

Report to the Men's Club
and other stories

I am disappointed by these stories. Disappointed that they have not (yet) won Emshwiller the Pulitzer she deserves as our premier magic realist. Disappointed that their sly and scary intimacy has not (yet) altered the tone of all science fiction for the better. Disappointed that she wrote them, not I.

—Terry Bisson, author of *The Pickup Artist*

Carol Emshwiller makes fiction out of the stuff of our everyday lives; about moms and memory and monsters that end up as familiar as Border Collies. She's deceptively deft, full of strange things that end up feeling as familiar as your own kitchen.

—Maureen McHugh, author of *After the Apocalypse*

I read one of the stories in Carol Emshwiller's new collection, *Report to the Men's Club*, in progress several years ago and have thought about it ever since. I could even quote you *lines*! And now, having read the rest of the elegant, complex, insightful stories, I know she's done the same thing to me again eighteen times over! Emshwiller knows more about men and mortality and love and loss and writing and life than anybody on the planet! Dazzling, dangerous, devastating writer! Unforgettable (and I mean that literally!) collection! Wow! Wow! Wow!

—Connie Willis, author of *Passage*

Praise for Carol Emshwiller's previous books:

First and foremost, Emshwiller is a poet—with a poet's sensibility, precision, and magic. She revels in the sheer taste and sound of words, she infuses them with an extraordinary vitality and sense of life.

—*Newsday*

Eighteen short fantastic fictions comprise Emshwiller's third superb collection. . . . again, her improvisations include inventive fabulisms and feminist satires, many with a science-fictional spin to them. . . . Emshwiller's fabulisms court a sense of the sacred but cleverly undercut that sense with tongue-in-cheek playfulness. The ensuing deft balance between mystery and skepticism is touching—and often aesthetically triumphant.

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Emshwiller knows well the marvelous inexplicability of love, jealousy, and heroism.

—*Library Journal*

Emshwiller has produced a first novel that combines the cruel humor of *Candide* with the allegorical panache of *Animal Farm*. In the hyper-Kafkaesque world of *Carmen Dog*, women have begun devolving into animals and animals ascending the evolutionary ladder to become women. . . . there has not been such a singy combination of imaginative energy, feminist outrage, and sheer literary muscle since Joanna Russ' classic *The Female Man*.

—*Entertainment Weekly*

This trenchant feminist fantasy-satire mixes elements of *Animal Farm*, *Rhinoceros* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. . . . Imagination and absurdist humor mark [*Carmen Dog*] throughout, and Emshwiller is engaging even when most savage about male-female relationships. —*Booklist*

Ledoyt is sweet and true and heartbreaking, echoing with the actualities of our old horseback life in the American West. Carol Emshwiller has got it dead right.
—William Kittredge, editor of *The Portable Western Reader*

[*Ledoyt* is] a fierce and tender portrait of a girl growing up fierce and tender; a sorrowful, loving portrait of a man whose talent is for love and sorrow; a western, an unsentimental love story, an unidealized picture of the American past, a tough, sweet, painful, truthful novel. —Ursula K. Le Guin, author of *The Birthday of the World*

Ms. Emshwiller is so gifted. . . . She describes the ragged, sunswept Western countryside with a vividness and clarity that let us see it as her characters do—and understand why they love it as they do. There are moments of [*Ledoyt*] that are remarkably moving; there are scenes of great power. —*New York Times Book Review*

It's always cheering when an unclassifiable writer suddenly grows a little more unclassifiable. That's the case with Carol Emshwiller, the feminist-fantast author of three short-story collections and one earlier novel. . . . With *Ledoyt*, Emshwiller offers a historical novel of sometimes gothic intensity, but one remaining well within the realm of physical possibility . . . of all things—a Western . . . a story of unlikely love and destructive jealousy. —*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

[*Ledoyt* is] as haunting as the song of a canyon wren at twilight. —*Atlanta Journal*

Leaping Man Hill is a satisfying novel, with complexities not susceptible to easy summary, as well as those quirky characters and some playful language. Finally, though, it is dominated by Emshwiller's sure development of Mary Catherine. Readers who grow with that young woman may remember this book a long time.
—*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

[*Leaping Man Hill* is] another strong, satisfying western . . . a headstrong young heroine succeeds in finding her niche in the ranch country of post-WWI California. . . . An exuberant yet exquisite portrait of a woman coming into her own.
—*Kirkus Reviews*

An inspired feminist fable. . . . A wise and funny book. —*The New York Times*

Carol Emshwiller must be read. . . . —Doris Grumbach, *Ms.*

REPORT TO THE
MEN'S CLUB

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MEN'S CLUB

CAROL EMSHWILLER

Small Beer Press
Easthampton, MA

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed
in this book are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

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*To my three brothers, Charley, Bob, and Pete, with much love. Without you guys
there are lots of things I'd never have been able to write about men.*

GRANDMA

Grandma used to be a woman of action. She wore tights. She had big boobs, but a teeny-weeny bra. Her waist used to be twenty-four inches. Before she got so hunched over she could do way more than a hundred of everything, pushups, sit-ups, chinning. . . . She had naturally curly hair. Now it's dry and fine and she's a little bit bald. She wears a babushka all the time and never takes her teeth out when I'm around or lets me see where she keeps them, though of course I know. She won't say how old she is. She says the books about her are all wrong, but, she says, that's her own fault. For a long while she lied about her age and other things, too.

She used to be on every search and rescue team all across these mountains. I think she might still be able to rescue people. Small ones. Her set of weights is in the basement. She has a punching bag. She used to kick it, too, but I don't know if she still can do that. I hear her thumping and grunting around down there—even now when she needs a cane for walking. And talk about getting up off the couch!

I go down to that gym myself sometimes and try to lift those weights. I punch at her punching bag. (I can't reach it except by

standing on a box. When I try to kick it, I always fall over.)

Back in the olden days Grandma wasn't as shy as she is now. How could she be and do all she did? But now she doesn't want to be a bother. She says she never wanted to be a bother, just help out is all.

She doesn't expect any of us to follow in her footsteps. She used to, but not anymore. We're a big disappointment. She doesn't say so, but we have to be. By now she's given up on all of us. Everybody has.

It started . . . we started with the idea of selective breeding. Everybody wanted more like Grandma: Strong, fast-thinking, fast-acting, and with the desire . . . that's the most important thing . . . a desire for her kind of life, a life of several hours in the gym every single day. Grandma loved it. She says (and says and says), "I'd turn on some banjo music and make it all into a dance."

Back when Grandma was young, offspring weren't even thought of, since who was there around good enough for her to marry? Besides, everybody thought she'd last forever. How could somebody like her get old? is what they thought.

She had three . . . "husbands" they called them (donors, more like it), first a triathlon champion, then a prize fighter, then a ballet dancer.

There's this old wives' tale of skipping generations, so, after nothing good happened with her children, Grandma (and everybody else) thought, surely it would be us grandchildren. But we're a motley crew. Nobody pays any attention to us anymore.

I'm the runt. I'm small for my age, my foot turns in, my teeth stick out, I have a lazy eye. . . . There's lots of work to be done on me. Grandma's paying for all of it though she knows I'll never amount to much of anything. I wear a dozen different kinds of braces, teeth, feet, a patch over my good eye. My grandfather, the ballet dancer!

Sometimes I wonder why Grandma does all this for me, a puny, limping, limp-haired girl. What I think is, I'm her real baby

at last. They didn't let her have any time off to look after her own children—not ever until now, when she's too old for rescuing people. She not only was on all the search and rescue teams, she was a dozen search and rescue teams all by herself, and often she had to rescue the search and rescue teams.

Not only that, she also rescued animals. She always said the planet would die without its creatures. You'd see her leaping over mountains with a deer under each arm. She moved bears from camp-grounds to where they wouldn't cause trouble. You'd see her with handfuls of rattlesnakes gathered from golf courses and carports, flying them off to places where people would be safe from them and they'd be safe from people.

She even tried to rescue the climate, pulling and pushing at the clouds. Holding back floods. Re-raveling the ozone. She carried huge sacks of water to the trees of one great dying forest. In the long run there was only failure. Even after all those rescues, always only failure. The bears came back. The rattlesnakes came back.

Grandma gets to thinking all her good deeds went wrong. Lots of times she had to let go and save . . . maybe five babies and drop three. I mean even Grandma only had two arms. She expected more of herself. I always say, "You did save lots of people. You kept that forest alive ten years longer than expected. And me. I'm saved." That always makes her laugh, and I am saved. She says, "I guess my one good eye can see well enough to look after you, you rapscaillion."

She took me in after my parents died. (She couldn't save them. There are some things you just can't do anything about no matter who you are, like drunken drivers. Besides, you can't be everywhere.)

When she took me to care for, she was already feeble. We needed each other. She'd never be able to get along without me. I'm the saver of the saver.

How did we end up this way, way out here in the country with me

her only helper? Did she scare everybody else off with her neediness? Or maybe people couldn't stand to see how far down she's come from what she used to be. And I suppose she has gotten difficult, but I'm used to her. I hardly notice. But she's so busy trying not to be a bother, she's a bother. I have to read her mind. When she holds her arms around herself, I get her old red sweatshirt with her emblem on the front. When she says, "Oh dear," I get her a cup of green tea. When she's on the couch and struggles and leans forward on her cane, trembling, I pull her up. She likes quiet. She likes for me to sit by her, lean against her, and listen to the birds along with her. Or listen to her stories. We don't have a radio or TV set. They conked out a long time ago, and no one thought to get us new ones, but we don't need them. We never wanted them in the first place.

Grandma sits me down beside her, the lettuce planted, the mulberries picked, sometimes a mulberry pie already made (I helped), and we just sit. "I had a grandma," she'll say, "though I know, to look at me, it doesn't seem like I could have. I'm older than most grandmas ever get to be, but we all had grandmas, even me. Picture that: Every single person in the world with a grandma." Then she giggles. She still has her girlish giggle. She says, "Mother didn't know what to make of me. I was opening her jars for her before I was three years old. Mother. . . . Even that was a long time ago."

When she's in a sad mood, she says everything went wrong. People she had just rescued died a week later of something that Grandma couldn't have helped. Hanta virus or some such that they got from vacuuming a closed room, though sometimes Grandma had just warned them not to do that. (Grandma believes in prevention as much as in rescuing.)

I've rescued things. Lots of them. Nothing went wrong, either. I rescued a junco with a broken wing. After rains I've rescued stranded

worms from the wet driveway and put them back in our vegetable garden. I didn't let Grandma cut the suckers off our fruit trees. I rescued mice from sticky traps. I fed a litter of feral kittens and got fleas and worms from them. Maybe this rescuing is the one part of Grandma I inherited.

Who's to say which is more worthwhile, pushing atom bombs far out into space or one of these little things I do? Well, I do know which is more important, but if I were the junco I'd like being rescued.

Sometimes Grandma goes out, though rarely. She gets to feeling it's a necessity. She wears sunglasses and a big floppy hat and scarves that hide her wrinkled-up face and neck. She still rides a bicycle. She's so wobbly it's scary to see her trying to balance herself down the road. I can't look. She likes to bring back ice-cream for me, maybe get me a comic book and a licorice stick to chew on as I read it. I suppose in town they just take her for a crazy lady, which I guess she is.

When visitors come to take a look at her, I always say she isn't home, but where else would a very, very, very old lady be but mostly home? If she knew people had come she'd have hobbled out to see them and probably scared them half to death. And they probably wouldn't have believed it was her, anyway. Only the president of the Town and Country Bank—she rescued him a long time ago—I let him in. He'll sit with her for a while. He's old, but of course not as old as she is. And he likes her for herself. They talked all through his rescue and really got to know each other back then. They talked about tomato plants and wildflowers and birds. When she rescued him they were flying up with the wild geese. (They still talk about all those geese they flew with and how exciting that was with all the honking and the sound of wings flapping right beside them. I get goose-bumps—geesebumps?—just hearing them talk about it.) She should

have married somebody like him, pot-belly, pock-marked face, and all. Maybe we'd have turned out better.

I guess you could say I'm the one that killed her—caused her death, anyway. I don't know what got into me. Lots of times I don't know what gets into me and lots of times I kind of run away for a couple of hours. Grandma knows about it. She doesn't mind. Sometimes she even tells me, "Go on. Get out of here for a while." But this time I put on her old tights and one of the teeny-tiny bras. I don't have breasts yet so I stuffed the cups with Kleenex. I knew I couldn't do any of the things Grandma did, I just thought it would be fun to pretend for a little while.

I started out toward the hill. It's a long walk but you get to go through a batch of piñons. But first you have to go up an arroyo. Grandma's cape dragged over the rocks and sand behind me. It was heavy, too. To look at the satiny red outside you'd think it would be light, but it has a felt lining. "Warm and waterproof," Grandma said. I could hardly walk. How did she ever manage to fly around in it?

I didn't get very far before I found a jackrabbit lying in the middle of the arroyo half-dead (but half-alive, too), all bit and torn. I'll bet I'm the one that scared off whatever it was that did that. That rabbit was a goner if I didn't rescue it. I was a little afraid because wounded rabbits bite. Grandma's cape was just the right thing to wrap it in so it wouldn't.

Those jackrabbits weigh a lot. And with the added weight of the cape. . . .

Well, all I did was sprain my ankle. I mean I wasn't really hurt. I always have the knife Grandma gave me. I cut some strips off the cape and bound myself up good and tight. It isn't as if Grandma has a lot of capes. This is her only one. I felt bad about cutting it. I put the rabbit across my shoulders. It was slow going, but I wasn't leaving the

rabbit for whatever it was to finish eating it. It began to be twilight. Grandma knows I can't see well in twilight. The trouble is, though she used to see like an eagle, Grandma can't see very well anymore either.

She tried to fly as she used to do. She did fly. For my sake. She skimmed along just barely above the sage and bitterbrush, her feet snagging at the taller ones. That was all the lift she could get. I could see, by the way she leaned and flopped like a dolphin, that she was trying to get higher. She was calling, "Sweetheart. Sweetheart. Where are youuuu?" Her voice was almost as loud as it used to be. It echoed all across the mountains.

"Grandma, go back. I'll be all right." My voice can be loud, too. She heard me. Her ears are still as sharp as a mule's.

The way she flew was kind of like she rides a bicycle. All wobbly. Veering off from side to side, up and down, too. I knew she would crack up. And she looked funny flying around in her print dress. She only has one costume and I was wearing it.

"Grandma, go back. Please go back."

She wasn't at all like she used to be. A little fall like that from just a few feet up would never have hurt her a couple of years ago. Or even last year. Even if, as she did, she landed on her head.

I covered her with sand and brush as best I could. No doubt whatever was about to eat the rabbit would come gnaw on her. She wouldn't mind. She always said she wanted to give herself back to the land. She used to quote, I don't know from where, "All to the soil, nothing to the grave." Getting eaten is sort of like going to the soil.

I don't dare tell people what happened—that it was all my fault—that I got myself in trouble sort of on purpose, trying to be like her, trying to rescue something.

But I'm not as sad as you might think. I knew she would die pretty

soon anyway, and this is a better way than in bed looking at the ceiling, maybe in pain. If that had happened, she wouldn't have complained. She'd not have said a word, trying not to be a bother. Nobody would have known about the pain except me. I would have had to grit my teeth against her pain the whole time.

I haven't told anybody partly because I'm waiting to figure things out. I'm here all by myself, but I'm good at looking after things. There are those who check on us every weekend—people who are paid to do it. I wave at them. "All okay." I mouth it. The president of the Town and Country Bank came out once. I told him Grandma wasn't feeling well. It wasn't exactly a lie. How long can this go on? He'll be the one who finds out first—if anybody does. Maybe they won't.

I'm nursing my jackrabbit. We're friends now. He's getting better fast. Pretty soon I'll let him go off to be a rabbit. But he might rather stay here with me.

I'm wearing Grandma's costume most of the time now. I sleep in it. It makes me feel safe. I'm doing my own little rescues as usual. (The vegetable garden is full of happy weeds. I keep the bird feeder going. I leave scraps out for the skunk.) Those count—almost as much as Grandma's rescues did. Anyway, I know the weeds think so.

THE PAGANINI OF JACOB'S GULLY

Used to be, I was the Paganini of Laggish. If my brother and I didn't play (he on the parlor bagpipes), there was no party. I played the Devil's instrument and so fast that, like Paganini, I was thought to be in league with Him. The faster I played, the more they said I'd sold my soul, or worse. Who could play this fast and frenzied but the Devil or one of his demons?

How did it come to be that the Devil always plays the violin? Dexterity, I suppose, but I can also play so sweet and slow I make you cry. That's like an angel.

My brother said my life was in danger. He said I should escape. He told me not to play this fast anymore, ever, no matter where I ended up. I changed my name from Hamish to James and ran away from Scotland to America.

Not just America, but to the opposite edge of it, westward, riding my donkey, cross-of-Jesus on her back, my fiddle wrapped tight against rain and dust. I'll die if anything happens to it and that's not just a figure of speech. I want it in my coffin with me. I want my arms around it. I've managed to keep it glued and in more or less decent

shape through all kinds of weather. I've managed to keep the bow strung with horsehair I yank out of tails myself.

I learned to play when I broke my back. I wasn't supposed to move. My brother, William, traded a calf for a violin. I lay flat as I was supposed to and looked at it—thought about it. My brother got me a little book on how to play it, but no bow. He thought I wouldn't be ready for that for a while. When I was well enough to sit up, I plucked it like a guitar. I plucked so much I got calluses on the tips of my fingers, so I was ready when William got me the bow. Then he got our dance caller to gave me a lesson or two. I took the fiddle with me up on the moors when I was out watching the sheep. Our dog would howl along with my playing.

Sometimes I'd play so bright and wonderful I'd lift myself right into the air. I seemed to reel and jig and twirl as I played, but I could never do that when I wasn't playing. My back didn't grow properly after the accident. For a long time I didn't know that I was any different from everyone else. I was crooked but I was loved. I didn't think my crookedness mattered until I went off to school for a couple of years. I was in pain, too, but I thought that was the way it was. I thought everybody was in pain.

I played away their laughing at me. I played away their insults and scorn. Later, after I'd left school for the moors and all day at the fiddle, I got my schoolmates' niggardly admiration. Maybe more their jealousy.

For a while it got so they couldn't have a dance without me and my brother. My magic was my violin. Out here it's the coyotes sing back to me.

The accident. . . . I remember just before, but not after. I was nine. I was skinny and small for my age, but lots of times I'd led that same

bull out to pasture. Usually there weren't any cows in the field on the way. This time the bull pushed down the barbed wire fence as if it was nothing and headed for those cows. He had a ring in his nose, so you'd think he'd behave even for me. I hung on. I scraped over the downed barbed wire and over stones until the bull turned back towards me. I remember his face close to my face, all bloody from his nose ring. I remember his luminous brown eye, his yellow ear tag. I remember being tossed.

I was never going to be like my brother, though that's what I always wanted. One leg is shorter than the other. One shoulder higher. I ended up as if made to curl around a violin. Or perhaps I twisted that way from cuddling it under my chin all day long as I grew.

Out here I don't do as my brother said to. He told me never to play this fast again, but I'm true to my skill. True, you could say, to my long, fast fingers. I can't help myself.

It pains me to walk, but I have my jenny. (I named her Maggie for William's girl.) I can ride if I need to, though mostly I walk beside her. She has enough to carry.

I've found other players to play with now and then. We set them stomping.

I'm often flirted with. That's not unusual here in America. Flirt with the Devil. Tempt fate. Some women like to do that. Stroke his long fingers. Bless his hands. (Bless the Devil's hands, for heaven's sake!) They never flirted with me back in Scotland. They were afraid of me, but they didn't torment and tease me.

I don't want those easy girls. I used to think, even with my shape, somebody might come to really like me, but now, at my age, I don't think so anymore. I haven't thought about my birthdays since I left Scotland. I lost track of time and I lost track of my age. I must be close to forty by now.

But being crooked isn't all there is to it. I'm not exactly the handsomest there is. My looks go with being the Devil, shiny, droopy black hair, face too long, shaggy eyebrows, and the worst, nose like a vulture. . . . And it doesn't help that I've not lost my Scottish burr.

"Plays like the Devil and even looks like him." I've overheard that said. And, "Look at the nose on him."

Sometimes somebody else will say, "But he has a nice smile."

I keep smiling.

I can make the violin cry like a baby. I can make it laugh. Make it baa and meow. People think there's somebody in there. Even after I let them look through the *f* holes, they still think so. They think I've imprisoned all sorts of creatures.

(Off and on I have a mustache, but I never would dare have a goatee.)

I spend a lot of time playing in bars along with the piano player (in towns that are little more than one bar and one piano), accepting free drinks and then pouring them into the spittoon or whatever is handy. (I don't want to get drunk with *them*, or *anybody*, for that matter.)

I play at dances, too. Those are mostly outdoors. Just like back in the old country, people come from miles around. Back there they walked, here they ride. There's always a couple of men around who play some instrument or other. Mostly mandolin and fife and banjo. The banjo player's as fast and furious as I am, but nobody takes him as the Devil. The Devil doesn't play the banjo.

This time I was playing at Wilkerson's bar, just me and the piano player. Wilkerson's is little more than a roadside corner where four ranches come together. I'd been flirted with unmercifully. I never dare ignore those women. That would be insulting. If they make too overt a request, I always say, "Another time," or, "Next time." This time one of the women leans over me where I sit, her big breasts right under my nose. I think any minute they'll flop out. She kisses my hand and

talks about my magic fingers and then she puts my hand right inside her dress. (Didn't have to go very far to be on her breast.) I pull away and look to see if anybody noticed. They have. They laugh and yell, "Go for it, busker."

But some must have been jealous. (Envious of the twisted?) After, when I was all set to leave, thank God my violin is packed up and strapped on the jenny, I come back in to fill my canteens. I should have used the pump down the street. At least I escaped with my fiddle in one piece.

And my hands are all right. I never hit out to defend myself. I have to save them. That's another reason to be a mild man that smiles all the time. Sometimes I do feel like hitting somebody, even with my fiddle, but I have to control myself. *Have* to. It would be as if using your best friend as a weapon.

I manage to pull myself up on Maggie. She's got everything I own on her back, including the violin. I hate to add to her load, but I have to get out of here faster than I can limp now. She knows what's going on, otherwise she'd balk at a load like this. She'd be mulish.

I head along the creek first. I need to heal myself until I can play again. I can't judge distances or time right now. I half pass out. Finally I let myself fall off. I hope she keeps quiet in the morning. Nothing like a good morning hee-haw to wake a whole town. I don't even know how far we've gone or where we are except we kept to the stream.

For once I don't sleep wrapped around my fiddle as I usually do. For once Maggie has to spend the night all packed up. I don't even loosen her cinch.

And for once she doesn't sing out at dawn. She's smart. She knows she shouldn't. Instead of her hee-haw it's her lips nibbling on my cheek that wakes me. As if to see how I am. As if to wonder why we're not up and away by now.

I manage to pull off her pack and rub her down. Then I check my

bruises, though what's the difference, one pain more or less? My right eye is swollen shut. I soak it with icy stream water. I lie on the bank as I do it and work on a new piece. First I call it, "Go to the Devil." Then I call it, "Here Comes the Devil." I work on it all day, but I work as I worked when I broke my back, lying flat and thinking about it. It's a habit of mind. Used to be I mostly looked at my ceiling—bottom of the thatch it was back then—now I look at the sky through cottonwood branches.

Maggie grazes nearby. She scares coyotes and wolves away. She'd warn me of strangers of any sort. She's fearless. She'd face a mountain lion. I never beat her even when she balks. I know there's always a good reason. Her balking has saved me lots of times. And, unlike horses, she has sense enough to save herself.

I don't feel any better as the day goes on, but that's to be expected, and I'll probably be worse tomorrow. I should move farther away while I still can. I pack up and head off. I have to find a place to hide as I heal. I walk this time. Maggie has had enough troubles. I don't ever need a lead rope. She follows by herself.

I pass through another town. Three lads follow and throw stones at me. I don't pay them any mind. Reminds me of back in school. One woman tells them to stay away from the tramp. Another walks with me for a minute and tries to talk to me, but I don't want her sympathy, especially not now when I'm hobbling along even worse than I usually do.

And I'm ashamed of my bruises, though I had nothing to do with them. I save my hands to such an extent that I let my face take the blows instead.

A few blocks farther down I sit on the edge of the watering trough and wait while Maggie drinks.

Here comes that same woman. I wish she'd go away. I'm not only all beat up, but my clothes are torn. I look even more like a tramp

than usual. I had thought to repair them later, when I find myself a safe place to rest up.

"I heard about what happened up at Wilkerson's," she says. "I'm sorry."

Wants to be in league with the Devil, does she? And nice-looking, too.

"I'm a little bit sorry myself."

Her eyes are gray-green-tan.

"Come by my place. I have a steak I could put on your eye. After, you could eat it."

I get up and check Maggie's load just to get away from the woman. I think of my new piece: Here Comes the Devil.

"I live on the far side of town. You'll go right by my place anyway."

I don't want her walking beside me, slowing her pace to my hobble. She doesn't look to be the kind of woman to saunter. I say just plain, No! and start hobbling along to show her how slow I am. She keeps beside me while I keep to the far side of Maggie. Can't she see who I am? Or is my face so swollen and purple I no longer look like the Devil?

At least I'm still heading away from Wilkerson's. She must chafe at having to walk at my speed. I think she'd normally be striding. She keeps glancing over at me and my jenny. I wish she wouldn't. Her hair, black as mine, is pulled back tight, but it's wispy and fine and won't stay in its knot. It gives her a nice tousled look.

Tempting fate, is she? Like those other women always do? "You might get in trouble for helping me."

"But I have herbs that heal."

I've been walking faster than is comfortable. At least the way is flat until we come to her house. There's a little group of houses up hill from a creek. Hers is the first, thank goodness.

I thought to walk right on by, but I'm so tired and discouraged. Partly because I was trying to hurry for her sake and trying walk straighter for my own pride. I stop, but I won't go in. I haven't set foot

in a home for a long time. I let her sit me out in a canvas lawn chair under her grape arbor.

She sits on the edge of another near by.

"How could they do that . . . to somebody who. . ."

She can't say it so I say it for her. "To a cripple like me."

That makes her blush. I think how back home we'd call her bonnie.

"I've never heard you play, but I've heard about it. Everybody has."

"I can't right now."

"Would you stay and rest until you can?"

"I don't know how long that'll take."

If I wanted to, I could make her cry in half a minute. There's one tune always does it.

She takes the packs off Maggie before I can stop her. She brings me tea and bread, puts her steak on my eye.

I've been too much in bars. I distrust women. I find them as garish in actions as in dress, though she's not. Yet I distrust her.

Perhaps there's something in the tea or I'm more tired than I think. Or perhaps it's the relief . . . being looked after for a change. Let her and my Maggie be in charge of things. I lean back in the lawn chair and fall asleep before I have the chance to think not to.

I don't wake up till twilight. It's Maggie wakes me again. She must wonder what we're doing here. The sun is behind the mountains. I stroke her velvety nose and rub her poll. We watch it get darker. I'm too comfortable, and every time I move, I hurt. We won't go far tonight. Maybe down by the arroyo we walked past on the way here. Camp behind some of those boulders.

The wind picks up. The woman comes out with a hurricane lamp. "I let you sleep but you must be getting cold now. It's way after supper time."

"I'll leave as soon as I get packed up."

"No!" (A worried, too-loud no.) "I meant for you to come in and eat here. You can stay the night. I have room."

I try to get up, but I'm so stiff and sore I can't. I lie back again and pretend I changed my mind.

"Come in and have some supper?"

"I'll just spend the night right here if you'll let me. I'll be fine."

But she sees what's wrong, grabs me by my elbows, and I hers, and we pull. But these canvas folding chairs are so unstable. It collapses. We fall, she on top of me. I like that she starts to laugh. I laugh, too, but then she's upset that she might have hurt me. So many "I'm sorrys" in a row. . . . And she blushes.

"Don't worry, I don't hurt any more than usual."

She's a tough, muscled woman. I could feel that, and you can see it in her hands.

Then, she pulling and I pushing, we finally get me up. She leads me inside, her arm around me. I'm so stiff I'd never have made it without her help and without trying to seem to her at least a partly whole man. I'd not even have tried if not for her being there. I'd have stayed on the ground.

The room is small and smells of stew. It's dim with the dusty glow from the lamps in their sconces. Another lamp is on the table, a soup tureen beside it. There's bread and cheese.

She sits me at the table. I'd rather lie down and forget about eating.

She sits near me. She says, "I'm Vera." Then, "I like your accent."

At least there's one thing about me to like. *If* true.

I don't know why, but I tell her my name is Hamish, not James. I guess I feel too at home, and I like that she likes my brogue.

As she serves me, she says, "I have oats for your donkey."

"Don't. Maggie mustn't have oats. Give her a carrot or an apple if you like, but she'll do fine on bitter brush."

She tries to get me to sleep on her cot in her bedroom while she

sleeps on the couch. I refuse, but, again, I sleep well, as though I've been waiting all this time just for a chance to lie down on a too-short couch with a hump in the middle. The ground would have been more comfortable.

Seven miles down river along the valley, there's a town called Jacob's Gully. They actually have a church, and they have a little opera house. Holds a couple of hundred people. She says Caruso sang there, and Madam Schuman-Hank, Galli-Curci. She wants me to play in that opera house. She says she can arrange it. She knows they want me.

I say yes, if I can ever play again.

She takes my hands, shuts her eyes, and holds them as though meditating over them or saying a prayer. She says, "Are they all right? I have a heating cream you can put on them that draws out pain." She turns them over. Looks as if she'd like to kiss them. I don't like it when those other women do that, but she's not like them. Then, like everybody else, she says, "What long fingers!" My hands are the only things about my looks I'm proud of.

She says she'll see to it I make some real money. She sets a date and marks it on her calendar. "Will you remember?"

She's right about me forgetting. She makes me a little calendar of the next few months. "Will you be all right by then?"

"I hope so."

She wants me to stay and recover here with her. She says she'll make a better bed for me than this couch.

I don't want to. I don't like people looking at me limping, hunching over even when I'm in good health. I leave that afternoon. I can't keep her from giving me salves and tonics, then corn-bread and bacon.

"Come here first," she says. "We can go down to Jacob's Gully together."

I say I will.

But before I can make that date, it happens again. I get beat up in the bar in Paradise Gap. There are lots of places called Paradise around here. The snow-topped mountains make it all so beautiful. This Paradise is on the edge of a gorge, alongside a river, and with lots of big cottonwoods. This time my violin is ruined.

I was starting to play . . . not the famous Devil's Trill, but *my* Devil's Trill. Just as hard to play as that one. Maybe harder. Tables seem to jiggle. Glasses rattle. Dust rises. It's the preacher himself says it. "No normal person can play like this." (What's a preacher doing in the bar anyway? Stirring up trouble, seems like.) This time somebody grabs my violin and splits it over his knee. Usually I just let myself get beaten, but now I fight. I don't care how ruined the fiddle is, I want it back. I break a couple of fingers, but on my right hand, so that's not so bad. Besides, I don't have a violin anymore anyway.

Finally somebody says, "Let him go." Somebody helps me up and hands me what's left of my fiddle. Somebody puts my hat on my head. I can walk.

I head away from everything and everybody, straight up into the mountains. Into the snow. When it comes to walking, I'm not in as bad shape as before, but my violin is hardly a violin anymore. I'll not make that date in Jacob's Gully.

I collapse when I reach the beginning of the evergreens. I lie there hugging the pieces of my fiddle. Every now and then I chew on jerky. (I don't know what Maggie chews on, but she's sister to the wild ass. She'll get along.) When my jerky's gone, I'll have to get up and do something. Or perhaps I won't.

I try to forget about that opera house and Vera, but I keep looking at the calendar she made me. I mark off the days, and when the day comes, I think of her wondering where I am. But perhaps she heard about me just as she did last time I got beat up at Wilkerson's.

Perhaps she heard they'd ruined my violin. I hope she didn't spend a long time waiting.

There's an interval called "Diabolus in Musica." The tritone. Hardest to sing of all. Banned by the Greeks and then later by the Church. Called the most corrupt interval in music. Feels like in no key whatsoever. I hum it to myself. It *is* hard. Doing it makes me feel sicker and more dispirited than I already am.

Used to be . . . everything is used to be . . . I could make trees rustle, creeks sparkle, birds twitter. I could play hail storms. I could play thunder.

Finally I get up. I go to a town I've never been to. They know me anyway, everybody does. Being the way I am, I could never hide. Big nose, limp, leaning-over kind of man. . . . Even if I grew a bushy beard it wouldn't help.

I camp out under the cottonwoods just outside of town, far enough away so Maggie's greeting the dawn won't bother anybody. I'll have water from an irrigation ditch nearby. There's a mama duck living on its banks. She walks across the road every morning with six babies following her, heading for the river. And back again every evening. People let me alone. I know I'm not helping my reputation by playing hermit.

I set my fingers and tape them up tight. I hobble into town to look for the right aged wood. I shape a new neck and attach it to the old scroll. I glue everything back together. I hobble out, even farther from town, to try it. I hardly dare. If worse comes to worst, I could go back to herding sheep, though around here the job seems only for Basques. I could become an ordinary beggar instead of a busker. Switch to a jaw harp. Play the spoons.

I haven't played in so long my fingers have soft tips for the first

time since I broke my back, and they've lost some strength. I thought I got the neck the same length, but I'm playing out of tune. Practice will fix that—and everything else. The sound has changed some but it's still pretty good. I'll get used to it as I've had to get used to my whole life.

I get a dance job. I don't know how they find me but word does get around. That means real pay. I circle the day on the calendar Vera made for me. I'm to join my busking buddies at Paradise Gap for a dance. There'll be four of us: Concertina, mandolin, and another fiddler. I always turn out to be the leader with any group I play in. I don't push myself forward but they always automatically defer to me.

(Those country fiddlers hold the violin to their chest, support it with their hand, and never go beyond first position, but they're clever with their tunings. I hold my fiddle with my chin, and I couldn't play at all if I changed the tuning.)

Do the townspeople understand that I'll be one of those players? I don't know how they dare ask me back, though it was just three or four drunken bums beat me up, not the whole town.

I come into Paradise Gap with my cross-of-Jesus wild ass as if into Jerusalem.

But *she* comes. I'll not play as I thought to.

She strides up to me the afternoon before the dance—strides, like I knew she would, and wanted to, back when she had to shuffle along with me.

"Hamish," she says. "I heard. Are you all right?"

I think again how much I like hair pulled back like that and how I like even better that it won't stay in its knot. As before, she's not wearing a bonnet, and she's, as they say, brown as a berry.

"I hope you didn't wait for me."

She strokes Maggie and Maggie nuzzles her.

"Last I saw you, you were all black and blue."

"I couldn't get word to you about the concert. I was. . . ." What should I say, that I was lying on my back in the snowy woods looking at the sky? "I was . . . away."

I change my plan. I have to. First I'll play so as to make her cry, and then, when they want a rest from dancing, I'll show off. I could even break all my strings but one as Paganini did, and show what I can do. I'll play the Devil's Trill. I've made loose women fall in love with me through fast fingers alone. At least they seemed to for the moment. A moment is better than never.

This is a dance out under the stars. It's not at all like it is in a bar. It takes place right in the middle of the village—actually right in the middle of the main road. The moon is out. Hurricane lamps line the dance area, but you hardly need them though they do give a happy glow to everything. There's maybe sixty, eighty people, all in a good mood. Babies are lined up along one shadowed wall with mothers taking turns looking after them. The small fry dance, too. Everybody dances, reels, jigs, polkas, square dances. . . . I and the other fiddler take turns calling: "Picken' up the Pawpaws," and "Pass around the jug. . . ." All these women and children present makes the whole tone different. There's hardly even any swearing.

As the evening goes on, couples move back to spoon in the shadows. I wonder how I could have thought to do as I'd planned. Even if Vera hadn't been here, I'd not have done it. Losing my violin for a month must have driven me crazy.

Vera dances. Here I am, making the music that pushes her into other men's arms, though she does look at me and smile when she passes near our little stage.

As I planned, at the first break I play the Devil's Trill. I get cheers and yells, catcalls, too, but happy ones. Then I limp off to rest with

the others. I wipe the sweat off my face and the violin, especially the fingerboard. She comes. I'm embarrassed by the sweat marks under my arms and all down my shirt front.

She brings me a mug of cider, moves a chair so as to sit beside me (I couldn't have moved it for her), lingers her touch on my arm. I can see how she feels in her eyes—in all of her. She's shining all over. This is the first time somebody I want to love me has loved me. (If this has anything to do with love at all.)

Later, as the night goes on, we play mostly waltzes, and later still, when everybody's getting tired, us included, love songs. The spooners get spoonier than ever, some hardly bothering to go back into the shadows. The music makes them fall in love even if they aren't. Married couples fall in love all over again. Everybody yearns for love—any kind of love.

Usually I don't think about wanting to dance, but as I play I yearn to have somebody in my arms. I yearn to be listening to myself instead of playing.

I had thought to walk . . . hobble down to Vera's house with her afterwards. I feel sick with yearning. I know she'd ask me to stay the night, but I can't breathe, I'm trembling, my knees wobble, and I can ill-afford to have anything more wrong with my legs. I pack up and then I go as if to the outhouse, but I hide across the street in the shadows of the alley by the general store. I watch her from there: How she asks after me, how she looks around until almost everyone's gone, how she gives up. But to be limping down to her house after all those love songs, and with the full moon. . . . I can't do it.

The dance had lasted most of the night so it isn't until dawn that I finally leave town. I know of a hidden camping spot, sheltered in an arroyo. There are a few trees, so there's shade. Though I've played the whole night through, I can't sleep. I spend the day playing. I play to

the sagebrush. I play to the rocks. I play to a family of foxes (a mother and three kits), I play to a jackrabbit. I let the wind carry, first my love songs and then my reels and jigs, out across the desert. At twilight the coyotes answer. I play until I can't think or feel anything anymore. I pack up my fiddle and sleep with my arms around it.

When I wake it's still dark or dark again. I might have slept the clock around, though I'm not sure. I make a fire of tough, dead sagebrush and make myself coffee in my frying pan—my one and only pan. I have no food but I'm not hungry. All I want is to run away and forget my whole life. I was seducing her, that was the whole purpose. I sighed, I yearned, I made love . . . all with my music, and she believed me. I should leave so she can forget me. Or I should have gone with her so she'd again see me shuffling. I could sit in her soft chair and then not be able to get out of it. She could ask me to reach into a high shelf. Though I'm skewed, I'm taller than she is, but I'd not be able to do it even so. She'd soon enough learn I couldn't help her down from a horse, or up into a carriage, carry her loads for her. My looks would be the least of her worries.

I'll cross the pass to the other side of the mountains. It'll be cold up there. Cold always makes my back worse. My shuffling will be slower than ever, but I'll cross to San Francisco.

But first I'll go back to Paradise Gap bar where they broke my fiddle. I'll fit myself to the Devil's reputation. I'll flirt with those women. I'll let them put my hands anywhere they want. I'll make those drunken bums even angrier than they were before. Then I'll play . . . corruption, debauchery, discordance, chaos. She'll hear about it and know what I am.

I do exactly as I planned. I play fever. I play madness. I start with the banned interval. Tritone over and over, higher and higher. Then I start

to play my "Here Comes the Devil" piece, but I don't finish it. Before I can, I drive them crazy, and myself, too.

I forget everything just as I forgot my accident when I was nine. All I remember of that is I was flying through the air. That's what happens now. Last thing I remember, I rose above them all, I flew . . . flew and fell.

As a child I had seemed to dance as I played, though I couldn't dance. Sometimes I had seemed to fly. I flew now, as in a dream. I looked down on them: Sweat flying, music flying, fingers. . . . I was hail and hurricane, dust devil, lightning. . . .

Until I was tossed exactly as by that bull. I fell . . . from higher . . . *had* to be higher than the ceiling, because there was time. As I fell, slowly, as from a great distance and with plenty of time to think, I thought, there . . . ! Look, Vera, see what I am!

They say everybody in the bar either passed out, as I did, or beat each other up and ended in the infirmary with me. I spent the night there and didn't know it till they told me later. They rescued my violin, and in one piece. They rescued Maggie.

Vera came for me as soon as she heard. Turns out everybody wanted to take care of me. The doctor thought I'd do well here with her.

I vaguely remember the ride down in the back of an empty hay wagon. I remember the sky with little white clouds moving by above me. I remember it was bumpy and pained me.

I wake up, first back on that hunched-in-the-middle couch, and then Vera tells them to carry me into her cot where I'll be more comfortable.

I'm feverish. I dream frightening, grotesque visions. Someone places cool cloths on my forehead. Sometimes I feel someone stroking my face. My mother had died even before I broke my back, but I thought myself with her. She was the only one ever did that. The

stroking stops when I come out of my fever and start to get better. I wonder if I dreamed it.

People begin to visit. All sorts of people. Some I remember from the dance. Musicians I've played with come. People bring fresh-baked bread, cake, tomatoes from their gardens, apricots. There's hardly a day people don't come by. Sometimes they don't want to disturb me, they just bring the things, and leave right away. They set up another date for me to play a concert at Jacob's Gully.

One day Vera moves a more stable chair for me out under the arbor. She's on a folding one. The grapes are ripe. We're eating some. Somebody has just left me a fresh-caught trout.

She says, "You always look surprised when they bring you things."

"I am."

"They care about you. They even like that you played Paradise Gap bar right out of business."

"And what if I never played again?"

"You've been too much in bars."

"Look at me."

"I am!"

"Can't you see? Back in Scotland they took me as the Devil himself. For God's sake I even had to escape."

"That's not what they think here, and *don't shout!*"

Suddenly she's close to crying. "It's only a few drunken bums that beat you up and they'd be fighting with anybody. Last weekend they tipped over the piano at Wilkerson's. They threw the piano player in the river."

She kneels by my chair, hugs my knees, and puts her head in my lap. I lean away and spread my arms to each side. I don't know what to do. I don't dare touch her. Then I lean forward and move my hands closer. I dare to *almost* touch her.

But she's crying. I touch. I put one arm across her shoulders, cup her head in both my hands. I kiss her flyaway hair. I hold her tight. Tighter. Then I lift her face and kiss her forehead, kiss the tears from her cheeks, from her chin. . . . I say, "Everything's all right now."

MODILLION

Here, a manuscript full of sun and moon signs, rams' horns, ammonites. . . . Marks that look like bundles of sticks. Marks like human ears. Marks like little cat faces. I'm trying to get used to them. I count their repetitions. I write them down in rows. I list their variants.

One sign in particular, I copy over and over. It's a large, curling M shape and graces each page in several places, always surrounded by its markers, small servants of its meanings, and appears in both a long and shortened form. Now and then only the M shape is unmistakable. I always recognize it even though it's decorated well beyond simple serifs. Often there's something fat and feminine about the way it circles, yet there's menace in its sprawl—in the way it dominates each page, arching above the other symbols. Something architectural about it. Corinthian. Though this was written well before that time. But I refuse to believe that it could stand for anything merely architectural—this lord—this king of all the signifiers.

I almost know the meaning of it. It's like a slip of the tongue that makes a word that seems vaguely understandable. Or like a

word I once knew the meaning of a long time ago. Modillion, for instance. I used to know what that meant. I call this big M shape that. I can feel the hair rise on the back of my neck, I see goose bumps all along my arms because of that word and what it might mean. Could be the name of an emperor. Or that place where his winter palace overlooked the sea (therefore, “Come back to Modillion,” she might have begged him, having spent all the lonely summer there leaning over the balconies). Could be a weapon—a giant, two-headed ceremonial ax. (If it is something architectural, then, surely, something that holds everything else up, nothing that merely decorates.)

But it could mean an act of violence. Perhaps against the reader of the manuscript, as if written in poison. Though more likely against the writer, as why does the manuscript end in mid-sentence (like the history of Thucydides? Therefore a tenderness towards the manuscript I’d not have felt had it been completed.). Were I, myself, to finish that last phrase, then, between one syllable and the next, could be thousands of years of wondering.

In the dim light the writing takes on more meaning than in bright. It is written with silver-point on unbleached paper. Sometimes I wonder, is the writing there at all, yet only the ruthless would question its existence, though the ruthless are many.



It is the unknown that always bears fruit. It is the unknown that informs on its way to becoming the almost known. I’ve heard tell of those who can catch a fish by hand, therefore I will plunge in against the current. I will make a great leap of understanding. Befuddled as I might be by a creative despair, out of my mouth might come, just at the lowest moment, words—strings of words—full of unexpected

possibilities: Once there was. . . . Yes, once there was Modillion. . . .



If a palace by the sea, white against white cliffs, and with all its banners flying, black-headed terns perched on its balconies . . . (this part came to me after I'd fallen asleep, my head resting on the manuscript) one prince after another tossed from the turrets. Seven princes, then, all perished on the same sad day, except for Modillion, dressed as a girl. No wonder the manuscript ends in mid-phrase.



Reading up or down, side to side . . . each direction tells a different story, but all the better since the truth is but a series of approximations. The same words can tell many conflicting tales. How could it not be so?



(Surely this is not just a list of the dead, or, worse yet, a list of the slaves and concubines of the dead, or, and even worse, the number of sacks of lentils stored in the store rooms of the dead. Yet who would write such things in silver? Except that they belonged to Modillion.)



To stand on the balconies of Modillion and watch the moon sparkling in the waves would be as mysterious as trying to decipher this writing is to me. To watch Modillion himself on the prow of his trireme, silhouetted against the water, a hundred and eighty oarsmen

dipping oars, and the sound of them would be as trying to decipher this writing is to me.



In the manuscript is written, “Oh my love, oh my love, come back before dawn,” and the spaces between the words stand for words that have been left unwritten. First there would have been shouts and curses, and then prayers, and then this. In the beginning was. . . . The most important word escapes me, but in the beginning there were words, the word for the place where small birds sing, the word for the way cats fall, so soft and smooth, the word for waking up (still alive!) and with a new idea.



Strung bows are symbols for the bow of the sky and also for the lips of Modillion as well as for his eyebrows, which come together in the middle over his Roman nose. Arrows are for his glances, though his eyes are indicated by the lupine flower. The arch is the arch of his forehead. Two symbols, jet and silk, mean his hair.

His walk is as only a king can walk. His toes point east-north-east and west-north-west. Even if alone, when spied upon, he has not been seen to falter from the perfect ways of leaning over, lying down, or getting up. Sometimes he takes what seems a reckless stance, leaning against an important tree.



At the highest curving of the cliffs stands the palace. Modillion, at the age of seven and still dressed as a girl, crosses the beach below it

with his grandmother. They live quietly among their enemies. "When this becomes the past," his grandmother tells him, "as all things must, you will not be able to forget that you were once as if you were a woman."

He was called by a woman's name, then, and took on women's ways before he became the wide warrior that he did become, wielding his ax.

It is written that he once said, "Though the conqueror's children hid, I knew where to find them. I had already, long before, hidden in the same places myself, and I had already learned not to let any children, male *or* female, escape to become what I have become."

It is written that he raged and rode so as to kill five horses in a row and that he yelled and cursed because of his sweet, high, woman-like voice.

It is written that he loved no creatures except for one horse and one hound and that they died.



I want to live a lively interlude in someone else's life. I want even to have seen all my half-brothers thrown from palace towers . . . I, already among the foolish lovers who desire a phantom—the one who persists in not existing, perhaps persisted in not existing even when he was alive. *If* alive, and *if* under the same name.

. . . foolish lover, here in the dim light, but I don't feel the need to see the sun when the sun is on every page, and then there are all these rows of full moon signs, and the sea, the beach, the seventy ships. Life is too short for any other joys than these.



Happy is he who is alone and working. She, I should say. She who is alone and doing away with chaos, making life readable, as it should be. It is I who have seen order in what seems like confusion. And I do see order everywhere. Or, rather, the possibility of order: Patterns on stones, wood grain, the palms of my hands. . . . I work so hard at my deciphering that I can't stop. Sometimes I find myself trying to decipher the secrets of my shoelaces.

It's a cozy carrel that I work in. And live in, though *they* don't know that. I work all the time, so what's the difference? I sleep with my head on the manuscript. I eat little. I don't leave crumbs. This carrel is away from the others and high up, with a dirty little round window that I love. Often, when tired of puzzling over faint curlicues and dots, I spend an hour or two looking out and thinking—perhaps even longer than that. I lose track.

Sometimes at dawn the sun's rays shine directly on the manuscript, and then all the signs and symbols take on different meanings: Amphora become women, arms akimbo; oats become grapes; rams' horns become ammonites; helmets become bowls of milk; chariots, chairs. . . . All of a sudden there has been no loss of princes off the balustrades. Modillions, painted turquoise, gold, and red, decorate (democratically) every cottage. A wide man with eyes the color of the lupine flower wears white linen and prays to the Pleiades instead of to Orion, though he calls the constellations other names and writes their signs in what looks like bird wings. But when the sun moves on, all returns to what it might have been.



“Do not speak with the women. Do not look at them. Let them bathe in peace. Keep yourself for your rage. Also do not let them make you their queen, though they will want to do it when they see

you grow so wide and powerful. They will want a wide and powerful woman to stand up for them against the men that keep them in harems.

“Enemies are all around you, for it is told that there were not seven, but eight princes, and that one still lives.” (Still lives!) “Your ax awaits, hidden in the tomb of your grandfather.

“And all you others, when you see him coming, keep your eyes on your sandals.”



I do. I do. I always do. I hunch my shoulders, hunker down. I lean away from people and towards buildings. I think of nothing but the lines of the sidewalk, I, faithful scribe. Blessed, as they always wrote at the end of every manuscript, blessed be the faithful scribe.

But some act of violence is about to be committed. I have suspected it from the beginning. The scribe will have been the first to die. I hear sirens in the distance. Enemies are all around me. I've always known that. I realize, suddenly, that that's why I've spent all my time in the library, though even here. . . . Even here! I leave in mid-sentence. I climb down my little stairway and cross the tunnels of the stacks. I have become aware, and just this moment, of yet another story not yet told.

At certain times in early morning (as this is) things look brighter than they really are. Pinkish. The library, as graceful and as luminous as the winter palace would be at sunrise. In the swish of traffic one can almost imagine the sound of waves along some shore below it. I can see that even *I* am luminous in this light. I trot down the long, marble steps, flanked—even such as I—flanked by lions.

There's a man lying there, head on white marble. Looks dead, but then I see he's not yet dead, though I'm not sure. He's wearing two overcoats, one on top of the other. They're both women's. (Of

course!) One has a fake fur collar. Both are too small for his wide chest. He smells bad. But they would all have smelled bad back then, no good places to wash, as none for him now. The toilets would have been merely holes in the outside walls of the palace. The white stones must have been stained in those places. And, down on the beach below when Modillion and his grandmother walked there, it must not have smelled as sweet as I have been supposing. Also he is darker than I expected, and I realize that all the people, even the blessed scribe who wrote it all down—all the people of the manuscript are of this same reddish-brown.

I lean over him to make sure it's him. I see the strung bow of his lips and his eyebrows that come together in the middle over his Roman nose. I have already recognized the arch of the sky in the arch of his forehead. I see the tangled silk of his hair. His toes point East, towards me. Both his hands lie, symbolically, at his crotch.

"Your majesty."

First I say it softly, and then louder so as to wake him, but he doesn't wake. I dare to touch his foot then. I shake it. "Awake," I say. He mumbles, in a high voice—seven words in a strange language, but doesn't wake up.

A prince shouldn't lie here like this, head on cold stone. I make him a pillow of my big, floppy purse. I think of the things his grandmother told him, as that a prince should throw off woman's things and rise up against the enemies, which are around every corner. "Up," I say, as she said. "It is already written that you did rise and conquer, and if not already written, then *I* will write it."

I squat beside him. His enemies are, I'm sure of it, the same as mine. I swear allegiance. I'll follow where he leads. I'll write it all down as it happens. Blessed (as is written at the end of the manuscript), blessed be (as I will be blessed . . . if faithful . . . if true) the scribe.

MRS. JONES

Cora is a morning person. Her sister, Janice, hardly feels conscious till late afternoon. Janice nibbles fruit and berries and complains of her stomach. Cora eats potatoes with butter and sour cream. She likes being fat. It makes her feel powerful and hides her wrinkles. Janice thinks being thin and willowy makes her look young, though she would admit that—and even though Cora spends more time outside doing the yard and farm work—Cora's skin does look smoother. Janice has a slight stutter. Normally she speaks rapidly and in a kind of shorthand so as not to take up anyone's precious time, but with her stutter, she can hold peoples' attention for a moment longer than she would otherwise dare. Cora, on the other hand, speaks slowly, and if she had ever stuttered, would have seen to it she learned not to.

Cora bought a genuine Kilim rug to offset, she said, the bad taste of the flowery chintz covers Janice got for the couch and chairs. The rug and chairs look terrible in the same room, but Cora insisted that her rug be there. Janice retaliated by pawning Mother's silver candelabras. Cora had never liked them, but she made a fuss anyway, and she left

Janice's favorite silver spoon in the mayonnaise jar until, polish as she would, Janice could never get rid of the blackish look. Janice punched a hole in each of Father's rubber boots. Cora wears them anyway. She hasn't said a single word about it, but she hangs her wet socks up conspicuously in the kitchen.

They wish they'd gotten married and moved away from their parent's old farm house. They wish, desperately, that they'd had children—or husbands, for that matter. As girls they worked hard at domestic things: Canning, baking bread and pies, sewing . . . waiting to be good wives to almost anybody, but nobody came to claim them.

Janice is the one who worries. She's worried right now because she saw a light out in the far corner of the orchard—a tiny, flickering light. She can just barely make it out through the misty rain. Cora says, "Nonsense." (She's angry because it's just the sort of thing Janice would notice first.) Cora laughs as Janice goes around checking and rechecking all the windows and doors to see that they're securely locked. When Janice has finished, and stands staring out at the rain, she has a change of heart. "Whoever's out there must be cold and wet. Maybe hungry."

"Nonsense," Cora says again. "Besides, whoever's out there probably deserves it."

Later, as Cora watches the light from her bedroom window, she thinks whoever it is who's camping out down there is probably eating her apples and making a mess. Cora likes to sleep with the windows open a crack even in weather like this, and she prides herself on her courage, but, quietly, so that Janice, in the next room, won't hear, she eases her windows shut and locks them.

In the morning the rain has stopped, though it's foggy. Cora goes out (with Father's walking stick, and wearing Father's boots and battered canvas hat) to the far end of the orchard. Something has certainly been there. It had pulled down perfectly good, live, apple branches to

make a nest. Cora doesn't like the way it ate apples either, one or two bites out of lots of them, and then it looks as if it had made itself sick and threw up not far from the fire. Cora cleans everything so it looks like no one has been there. She doesn't want Janice to have the satisfaction of knowing anything about it.

That afternoon, when Cora has gone off to have their pickup truck greased, Janice goes out to take a look. She also takes Father's walking stick, but she wears Mother's floppy pink hat. She can see where the fire's been by the black smudge, and she can tell somebody's been up in the tree. She notices things Cora hadn't: Little claw marks on a branch, a couple of apples that had been bitten into still hanging on the tree near the nesting place. There's a tiny piece of leathery stuff stuck to one sharp twig. It's incredibly soft and downy and has a wet-dog smell. Janice takes it, thinking it might be an important clue. Also she wants to have something to show that she's been down there and seen more than Cora has.

Cora comes back while Janice is upstairs taking her nap. She sits down in the front room and reads an article in the *Reader's Digest* about how to help your husband communicate. When she hears Janice come down the stairs, Cora goes up for her nap. While Cora naps, Janice sets out grapes and a tangerine, strawberries and one hard-boiled egg. As she eats her early supper, she reads the same article Cora has just read. She feels sorry for Cora, who seems to have nothing more exciting than this sort of thing to read (along with her one hundred great books), whereas Janice has been reading *How Famous Couples Get The Most Out Of Their Sex Lives*. Just one of many such books that she keeps locked in her bedside cabinet. When she finishes eating, she cleans up the kitchen so it looks as if she hadn't been there.

Cora comes down when Janice is in the front parlor (sliding doors shut) listening to music. She has it turned so low Cora can hardly make it out. Might be Vivaldi. It's as if Janice doesn't want Cora to

hear it in case she might enjoy it. At least that's how Cora takes it. Cora opens a can of spaghetti. For desert she takes a couple of apples from the "special" tree. She eats on the closed-in porch, watching the clouds. It looks as if it'll rain again tonight.

About eight-thirty they each look out their different windows and see that the flickering light is there again. Cora says, "Damn it to hell," so loud that Janice hears from two rooms away. At that moment, Janice begins to like the little light. Thinks it looks inviting. Homey. She forgets that she found that funny piece of leather and those claw marks. Thinks most likely there's a young couple in love out there. Their parents disapprove and they have no place else to go but her orchard. Or perhaps it's a child running away. Teenager, maybe, cold and wet. She has a hard time sleeping, worrying and wondering about whoever it is, though she's still glad she locked the house up tight.

The next day begins almost exactly like the one before, with Cora going out to the orchard first and cleaning up—trying to—all the signs of anything having been there, and with Janice coming out later to pick up the clues that are left. Janice finds that the same branch is scratched up even more than it was before, and this time Cora has left the vomit (full of bits of apple peel) behind the tree. Perhaps she hadn't noticed it. Apples—or at least so many apples—aren't agreeing with the lovers. (In spite of the clues, Janice prefers to think that it's lovers.) She feels sorry about the all-night rain. There's no sign that they had a tent or shelter of any kind, poor things.

By the third night, though, the weather finally clears. Stars are out and a tiny moon. Cora and Janice stand in the front room, each at a different window, looking out towards where the light had been. An old seventy-eight record is on. Fritz Kreisler playing the Bach Chaconne. Janice says, "You'd think, especially since it's not raining. . . ."

Cora says, "Good riddance," though she, too, feels a sense of regret. At least something unusual had been happening. "Don't forget," Cora says, "the state prison's only ninety miles away."

Little light or no little light, they both check the windows and doors and then recheck the ones the other had already checked, or at least Cora rechecks all the ones Janice had seen to. Janice sees her do it, and Cora sees her noticing, so Cora says, "With what they're doing with genetic engineering, it could be anything at all out there. They make mistakes, and peculiar things escape. You don't hear about it because it's classified. People disapprove, so they don't let the news get out." Ever since she was five years old, Cora has been trying to scare her younger sister, though, as usual, she ends up scaring herself.

But then, just as they are about to give up and go off to bed, there's the light again. "Ah." Janice breathes out as though she had been holding her breath. "There it is."

"You've got a lot to learn," Cora says. She'd heard the relief in Janice's big sigh. "Anyway, I'm off to bed, and you'd better come soon, too, if you know what's good for you."

"I know what's good for me," Janice says. She would have stayed up too late just for spite, but now she has another, secret reason for doing it. She sits reading an article in *Cosmopolitan* about how to be more sexually attractive to your husband. Around midnight, even from downstairs, she can hear Cora snoring. Janice goes out to the kitchen. Moves around it like a little mouse. She's good at that. Gets out Mother's teakwood tray, takes slices of rye bread from Cora's stash, takes a can of Cora's tuna fish. (Janice knows she'll notice. Cora has them all counted.) Takes butter and mayonnaise from Cora's side of the refrigerator. Makes three tuna fish sandwiches. Places them on one of Mother's gold-rimmed plates along with some of her own celery, radishes, and grapes. Then she sits down and eats one sandwich herself. She hasn't let herself have a tuna fish sandwich, especially not one

with mayonnaise and butter and rye bread, for a long time.

It's only when Janice is halfway out in the orchard that she remembers what Cora said about the prison and thinks maybe there's some sort of escaped criminal out there—a rapist or a murderer, and here she is, wearing only her bathrobe and nightgown, in her slippers, and without even Father's walking stick. (Though the walking stick would probably just have been a handy thing for the criminal to attack *her* with.) She stops, puts the tray down, then moves forward. She's had a lot of practice creeping. She's been creeping up on Cora ever since they were little. Used to yell, "Boo," but nowadays creeping up and standing very close and suddenly whispering right by her ear can make Cora jump as much as a loud noise. Janice sneaks along slowly. Has to step over where whoever it is has already thrown up. Something is huddling in front of the fire, wrapped in what at first seems to be an army blanket. Why it *is* a child. Poor thing. She's known it all the time. But then the creature moves, stretches, makes a squeaky sound, and she sees it's either the largest bat or the smallest little old man she's ever seen. And with wings. She's wondering if this is what Cora meant by genetic engineering.

Then the creature stands up and Janice is shocked. He has such a large penis that Janice thinks back to the horses and bulls they used to have. It's a Pan-type penis, more or less permanently erect and hooked up tight against his stomach, though Janice doesn't know this about a Pan's penis, and anyway, this is definitely not some sort of Pan.

The article in *Cosmopolitan* comes instantly to her mind, plus the other, sexier books that she has locked in her bedside cabinet. Isn't there, in all this, some way to permanently outdo Cora? Whether she ever finds out about it or not? Slowly, Janice backs up, turns, goes right past her tray (the gleam of silverware helps her know where it is). Goes to the house and down into the basement.

They'd always had dogs. Big ones for safety. But Mr. Jones (called Jonesy) had died a few months ago, and Cora is still grieving, or so she keeps saying. Since the dog had become blind, diabetic, and incontinent in his last years, Janice is relieved that he's gone. Besides, she had her heart set on something small and more tractable, some sort of terrier, but now she's glad Jonesy was large and difficult to manage. His metal choke collar and chain leash are still in the cellar. She wraps them in a cloth bag to keep them from making any clanking noises and heads back out, picking up the tray of food on the way.

As she comes close to the fire she begins to hum. This time she wants him to know she's coming. The creature sits in the lowest fork of the tree now and watches her with glinting red eyes. She puts the tray down and begins to talk softly as though she were trying to calm old Jonesy. She even calls the thing Mr. Jones. At first by mistake and then on purpose. He watches. Moves nothing but his eyes and big ears. His wings, dangling along his arms, are olive drab like that piece she found, but his body is a little lighter, especially along his stomach. She can tell that even in the moonlight.

Now that she's closer and less startled than before, she can see that there's something terribly wrong. One leathery wing is torn and twisted. He's helpless. Or almost. Probably in pain. Janice feels a little rush of joy.

She breaks off a bit of tuna fish sandwich and slowly, talking softly, she holds it towards his little clawed hand. Equally slowly, he reaches out to take it. She keeps this up until almost all of one sandwich is eaten. But suddenly the creature jumps out of the tree, turns away, and throws up.

Janice knows a vulnerable moment when she sees one. As he leans back on his heels between spasms, she fastens the choke collar around his neck and twists the other end of the chain leash around her wrist.

He only makes two attempts to escape: Tries to flap himself into

the air, but it's obviously painful for him; then he tries to run. His legs are bowed, his gait rocking and clumsy. After these two attempts, he seems to realize it's hopeless. Janice can see in his eyes that he's given up—too sick and tired to care. Janice thinks he must be happy to be captured and looked after at last.

She leads him back to the house and down into the basement. Her own quiet creeping makes him quiet, too. He seems to sense that he's to be a secret and that perhaps his life depends on it. It was hard for him to walk all the way across the orchard. He doesn't seem to be built for anything but flying.

There is an old coal room, not used since they got oil heat. Janice makes a bed for him there, first chaining him to one of the pipes. She gets him blankets, water, an empty pail with a lid. She makes him put on a pair of her underpants. She has to use a cord around his waist to make them stay up. She wonders what she should leave him to eat that would stay down. Then brings him chamomile tea, dry toast, one small potato. That's all. She doesn't want to be cleaning up a lot of vomit.

He's so tractable through all this that she loses all fear of him. Pats his head as if he were old Jonesy. Strokes the wonderful softness of his wings. Thinks: If those were cut off, he'd look like a small old man with long, hard fingernails—misshapen, but not much more so than some other people. And clothes can hide things. Without the dark wings, he'd look lighter. His body is that color that's always described as *café au lait*. She would have preferred it if he'd been clearly a white person, but, who knows, maybe a little while in the cellar will make him paler.

After a last rubbing of his head behind his too-large ears, Janice padlocks the coal room and goes up to her bedroom, but she's too excited to sleep. She reads a chapter in *Are You Happy with Your Sex Life?* The one on: How to turn your man into a lusty animal. ("The feet

of both sexes are exquisitely sensitive.” And, “Let your eyes speak, but first make sure he’s looking at you.” “Surrender. When he thinks he’s leading, your man feels strong in *every* way.”) Janice thinks she will have to be the one to take the initiative, though she’ll try to make him feel that he’s the boss—even though he’ll be wearing the choke collar.

For a change, Janice wakes up just as early as Cora does. Earlier, in fact, and she lies in bed making plans. She gets a lot of good ideas. She comes downstairs whistling Vivaldi—off-key as usual, but she’s not doing it to make Cora angry this time. She really can’t whistle on key. Cora knows that Janice knows Cora hates the way she whistles. Cora thinks that if Janice really tried, she could be just as in tune as Cora always is. Cora thinks Janice got up early just so she could spoil Cora’s breakfast by sitting across from her looking just like Mother used to look when she disapproved of Father’s table manners. And Cora notices, even before she makes her omelet, that one can of tuna fish is missing and her loaf of rye bread has gone down by several slices. She takes a quart of strawberries from Janice’s side of the refrigerator and eats them all, not even bothering to wash them.

Janice doesn’t say a word. She doesn’t care, except that Jonesy might have wanted some. Janice is feeling magnanimous and powerful. She feels so good she even offers Cora some of her herb tea. Cora takes the offer as ironic, especially since she knows that Janice knows she never drinks herb tea. She retaliates by saying that, since they’re both up so early, they should take advantage of it and go out to the beach to get more lakeweed for the garden.

Janice knows that Cora decided this just to make her pay for the tuna fish and bread, but she still feels magnanimous—kindly to the whole world. She doesn’t even say that they’d already done that twice in the spring, and that what they needed now were hay bales to put around

the foundations of the house for the winter. All she says is, "No!"

It's never been their way to shirk their duties no matter how angry they might be with each other. When it comes to work, they've always made a good team. But now Janice is adamant. She says she has something important to do. She's not ever said this before, nor has she ever had something important to do. Cora has always been the one who did the important things. This time Cora can't persuade Janice to change her mind, nor can she persuade her that there's nothing important to be done—at least nothing more important than lakeweed.

Finally Cora gives up and goes off alone. She hadn't meant to go. She's never gone off to get lakeweed by herself, but she goes anyway, hoping to make Janice feel guilty. Cora knows something is going on. She's not sure what, but she's going to be on her guard.

As soon as Janice hears the old pickup crunch away on the gravel drive, she goes down in the basement, bringing along Father's old straight razor (freshly sharpened), rubbing alcohol, and bandages. Also, to make it easier on him, a bottle of sherry.

Cora comes back, tired and sandy, around six-thirty. Her face is red and she has big, dried sweat marks on her blue farmer's shirt, across the back and under the arms. She smells fishy. She's so tired she staggers as she climbs the porch steps. Even before she gets inside, she knows odd things are going on. There's the smells . . . of beef stew or some such, onions, maybe mince pie, and there, on the hall table, a glass of sherry is set out for her. Or seems to be for her. Or looks like sherry. Though the day was hot, these fall evenings are cool, and Janice has laid a fire in the fireplace, and not badly done. Cora always knew Janice could do it properly if she set her mind to it. Cora takes the sherry and sits on the footstool of Father's big chair. It's one of the ones Janice had covered in a flowery pattern. Looks like pinkish-blue

hydrangea. Cora looks at the fire. Thinks: All this has got to be because of something else. Or maybe it's going to be a practical joke. If she lets down her guard, she'll be in for big trouble. But even if it's a joke, might as well take advantage of it for as long as she can. The sherry relaxes her. She'll go up and shower—if, that is, Janice has left her any hot water.

For several days, Mr. Jones is in pain. Janice is glad of it. She knows how a wild thing—or even a not-so-wild thing—appreciates being nursed back to health. (As soon as he's better, she hopes to bond him to her in a different way.) She hopes Mr. Jones was too drunk to remember about the . . . amputation . . . whatever you call it. (Funny, he only has three fingers on each hand. She'd not noticed that at first.)

Cora is still suspicious, but doesn't know what to be suspicious about. The good food is going on and on. After supper, Janice cleans up and doesn't ask for help even though she's done all the cooking. And Janice disappears for hours at a time. Goes up to take her nap—or so she says—but Cora knows for a fact that she's not in her room. After the dishes are cleaned up in the evenings, Janice sews or knits. It's not hard to see that's she's knitting a child-sized sweater and sewing a child-sized pair of trousers. At the same time, she's working on a white dress, lacy and low-necked. Cora thinks much too low-necked for someone Janice's age. But perhaps it's not for Janice. Maybe Janice has some news she's keeping from Cora. That would be just like her. Someone is getting married or coming for a visit. Or maybe both.

Mr. Jones is getting better. Eating soups, and nuts, and seeds, and keeping everything down, finally. Janice is happy to see that his skin has faded some. He might pass for a gnarled little Mexican or maybe a fairly light India Indian. And he's beginning to understand some

words. She's been talking to him a lot, more or less as she used to talk to old Jonesy. He knows good boy and bad boy and sit, lie down, be quiet. . . . She thinks he even has the concept of, "I love you." She's never said that to any other creature before, not even to the pony they'd had when they were little. She's been doing a lot of patting, back rubbing, scratching under the chin and behind the ears. Though he's always wearing a pair of her underpants tied up around his waist, and though she hasn't yet tried the stroking of the "exquisitely sensitive" feet, every now and then she notices his penis swelling up even larger than it already is.

One night, after rereading the chapter "How to Turn Your Man into a Lusting Animal," she puts on her flowery summer nightgown (even though the nights are colder than ever, and they haven't started up the furnace yet). She puts on lipstick, eye shadow, perfume, combs her hair out and lets it hang over her shoulders. . . . (She's only graying a little bit at the temples. Thank God, not like Cora, she's almost completely gray.) She goes down into the cellar with a glass of sherry for each of them. Not too much, though. She's read about alcohol and sex.

She tells him she loves him several times, kisses him on the cheeks and then on the neck, just below the choke collar. Finally she kisses his lips. They are thin and closed up tight, and she can feel the teeth behind them. Then she rolls her nightgown up to her chin. She hopes he likes what he sees even though she's not young anymore. (If anything, he mostly looks surprised.) But no sooner has she lain herself down beside him than it's over. She's even wondering, did it really happen? Except, yes, there's blood, and it did hurt. But this isn't at all like the books said it would be or should be. She's read about premature ejaculation. This must be it. Maybe later, when he knows more words, they can go for therapy. But—oops—there he goes again, and just as fast as before. After that he falls asleep. She not only didn't get

any foreplay, but no afterplay, either. She's wondering, where's the romance in all this?

Well, at least she's a real woman now. She hasn't missed all of life. She may have missed a lot, but no one can say she's missed all, which is more than Cora can say. Janice thinks she is, and probably permanently—at least she hopes so—one up on Cora. She's joined the human race in a way Cora probably never will, poor thing. Janice will be kind.

Janice hardly ever drives. She has always left that to Cora. She knows how, but she's out of practice. Now she has several errands to do. She wants a nice pin-striped suit, though she wonders if they come in boys' sizes—a suit like her father would have worn. She wants a good suitcase, not one from the five-and-ten. Shiny shoes big enough for rough claws, though she's cut those claws as short as she could, using old Jonesy's nail clippers. Since Mr. Jones looks sort of Mexican, she'll get him a south-of-the-border Panama hat and dark glasses.

It only takes a couple of days for Janice to get her errands done, and then a couple more to get the guest room ready: Aired out, curtains washed, bed made. (Good it's a double bed.) She whistles all the time and doesn't even remember that it bothers Cora.

Cora watches the preparation of the guest room but refuses to give Janice the satisfaction of asking any questions. It's easy to see that Janice wonders why Cora isn't asking. Once Janice started to tell her something but then turned red to her collar bone and shut up fast.

Janice has continued making good suppers of Cora's favorite foods. Cora is still waiting for the practical joke to come to its finale, but even . . . or especially if it doesn't end, she knows something's up. She hasn't let down her guard, and she's snooped around—even in the

basement, but not in the coal room. Up in the attic she did find a large . . . very large piece of stiff leather, dried blood along its edges and so brittle she couldn't unfold it to see what it was. It gave her the shivers. Pained her to see it, though she couldn't say why. Perhaps it was the two toenails or claws that were attached to each corner. She's thought of throwing the dead-looking thing out in the garbage, but after she saw those claws that were part of it, she couldn't bring herself to touch it again.

Everything is ready, but Janice knows Jonesy needs a little more experience and training. She wants to pretend to go down and pick him up at the airport in Detroit. Cora, if she hears about it, will never let Janice go there by herself. But Cora mustn't be there. For lots of reasons, not the least of which is that Janice wants the trip to be like a honeymoon. They could sneak out in the middle of the night and they could take two or three or even more days coming back. Maybe a couple of days enjoying the sights of Detroit. Jonesy could learn a lot.

Janice has never dared to even think of going on a trip like this before, but with Jonesy she wouldn't be alone. She sees herself, dressed in her best, sitting across from him (he'll be wearing his pin-striped suit) in restaurants, going to motels, movies, even. . . . She'd look right doing these things. Like all the other couples. They'd hold hands at the movies. They'd stroll in the evening after their long drive. Can he stroll? She'll get him a silver-handled walking stick in Detroit. Better than Father's cane. He may be a cripple, but he'll look like a gentleman, and the better he looks, the more jealous Cora will be.

Janice leaves a note for Cora mentioning the airport in Detroit.

And it started out being a wonderful honeymoon. Janice kept the choke collar under Jonesy's necktie and shirt, running the chain down inside his left sleeve so that when she held his hand she could also

hold the chain just to make sure. She also found a way to hold the back of his shirt so she could give a little pull on it, but she seldom had to use any of these techniques. And how could he try to escape, hobbling as he does? Unless he learns to drive the pickup? But Janice wouldn't be a bit surprised if he could learn to drive it. Even before they get to Detroit, Jonesy is dressing himself, uses the right fork in fancy restaurants, can eat a lobster just as neatly as anyone can. (Though he throws it up afterwards.)

Janice keeps a running conversation going, just as if they were communicating. She keeps saying, "Don't you think so, dear?" hoping nobody will notice that he doesn't even nod. Lots of husbands are like that. Even Father didn't answer Mother, lost as he was in his own thoughts all the time. But Mr. Jones doesn't look lost in his thoughts. And he doesn't look as if he feels hopeless anymore. He looks out at everything with such intelligence that Janice is considering calling him *Doctor Jones*.

In Detroit (they are staying at the Renaissance Center), Janice gets the good idea that they should get married right there in City Hall. Before she even tries to do it, she calls Cora up. "I got married," she says, even though it hasn't happened, and whether it ever does or not, Cora will never know the difference. "And isn't it funny, I'm Mrs. Jones, and I call him Jonesy just like old Jonesy."

Cora can't answer. She just sputters. She's been lonelier without Janice than she ever thought she would be. She has even wished the little light was still flickering in the orchard. She'd gone out there, hoping to find another nest. Partly she'd just been looking for company. She'd even left the doors unlocked and her window open. But then she'd put two and two together. She's had all these days to wonder and worry and wait, and she's been down in the basement where the coal-room door had been carelessly left open. She's seen the pallet on the floor, the bowl of dusty water, the remains of a last meal

(Mother's china, wine glasses), three pairs of Janice's underpants, badly soiled. And she remembers that piece of folded leather with the dried blood on it, and she gets the shivers all over again. Cora knows she's been outmaneuvered, which she never thought could ever come about, but she suddenly realizes that she doesn't care about that anymore.

She sputters into the phone, and then, for the first time—at least that Janice ever knew about—Cora bursts into tears. Janice can tell, even though Cora is trying to hide it. All of a sudden Janice wants to say something that will make Cora happy, but she doesn't know what. "You'll like him," she says. "I know you will. You'll *love* him, and he'll love you, too. I know him well enough to know he will. He *will*."

Cora keeps on trying to hide that she's crying, but she doesn't hang up. She's glad, at last, to be connected to Janice, however tenuously.

"I'll bring you something nice from Detroit," Janice says.

Cora still doesn't say anything, though Janice can hear her ragged breathing.

"I'll be back real soon." Janice doesn't want to break the connection either, but she can't think of anything else to say. "I'll see you in two days."

It takes four. Janice comes home alone by taxi after a series of buses. (The pickup is going to be found two weeks later up in Canada, north of Thunder Bay. Men's clothes will be found in it, including a Panama hat, dark glasses, and a silver-handled cane. The radio will have been stolen. There will be maps and a big dictionary that had never belonged either to Cora or Janice.)

As Janice staggers up the porch steps, Cora rushes down, her arms held out, but Janice flinches away. Janice is wearing a wedding ring and a large, phony diamond engagement ring. She has on a new dress. Even though it's wrinkled and is stained with sweat across the back,

Cora can see it was expensive. Janice's hair is coming loose from its Psyche knot, and now she's the one who's crying and trying to pretend she's not.

Cora tries to help Janice up the steps. Even though Janice stumbles, she won't let her help, but she does let Cora push her on into the living room. Janice collapses onto the couch, tells Cora, "Don't hover." Hovering is something Cora never did before. It's more like something Janice would do.

Even after Cora brings Janice a strong cup of coffee, Janice won't say a single word about anything. Cora says she'll feel better if she talks about it, but she won't. She looks tired and sullen. "You'd like to know everything, wouldn't you just," she says. (What other way to stay one up than not to tell? . . . than to have secrets?)

Cora almost says, "Not really," but she doesn't want to be, anymore, what she used to be. Janice hasn't had the experience of being in the house all alone for several days. There's a different secret now that Janice doesn't know about. Maybe never will unless Cora goes off someplace. But why would she go anyplace? And where? Besides, being one up, or getting even, doesn't matter to Cora anymore. She doesn't care if Janice understands or not. She just wants to take care of her and have her stay. Maybe, after a while, Janice will come to see that things have changed.

Cora goes to the kitchen to make a salad that she thinks Janice will like. She sets the dining room table the way she thinks Janice would approve of, with Mother's best dishes, and with the knives and forks in all the right places and both water glasses and wine glasses, but Janice says she'll eat later in the kitchen and alone and on paper plates. Meanwhile she'll take a bath.

After Cora eats and is cleaning up the last of her dishes, Janice comes in wearing her nightgown and Mother's bathrobe. As she leans to get a pan from a lower shelf, the bathrobe falls away. When she

straightens up again, she sees Cora staring at her. "What are you ogling?" she says, holding the frying pan like a weapon.

"Nothing," Cora says, knowing better than to make a comment. She's seen more than she wants to see. There are big red choke collar marks all around Janice's neck.

But something *must* be said. Cora wonders what Father would have done. She usually knows exactly what he'd do and does it without even thinking about it. Now she can't imagine Father ever having to deal with something like this. She can't say anything. She can't move. Finally she thinks: No secrets. She says, "Sister." And then . . . but it's too hard. (Father never would have said it.) She starts. Again, she almost says it. "Sister, I love. . . ."

At first it looks as if Janice *will* hit her with the frying pan, but then she drops it and just stares.

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Noble poets of the consortium:
You have conferred upon me your highest honor, you have called me, in your own words, Most Noble of the Noble (though “words” is hardly the proper way to refer to what you call your parts of speech, so, rather, your syllables, your prefixes, your signs and signals), and I have already made the accepting gestures as well as I can manage them.

Now, in order to know your strange yet “Humble Master” better, you have asked for my alien view of the story of how I came to be your leader. I will tell you.

I came here, as you all know, as a mere specimen—a spot—a “speck,” as you have called me; kidnapped from my world. I jumped through the right door on the first try—ran the maze, jumped to the proper ledge, escaped pain (at least for the moment). Though our noses are not as keen as yours, I could smell the rot behind that door—the sea-like rot that seemed to me might mean freedom. It turned out to be a feeding trough. I did not eat. At least not then.

But I have come to be a new meaning in your land, which is sweet

to me to be, and even more so because I will eat, now, nothing but the roots of lilies and the blossoms of squash, or, rather, what, on my world, would seem to be the equivalent of these things.

Here, not everything is strange to me. There are small things that might as well be cats. There are fish. The only difference is that they can fly as well through air as through water, so one sees fish sitting in the trees, preening themselves, which is a strange sight to me. The trees are not unlike those from my own home world, though I've seen none taller than a tall man. The land, at least in this area, is flat, and every few yards there is another stream to cross. This I've seen, though not experienced. Before, I wasn't important enough to walk the land, and now I'm too important for it, and will be carried along in a sort of upright barrel with a little tent over it in case it rains, which it often does.

It was my curls that started you off about me. Curls are rare among you. You call them "curls of the dreamers that come from having dreamed. Curls," as you say, "of creativity." It is by my curls that I came to be in the magnificent fat state I'm in now. It is by them that I have been raised up to this point. Now it will be my poems that will fly from your mastheads, hang over your doorways, be carried through your streets on banners, and worn across the tops of your caps.

You hadn't noticed my curls at first, but they grew long in my captivity, so that after a few months you knew that I must be a creature to be reckoned with. (I paid for a cool, perfumy drink—my first taste of such things as you drink every day—with my first poem, not knowing, then, its true value. Not even knowing that it was a poem.)

Suddenly you started with different sorts of tests, though whether tests or initiation, I'm still not sure. You don't speak to me of that other time before I wore the robes and ribbons of my station. Perhaps it's beneath my dignity to speak about it now, but now you'll not fault

me for it because I have already had a poet's full share of punishment.

You began the new stage by throwing mud and rocks at me. I couldn't guess why. Sometimes it seemed inadvertent—almost like a tic of some sort. You weren't even looking toward my cage when you did it. Or I wasn't looking. Once I was hit on the head and didn't know it until I came to with a lump behind my ear. Why, I wondered, this change from mazes to cruelty?

And you were saying, "Confess," over and over. (I knew by then the syllables for it.) Confess what? Then there came a series of small annoyances: Tacks on the floor of my cage, crumbs on my pallet, rotten things in my soup, shells in my nuts, hulls in my grains. "Confess. Admit," is all you would say. I had no idea what to confess to, and, as my curls grew yet longer, you became more and more frantic. I began to be able to tell your moods by the way your ears lay (flat against your hair if you were angry) and by the way your tails flipped from side to side.

Being a poet is knowing when to stop.

Being a poet is knowing when to begin.

(*You said these.*)

I finally discovered, through dint of your training, that I did, after all, have the knack of the contemplation of the absolute. Though at first the concept of the absolute escaped me utterly, you lived by it every day. The syllables for it were your favorite syllables. The absolute, you said, is where and what all science comes from. It took me many hard lessons to come to terms with that and to answer, as was so often called for: "Absolutely."

But I began with: "Ab, baa, baa, ab, ab, baa," and after those first bits I got myself the drink, but then my cage was tipped up over a puddle, and I fell out and landed in the mud. Unwashed, just as I was, I was tied to a pole and carried to the poets' palace and taken in through a small back door. Hooded poets came. "Sing," they said. All

I knew was my, “Ab, baa, baa,” but now it wasn’t enough. I tried: “Cha, poo, tut,” and was told to go back to ab, and yet ab was wrong. I was pinched and pulled and slapped at until, three days later, I could answer properly with: “Ab-so-lu-la-la,” and when I could answer with the “word” for poet in all its syllables, as we, in my homeland, might say: “Po-et-ti-ca-la-la”—when I could say these two, I was taken to the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, he who is called The-Uncertained-Among-the-Certained, and also sometimes The-Certained-Among-the-Uncertained. Not as I was, all muddy and red, but washed and dressed in a backless robe of your form of silk, with the worms that made it still attached here and there so that all could see what it was woven of and marvel. I didn’t know then why it had no back to it.

I was not allowed . . . of course not allowed to actually see the president of poems, who talked to me from behind a screen. He, however, could see me, and from there could reach out with his whip and snap it over my head with a great snap, or let it fly onto my back, in which case it made, instead, a flat, slapping sound.

“Sing,” he would say, and I would answer, “Ab-so-la-la,” but by then that was wrong.

In this manner I learned your syllables and syntax. I learned the prefix for the poem, and the suffix for happiness, and I learned to call the president of poems sometimes: Humble-Master-of-the-Names-of-Things, or sometimes: Humble-Master-of-the-Thingness-of-Things-that-Objects-Should-Speak-Through-Him. And I learned, whatever I wore, to bare my back in his presence or in the presence of any of you poets of the palace as a temptation to the whip. Yet I must confess it, I still, even at this moment . . . I still don’t know what a poem is, or how to find one, or which syllables make one up, or whether a syllable is part of one or belongs to a part of another entirely different poem.

The first poem of mine that hung from the flagpoles (and I still don't know why) was:

Look for the tender. The tenders
of the stock. Flocks
of fish fly. By
now they nest in the poet's curls. Whirl
his thoughts like fish. Oh fly
them by. And by.

After that poem, the screen was removed, and I was allowed to see, at last, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, his head of black curls going gray, his yellow eyes, his ears set forward in greeting. . . . It was he, then, who taught me to snap the whip, "Because," he said, "your syllables will travel at the speed of sound, sounding out over the whole world." "Snap," he said, and I would snap. "Sing," he said, and I would sing, and many's the time he stole my syllables and took them as his own and only let, as you would call them, the lesser of my syllables be taken as said by me, though, neither then nor now, do I know which are the lesser of my syllables, and many that you say are lesser, I think otherwise, while those on the banners are those I would deny.

"Don't think," he would tell me. "That way lies the false madness and not the true madness of the poem." But sometimes he said, "Think! Think, think, think," and I still don't know, I confess it, when to think and when to not think.

First, then, the poet's whip lashing out at me, and, afterward, a long time afterward, the bed where he mothered me as only (as you say) poets can mother, fed me blossoms and let me recover, for a while, from poetry. By that time I had learned better than to repeat myself. By that time I was scarred and bruised but knew not to stop

talking when poems were being called for—not to let any line that might be turned and twisted and hooked onto another line or divided in that strange way of yours into even more nonsense than I'd thought it had—I learned not to let any such lines stay unsaid.

It was a long rest he (and you) gave me. And for all that time, not one single, little poem or even syllable, not one suffix or prefix, was allowed from me, though I had been beaten to the point that, whenever my vigilance relaxed, poetry would pop out of my mouth at random. The president, Humble-Master, shushed me, and yet, even so, I saw him pressing down what I had said into his little clay tablet, quickly, with the long nails of his paws. (You had let my nails grow, too, by then, so that I could do that, though I was clumsy at it.)

Then it was that he (and you) were all kindnesses, but especially he, the Humble-Master, waiting on me hand and foot (ear and tail, as you would say), held the wine glass to to my lips, brushed back my curls. His ears always pricked forward now and his tail moved in a slow, contented back and forth. He waited by me even all night long. I could see his eyes glow when he was awake and watching me. I felt he liked me, perhaps even loved me, and I began to like him, too, though I could make out nothing about him. I could speak your syllables, but I understood nothing of anything, neither of poetry, nor of love, nor of liking. It seemed that, as I learned more, I understood less and less.

But I lay back and rested, grateful for the care, and only woke out of my happy dream of no more whipping, no more groveling, not even, anymore, to answer: “Ab-so-lu-la-lat-ly”—only woke up to my thoughts again the day he shaved my head. . . . Cut off my curls and then shaved me. *He* did it. My (I thought of him as mine now) my president, my Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, did it all gently, as, now, he always was with me. Then he turned away and did the same to himself, cut his curls and shaved his head. After that he gave me the

lick that was his kiss (on each of my eyelids) and motioned me to do the same to him. I felt the soft vulnerability of his closed eyes. Then he brought out a box for me and left me, for the first time—the first time on this world—completely alone. I had been watched and studied from the moment I came here and then tortured and then kept awake and kept talking and only now left alone, with a few blossoms strewn about the table (whether for decoration or a snack, I couldn't guess).

I knelt by the box and opened it. At first I couldn't tell what it was except that it was something to wear and that what lay on top of it was a helmet. The helmet was covered with a glassy, red enamel, and the sign of the poet was on the front—not just the sign of any poet, but the sign of the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem . . . *his* sign was on the front of it, but one of my own short poems was written—embroidered, actually, along the red and white flag that feathered from the top and unfurled as I took the helmet from the box. My poem, all there in a long line: *If the sound of the snap, then no pain therefore joy.* The helmet exactly fit my now bald head. The ear holes had been moved from the top to the side in order to fit my ears. Under the helmet was a breastplate exactly right for my strange, flat chest, jointed mitts that would fit my hands only, under them: Penis sheath, leg guards. At the bottom of the box curled a whip, longer than any I had seen, and under it was a dagger, curved, with the sharpness on the inside, like a sickle. On the hilt was the sign for joy and the sign for the power of sparkling mirrors, and I knew that, just as the president, Humble-Master, was the poet called Uncertainties, I was to be the poet called Joy. I had never heard, among your poets, of a poet ever called Joy, and I have since learned that that is true, there are none, which is odd, for it seems to me that the joy when the sound of the whip comes snapping over your head is as much as any joy I've experienced here on your world, because when the blows fall upon your back it makes an entirely different sound. One would

think it would have been written about, and often, but I suppose that's not your way.

I was left alone with these new things long enough to think about them, which I did. Then other poets from the palace came and dressed me in them.

"There is no future for you, Joy, nor any future for any of us, in a land where the president who is known as Uncertainties exists at the same time as you do. Now Joy must put an end to him."

I asked them the same question I'd asked *him* and that he would never answer: Why had I been raised up so high among them, from speck to where I was? They said it was not only because my curls were tight and tiny and stuck out around my face like a great amphitheater, but also because I had brought unusual and important things to poetry. "It would be a pity for poetry if your syllables were stopped," they said, "so be vigilant."

They belted my dagger about me, they coiled my whip over my shoulder and led me to the arena, a place where I'd only heard poetry before, though I'd often wondered at the brown stains on the far wall. When I'd asked about them, you'd always answered that they were the stains of bad poems.

The fight, you told me, was to be fought to the sound of our poems, so that I and the president must never stop talking and never stop fighting. Also we must never turn our backs or grovel, as that would change death to non-death, for no one could kill a groveler. Then, if I had killed him, I was to put my ear on the ground and grovel one last time, which would be the last forever. If the president, on the other hand, killed me, he'd not have to do that, having already, when he'd won and become the president, come to his last grovel.

You poets of the palace were to be our audience, and you sat on the tiers with your tablets on your laps, ready to write out the poems we would be saying to each other. Those in red robes were to be for

me. Those in green were for he who had taught me everything I knew, who had nursed me, waited on me, drunk wine with me, and once gave me a handful of jade marbles.

"It's possible to win with the poetry," you told me, "and yet still die."

I wasn't one of you and I didn't fight as you were used to. I threw off my whip at once, for I wasn't good at it and didn't want the added weight. I took out my dagger right away, and you all made great barking sounds I had not heard you ever make before, though you said to each other that what I did was not against any of the rules. There was no rule about it because no one had thought to do that.

The president, Noble-Master, turned me and twirled me and forced me back with his whip. All skills I had never mastered. He did this over and over, but I kept coming in, each time trying some new way and trying to grab his whip, which he skillfully kept away from me. He could wind me up and turn me and throw me against the back wall until it was my blood that mixed with the older stains. Then he could unwind the whip so fast I couldn't grasp it and only got rope burns trying. I gave up on the whip and went, instead, after the poem that hung from his helmet on that long banner. (His poem read: *The absolute is full of uncertainties.*) I jerked at it and had his helmet off before he'd realized what I was doing. Again, it was obviously not something that any of you would have done.

For a moment the slow intonations of his fighting poem stopped, and his own side called to him that time was running out for the sound of the next syllable.

His neck was bared to me now, and yet he stood still, shocked, and I stood still, too. Finally he spoke, and, according to the timers, just in time. "To the uncertainty of death," he said, "I'm sending Joy, poet from the lesser world." I, at the same time, was saying, "I have learned to like you," and, at that moment, as he stood, still dazed, I came out

of my own shock. And cut off his tail.

There was a roar of rage from all of you. It was clear that nothing of the sort had ever happened before. In my mind it had been that or his head, and I decided at the last moment that I wouldn't—couldn't—try to kill him.

He turned, then, dagger out, and fought me with a rage I'd never seen in him in all the time that I had spoiled syllables. He was so angry, he lost all skill and flailed out, scratching at me and even biting. His poem fell apart to mere mouthings. "Not done . . . not to be considered" . . . and that there, "Couldn't be a president with only half a tail. Might as well," he said, "be without ears." At which point I clipped the left one off. At this, he fell and groveled. He wasn't dead, but he said he could never again rule poems. "I'm as good as dead," he said, but I said, "No. You're my poet. If no one else's, then mine."

"If it comes from your mouth," you all said—"If it comes from the mouth of Joy, the president, Humble-Master-of-the-Poem, then it must be."

And that is how I came to be here before you, making accepting gestures, being the six hundred and twelfth poet to become president, and here, my friend and servant, still alive—though in his own mind only half so, having lost all but one way of greeting you, and all but one way of showing pleasure—yet, to me, alive and singing, the even-humbler master, the poet, Uncertainties, and, as I am also, sure of only a few small things.

ONE PART OF THE SELF IS ALWAYS TALL AND DARK

I stopped speaking in mid-sentence (something went beep, beep outside. Perhaps a truck.), wanting to relax into cozy madness and chew on an old sock. Why did I ever grow up? I wondered. Just because it was expected?

I'm writing this with careless abandon, partly because I know it will not be my last story. (They say always do something as though it were your last chance, but I'm pretty sure I'm not going to die tomorrow.) And not only not the last story, but not the most important. Perhaps the least important, written on the backs of old envelopes. Stories do not change the world. I've learned that. But perhaps in some secret, subtle way. . . . I mean it's not the world I want to change.

Intelligence, or the lack of it, is the least of my worries. On the other hand, I have always wanted to go mad. I confess it. I've already felt glimmerings of each kind: Catalepsy, manic depressive, schizoid. . . . Sometimes I'm speechless and frozen, sometimes in a frenzy. Whenever I see a mad person I feel a sense of oneness, especially if they are struggling in a straitjacket. He suspects it. He always says, "That's crazy."

As usual I must ask myself: What do I give up? What do I gain? And, most important, when should I do it?

If someone grabbed me around the neck from behind, I would bite their wrist no matter how sweaty and hairy. It was at that thought that I stopped speaking in mid-sentence when something went beep, beep.

He wasn't listening. He didn't notice.

Many things are happening: Cars pass outside. A fish is defrosting in the sink, a faucet drips, moths are in the soy beans. There's a tree that, if it falls, will hit the roof and, most probably, do some damage. Because of these there's a sense of suspense in the air.

There are other reasons for suspense, too, not the least of which is that I have a little pillbox in my purse in which I carry an assortment of vitamins, including a large, brown, hard-to-swallow, suspicious-looking multi-vitamin pill. I'm always afraid the police will stop me and look in my purse and see this multi-colored assortment of pills, accuse me of trafficking in drugs, and haul me off to jail. They search me even in the most private places of my body, all the policemen taking a look to confirm that there are no vitamins hidden there. I tell them I don't even drink. I tell them I never had a traffic ticket. I tell them I never lie and never even stole from the five-and-ten when I was a kid, and when somebody gives me too much change I always give it back, so what would my kind of person be doing with drugs? "That's what they all say," they say. I'm in jail for a week. Other prisoners keep me awake at night. I almost go crazy. Finally they analyze the vitamins and find out what they are. When they let me go, they say they're sorry.

When I really do go crazy at last, I envision a place not at all like jail. It's a large country mansion. Everyone has a monk-like private room with a cot and a chest of drawers. The room is painted white. The furniture is dark. There's a little desk and chair in front of the

barred window. I'll bring all the books I have that I haven't read yet. It's a little like going to college.

The telephone rings.

It's for him.

It's a call from California. He gets many such calls.

I would have liked to have gotten a call from California myself.

Yesterday I wanted to make sure he understood that it wasn't *my* fault we hadn't made love for a month. I wanted that clearly understood. I made a remark to that effect. Of course it made him angry, and I must say nothing much was accomplished for the rest of the day.

I'm hoping things go better today. I'm going to be careful to not mention that anything is not my fault.

He assures me that he loves me.

I show a breast for his inspection.

The telephone rings.

The ground around that tree is wet and soft from spring rains, and I think the tree is leaning even closer to the house than usual, but we are still not doing anything about it. We're thinking instead of world betterment and of the feasibility of setting up some sort of committee or society. Perhaps we should begin a nationwide movement, but before we can get anything under way, the house fills with teenagers who are eating things that were planned for other meals.

I ask him, "Can I count on the teenagers in an emergency?" (The question has a special importance considering what is to come.) He tells me they are older than they look. He's standing in the yard looking up at the tree with a quizzical expression. Seen at close range, his face helps me to become aware of my own confusion.

One of the teenagers is having a nervous breakdown. I was hoping I'd be the one to do that. I'm spending the next few days being extra-nice to the teenager, though things will probably right themselves since, under the advice of the school psychologist, the teenager has dropped chemistry. I have nothing I can drop, but I seem to go on after a fashion . . . so far.

I'm writing a survey of unusual needs and desires, especially those peculiar to women. Also those expressed in dreams because, in spite of it all, I do sleep well and dream up satisfactions. Erections, for instance, as far as the eye can see. Phallic temples raised to the essential femaleness of myself. But perhaps I sleep too much. It's another way of going crazy, though I would prefer the violent. To strike out, even in sadness and grief. To leer, wink, smirk, drool; to talk a language all my own, or to laugh and not stop laughing. My ears buzz. I interpret this as the sounds of jokes I can't quite hear. If I seem sane, it's only for those times when I have the illusion I'm the heroine of my own life.

There are several different ways of going mad. There are almost as many ways to go mad as there are people going mad. There's a best way for everybody. As yet, I'm not in any serious financial trouble, so I can afford to go mad in almost any way I like and pay for whatever damage I do.

I'm reading the later works of Nietzsche. Also Zelda's biography. I'm singing one of the last sad songs Schuman wrote just before he was taken off to an asylum. The words are about leaving behind something one loves.

The teenagers are throwing shoes and hats back and forth. Later, even though a fish *is* defrosting in the sink, they want to go eat at Arthur Treachers. One is climbing into the tree. I look in the other

direction because he has told me not to be over-protective. Suspense mounts, during which time I try to think of Fred Astaire. I was in love with him when I was the teenagers' ages. I think back as far as I can, and I can't remember ever not being in love with someone, but the reason I'm remembering Fred Astaire right now is because one of the teenagers is interested in tap-dancing and has been reading his autobiography. Fred Astaire was very much in love with his wife. When she died, he didn't get married again or have any other women (that we know of). Her name was Phyllis. I would be ill at ease if Fred came for a visit. I would hardly even know how to sit, whether to cross my legs or be natural in my jeans and sweatshirt and with my knees apart as usual. I would try to be natural, but it would be how I think I am when I'm natural. Fred Astaire and I would make a good pair because when I go mad I would like to wear a top and tails all the time. Perhaps when I do go mad, I won't have any choice in the matter.

The teenager falls out of the tree, but it's all right, he only sprains his ankle.

I dream solutions. I dream words of warning. I dream toilet dreams where the fixtures are so strange you can't figure out what they're for. I dream three-letter words. In this dream, every word in the world has only three letters. It's beautiful how things fit together. Lines no longer need adjusting. I decide to write according to this plan:

Now all men can say Who was she any way Ask *Qui est*
How can one not say she was Mrs Red Hat Mrs big eye
She was far out and tip top too All the men got set for
sex One was the top ten toe tap man Boy was she hot
for him She let him too Sin was bad but fun Ohs and
Ahs for sex now See how one sly man can get her But

she set her cap for him too and she let him get his way
The sun was out all day for her and the man hes not bad
and did his bit Now she has one son Bob was her shy
boy You may say the dad won but its not all rip off for
the mom

One day she ask Why are you sad All men get mad and
hit out and say Hey you old hag Why not fly off one
day Set out for the sea any way you can get out Dim Wit
Why are you not yet far off Her eye was wet Its Sad but
Hes not fit for her any way

Her man was toe and leg man and arm lip and ear man
too She let him pay for her new out fit but hes too far
off now

Her son Bob say Wow Mom won not bad Out our way
you pay the fee and you can get all the art you can buy
Its not new but its art She can get art too Art was her
way and sex but one tit was too low THE END

I have submitted my case to the insane asylum more than once. They think I'm bluffing. I explain that, though I've only had one real hallucination in my life, I've heard voices calling my name on six separate occasions when I was alone. I send them my picture with the wild look in my eyes. I write that I say, "I give up," and, "I give in," at least once a day. The fear of not going crazy is driving me crazy.

Agnes went crazy. She couldn't stop talking. She collected rubber bands. (She ate some.) She heard nasty voices. She went to bed and didn't get up for three days. (Why didn't I think of that?) Other

times she seemed perfectly sane, as I do. Even so, they took Agnes away.

Dogs on leashes are walked by. Gifted poets arrive in New York from Russia. The day is so bright, for a minute I think I can play the piano. I forgot the many years it takes of practice. I sit down and bang out a few dissonant chords.

He listens. "I give in," I say, and, "take me" (whipping off my sweatshirt). We begin, but then we remember that one of us has to drive out to pick up one of the teenagers at eleven or so.

He assures me that he loves me.

The telephone rings.

I write: Caught up in an absurd, abstemious rigmarole of days and nights full of crises. . . . I write: Locked out somewhere on the other side of insanity. . . . I write: When I was thirteen and in love with Fred Astaire. . . . Also I write advice to the young: Beware of warm mayonnaise, swollen cans, heights, drivers your own age, and, when in burning houses, rescue yourselves, not the goldfish. Fall in love wisely!

Oh, how I want to be the mother of the Great American Poet! How I want to be the mother of doctors that go to Africa, the mother of an ombudsman, and, especially, I want to be the mother of an opera star. It's a hard thing for the teenagers to understand.

That book I mentioned before says that Fred Astaire spent many a summer at a place in Pennsylvania next door to where my father grew up. It's strange to think that many times my father and Fred Astaire must have passed each other on the road up and down the mountain to and from Wernersville, though I don't think my father would have recognized Fred Astaire even after he (Fred, that is) had become

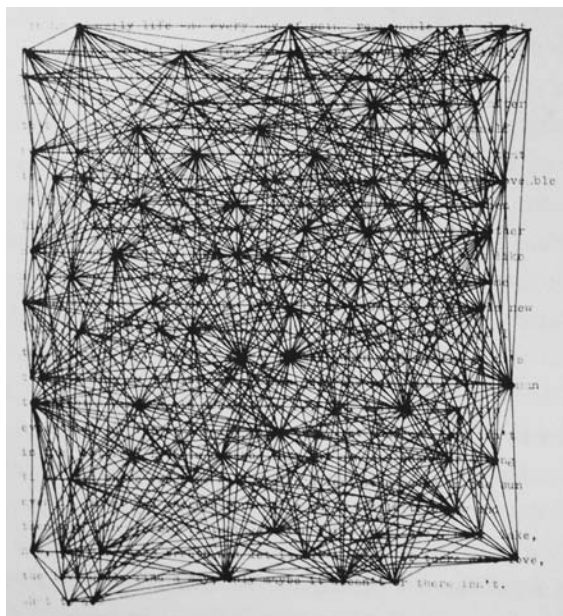
famous. My father was not one for going to the movies.

I mention something of the sort to *him*. He says, "I think you're crazy." This makes me angry. When I say I want to go crazy this isn't what I mean.

I think the teenagers are learning a lot about life from watching us.

I feel like going out and sitting under the about-to-fall tree.

I fill in all the Os in a page of my writing, and I connect them (also the periods) using a ruler.



At the mansion for mad people, the day will be divided into hours for this and that, not at all like it is here, where anything can happen at any time and always does. One hour will be for cleaning up, one

hour for exercise, one hour free time, one hour for a nap, one hour for dinner, one hour for TV, one hour for a little walk. A bell will ring each hour on the hour. I can hardly wait.

Higher gusts today. I can tell without turning on the weather. Even so, the tree still stands, though the suspense is becoming unbearable. Somehow the anticipation gives me a sense of euphoria. I find I clap at the slightest excuse. I say, "Yes," and, "Hooray!" I guess all the "Guess what's?" even though madness-wise I seem no closer than I was yesterday. I think I'll jot down some ideas for an uplifting work of art. I'll start with a list of all the non-disastrous aspects of the world. There must be some.

Much later, when I'm feeling that good kind of tiredness that means I can sit down and watch two hours of bad TV and deserve it, he sits down beside me and apologizes for his past failures. That is ground gained, I think. He doesn't look at all like Fred Astaire, but a part of everyone's self is always a little bit short and fat, even Nureyev's. I must remember that. I tell him I'm sorry, too, though I'm not sure for what. We glance sideways into each other's eyes in a shy (and sly) way. We're both thinking the same thing. . . .

The telephone rings.

FOSTER MOTHER

DIRECTIONS FOR THE SMALL:

*Y*ou'll have to bottle-feed it. Give it plenty of strokes and hugs until it'll follow no one but you. Don't let it get too obstreperous. That can happen when no other big ones of its own kind are around. Then hand it over and leave the rest to us.

You may name it if you feel so inclined, though a name is not necessary. We'll give it a name of our own choosing if we need one.

Don't expect too much. They have small brains, about the size of two lima beans. As far as we know, their smiles might not be smiles. Their tears, not tears. Though they bleed, they don't feel pain as we do.

Afterward, let it go on with what it has to do. Go live a different story someplace far from here. Don't come back.

Remember it belongs to us.

And so I'm thinking: Lester? Jester? Or, on the other hand, Baladin? Balladeer? He should have a name the opposite of what he will become. It might stand him in good stead and there might be a little bit of hope.

Probably nobody will ever get to know the name except for the two of us.

He'll have to find his own kind of joy by himself. Best to have a joyful name. At least that. And best we laugh a lot (if that is laughing). Tickle and tussle. Dance.

They call him, "it." The sex is not important to them.

He was absolutely the cutest thing I ever saw. They start out small. Just like us. Little chubby goat-boy. Little chubby donkey-boy. Loves me already. As who else is there but me? I know I mustn't take it personally.

But now, later, little skinny boy and even more goat-like and still the cutest thing I ever saw. Now he calls me Mush, Mushka, Mash. . . . I don't remember how that started. I call him Kookie, Cookie. . . .

I think he should have a musical instrument. Something that makes a deep bass sound. Tuba or some such? Or the biggest viol there is? Except he's still too small. I think trumpet. That'll sound out nicely from mountain to mountain, though it is a bit on the military side and reminds me of those others who are in charge of us.

See us—both of us—leaping, though I'm not as good at it as he is. See us on cliff edges, naked or almost. Well, he is, the sun browning us. See them, pointing up at us and looking pleased, folding their hands around their important papers, all the paraphernalia of their status and their jobs hanging about them. They wear so much, nobody knows what they look like. Are they us or are they some sort of alien?

He depends on me. In the beginning I even chewed his food for him. Better than trying to cut it. They didn't give me a grinder.

We take long walks holding hands. When he gets tired, I carry him piggyback. I made him booties. They don't supply footwear or

clothes. They say he grows too fast for them to bother. They say he doesn't need shoes. (Actually, they don't supply much of anything.) We fish. We pick flowers. By now he knows the names of all the ones around here. They say he's not smart enough for that, but he is.

We brought home a gopher snake. We hope it stays and lives under our shack. We named it Squiggly. We planted an apple tree. Already he says, "See my tree." We named it Appy.

When he's happy he wiggles all over. They said that wasn't happiness. They said he can't feel much more than rage. I think that's what I'm here for, to make sure it's rage. What he says most of all is, "Let's get going." They think I'm too old to "get going" with him. They think I'll hold him back and that will make him angry, but even when he's about to roar at night, I'm awake before it happens. I hear his first whimper, so I'm by his side before it can turn nasty. I sing to him, long song stories. "That's a ballad," I say. "That's what I named you, Balladeer."

We live at the top of a strategic pass. He's supposed to get to know the whole region so he can patrol it. We climb to the mountain tops on each side, and across to the dangerous drop-off. He'll be able to leap off that one of these days, but now he's still too little to leap streams. We take off our booties and wade. (He goes through booties like you wouldn't believe.)

It's a paradise up here. If, that is, one likes one's paradise steep and rocky, with boulders to climb around or over. A paradise if one likes it rugged. If one likes to slip and slide, and, suddenly, flop! so, now and then, be on the ground looking straight up into the, usually, blue sky.

He gets into everything. I brought out my suitcases and shoes and hats. They forgot he might have wanted toys, but—well—when did

a young one ever need toys when there are pebbles and sticks and flat pieces of slate, pots and pans, packing boxes? And I have paper and crayons. Pieces of cloth. I know he's male (or he seems so to me), but I made him a rag doll.

What energy! I wonder what his real mother would have done with him? Of course she'd have been much stronger.

Frankly, I think he knows a lot more than even I can guess. I don't need to tell him not to show his smarts. I think he's hiding them even from me. On the other hand, we're supposed to show off his athletic prowess. He's still awkward. What can you expect from somebody growing so fast?

He has so much spark and sparkle. Sometimes I call him Bright Eyes. Brains like beans! I don't believe it.

But I worry. His future can't possibly be good. I think he will die a bad death well before his time. One never wants that for a creature one has raised from birth.

I wonder if we should run away. Pretend we got lost in the hills. But he's too little for that now.

Could I take him back to where he came from? There must be some sort of a mother somewhere. Unless he was made some odd scientific way.

I'm wondering more and more why I was picked for this job. I volunteered, but so did lots of others. There must be something special about me, but special in a good way or a bad way? Probably something inept. A stupid side. What is it I don't see? It's most likely the most important thing of all. By the time I find out, it'll probably be too late.

But I wonder if my looks had anything to do with it? Is that why we look alike? And what about my own teeth? They stick out like his

do. I always look as if I'm getting ready to bite somebody. Anyway, I don't care why they picked me. Look at us, how we get along. He'd sacrifice himself for me, and I'd do the same for him. I would have the minute he was put in my arms, squeaking and so tiny and vulnerable.

I had to promise to keep him a secret, and I had to sign that I was aware my own life was in danger, but, I wonder, from him or from them?

What does a weapon need to know? I don't suppose much. Certainly not the names of flowers. Probably how to obey simple commands. A few words of everyday life might come in handy. How to snarl.

Anyway, somebody has to care for creatures when they're juveniles, don't they?—no matter what they are to become.

They never told me what he'd end up being. I see hardly any signs. Perhaps that's where my stupidity lies. As far as I'm concerned, he's exactly the baby I always wished I'd been able to have. I think we even look alike. I see myself in the way he smiles. The words he knows are my words. But I suppose, when I've given him over and he's all grown up, I won't recognize him at all.

So far he's only a little bit scaly, his toenails only a little bit too horny. You hardly notice. I wonder when his teeth will be growing? Now he's just losing them. We put them under his pillow. (He does have a pillow. He carries it with him all the time. He'd take it outside if I let him.) And he gets a treat in the morning. Not money. What would we do with money way out here?

I see the eye-teeth peeking out. Maybe they'll all be eye-teeth pretty soon.

They said they question his ability ever to follow more directions than three in a row, but already he remembers more than I do. He counts to a hundred with no trouble. He loves to yell it out, but I tell him to whisper. I have a hard time holding him back. He has a loud,

echoing voice and loves to use it. I suppose he won't need a trumpet. He already sounds like one.

Sometimes I tell him his name should be Let's Go. And he tells me mine should be Wait a Minute. But I think I've been too much Wait a Minute. I think we should run away now. At first I thought we should wait until he's larger and stronger, but that might be a mistake. I think we should run away while he's still easy to handle.

"Come on, Let's Get Going," I say. "Get your pillow. We're going on a trip. You'll like it."

He likes it already and we haven't even started. He's running round and round the kitchen table, leaping up on it every now and then. He couldn't do that last year. He'll be leaping wider streams than I can. I hope he waits for me. I'll give him the heavy backpack to hold him down.

I don't say, "Save your energy." He has plenty for anything.

He's singing. Dumb things like, "Here we go loop-de-looping-loo."

I say, "Come kiss me before we get going. A big fat wet one. Give me a big fat hug."

I have a funny feeling. Worried. I'm not exactly a knowledgeable person—about anything, even the wilderness we're on the edge of right here. They probably picked me for that ignorance.

So we get going, him skipping and trumpeting as usual. Every now and then he shouts and jumps up and down out of sheer joy. He's as if on springs, backpack and all. I don't know how he does it.

Pretty soon I'm going to tell him we're on a secret trip and he should keep quiet.

We go up into the treeless places and over the cliffs. It's his turn to be helping me. He leaps me over streams. We have to hurry. We have to get down into the trees before they come to check on us.

As soon as we get well into them, I stop to give him a lesson (I need a rest anyway). I say that, if we get found out, he should leave me there to face them alone and go hide by himself. I say, "Those rolls of paper they hold on to all the time could be weapons." I explain weapons. I explain how he's tough, but not that tough. Besides, they're discovering new weapons all the time. No matter how strong and scaly he gets, they'll have found something to destroy him with. "Leap a lot," I say. "Side to side. And their weapons might be silent. They might look like pieces of paper. They have all those jewels. Those might be weapons, too."

I see in his eyes that he understands. (Are his eyes getting smaller, or is he getting larger all around them?) How could they say his brain was the size of two beans? He sparkles with intelligence. And love. As I'm telling him all these things (that I'd not thought I'd have to do till later), he holds my hand with his sandpapery one. I raise it to my lips, and then he does the same to mine, clunk against his teeth. "Balladeer," I say, "but don't sing now."

"Ho dee ho dee ho dee ho," he says, but softly. It's a joke.

We sleep that night curled around each other. We always sleep that way. He doesn't keep me warm. He never has. I've suspected for a long time that he's cold-blooded. He's so sluggish in the morning, but of course I was, too, at that age. I just couldn't wake up. My mother always had to come in and shake me. Yelling and knocking at my door just didn't do it. All that growing takes energy.

It happened just as I was afraid it would. We got caught. He was getting too big to hide even here in the trees.

Of course they picked morning, and an especially cold one. It'll take him a while to realize anything. It'll prove to them all the more his brains are beans.

We ran—started to. He pulled me along with him, but there was no direction to go in. They were all over. Then he let go of me and did as I'd told him, jumped a great leap. Over all of them. I'd no idea he could do that, and he wasn't even warmed up yet. He trumpeted. He was over the cliff, down and going.

One of them stayed to keep me prisoner, but the rest went after him. I saw he was all right at the bottom of the cliff, leaping and leaping. Trumpeting and skipping. For him it was still as much fun as the first part of the trip. As if this was what he was born for and maybe he was. Or at least it's sort of what he was born for. Certainly for leaping about the forest knocking down trees, pulling up bushes and tossing them into the air. I'm wondering if I was born for this, the other side of it, to stand here handcuffed while he cavorts away, down the cliffs. I wish he'd carried me off with him, but I told him to go. I waved him away. "You're on your own!" I kept yelling it and, "Love you!" until I couldn't see him anymore.

He knocked down three of those keepers as he leaped away. One got stepped on. None got killed, which is more than I can say about what they want to do to him, what with all these weapons. Or what might be weapons. He doesn't know the difference between them and the enemy—whoever that is. I wish I had thought to tell him about the downtrodden. I know whose side he'd be on if he knew about us, but there's no rage in him toward anybody and never has been. There's only joy.

"Dead!" they said, but they've never brought any pieces of him back. Not even a claw nor a greenish scale to prove it. You'd think they would have.

I knew, though, whether he was dead or not, they'd say he was. They won't want anybody but themselves out there looking for him, but I think he may be roaming yet. On a rampage. On a love rampage. Because he loves me.

I'll never know. I don't want to. Yes, I do. I'll go hallooing off myself. They won't bother stopping me. Maybe I won't find him, but, if he's out there, he'll find me.

They tore him from my arms. (Or, more like it, they tore me from his arms. He was bigger than me by then and stronger. My skin came off on his claws. Metaphorically speaking, that is.) Of course all this might be what was supposed to happen from the start: That he should love me and that he should lose me and that they should say he's dead. I only just figured it out right now, which shows how slow I am.

But this is not the end. He's out there. And he has a right to be. Trumpeting. Rearing up. I know exactly what he's doing. It's what we always did. Peering at flowers and bugs and such. Watching snakes. Eating berries. Maybe finding a bee tree and getting honey. Sitting quietly until some animal or other comes to see what he is. And still sitting, letting the animal, whatever it be—once we sat like that for a fox, letting it be—come close, and then letting it walk away, safe.

If you come upon him, don't be frightened. Of course by now he'll be much bigger, but just sit down calmly and sing something. He likes music. Smile.

CREATURE

This creature looks more scared than I am. Come knocking . . . pawing . . . scratching at my door. Come, maybe, in search of me (I'm easy prey for the weak and scared and hungry), or maybe in search of help and shelter. . . . (I'm peering out my window, hoping it won't see me.) It's been snowing—seems like three or four days now. The first really bad weather of the year so far.

It looks so draggled and cold. . . . I open the door. I welcome it. I say, "Hello, new and dangerous friend." My door's a normal size, but too small for it. It pushes and groans and squeezes itself in. Then collapses on the floor in my one and only room, its big green head facing the stove. It takes up all the space and makes puddles.

There's a tag stapled in its ear—rather tattered (both ear and tag), green (both ear and tag), with a number so faded I can hardly make it out. It might be zero seven. Strange that it has ears at all, considering what it (mostly) looks like. But they're small—tiny, vestigial . . . no, the opposite, evolving ears. They look as if made purely as place to put a tag.

It's wearing a large handmade camouflage vest with lots of

pockets. Now, while it's still out of breath and collapsed, I check for weapons, though with those claws, why would it need any? What it has is old, dried crumbs of pennyroyal left over from some warmer season and some higher mountain, a few interesting stones, one streaked green with copper and one that glitters with fool's gold, two books, one of poetry (*100 Best-Loved Poems*) and one on plants of the area. Both well-worn. A creature of my own heart. Perhaps.

It looks half-starved—more than half. I have broth. I help it raise its heavy head. It sips, nods as if in thanks, but then shows its teeth, blinks its glittery eyes. I jump back. Try to, that is, but I bump into my table. There's no room with it in here. It shakes its head, no, no, no. Seems to say it. "Mmmnno."

But how can such a creature talk at all with such a mouth? But then come words, or parts of words. "Thang . . . kh . . . mmmyou . . . kind. Kindly. Thang you." Then it seems to faint, or collapses, or sleeps—instantly—snow melting from its eyelashes (it has eyelashes) and rolling off its back, icy mud drying between its claws. The tiny arms look as if made for nothing but hugging.

While it seems in such an exhausted sleep, or maybe passed out, I take pliers and carefully remove the staple that holds the zero seven ear tag. I notice several claw marks along its back and it's lost a large chunk off the end of its tail.

Now where in the world did this thing come from?

I've heard tales. I thought they were the usual nonsense . . . like sasquatch, yeti, and so forth, abominable this or that. (And here, for sure, the most abominable of all.) But I've heard tales of secret weapons, too. I've heard there are creatures made specifically to patrol this empty borderland. Supposed to be indestructible in so far as a living, breathing creature can ever be. Supposed to attack everything that moves in this no man's land where nothing is supposed to be, but another of its own kind.

I'd probably help even a suffering weapon, I probably wouldn't be able to keep myself from it, but this one seems odd for a weapon, too polite, and with vest pockets full of dried bits of flowers, that book of poetry. . . .

I drink the rest of the broth myself and stare at the creature for a while. No sense in trying to mop up with this thing in the way and still dripping. I can't even get across the room without leaning against a wall or climbing over my chair or cot. I step over its legs. I squinch over to my front door. I take my jacket. I'm not worried about leaving the thing alone. It doesn't seem the sort to do any harm—unless by mistake.

I whisper, "Sleep, my poor, wet friend. I'll be back soon," in case it hears me leave. It doesn't move. I might as well be talking to myself. I do that all the time anyway. I used to talk to my dog, Rosie, but since she died, I haven't stopped. I jabber on. No need for a dog for talking. They used to say we men were the silent sex, at least compared to women, but not me. Rosie just made it worse. She would look up at me, trying hard to get every word. Seemed to smile. I'd talk all the more. And now, as if she was still here, I talk. I talk to anything that moves.

As I go out, right outside the door there's some juniper branches threaded together as though it had made itself a wind shield of some sort and dropped it before it came in. Farther along I see broken branches around my biggest limber pine. It must have sheltered there—leaned against the leeward side. Hard to think of such a creature giving out.

I lean against the leeward side, too. You'd think it would have smelled my fire and me. Perhaps it was already weak and sick. I don't dare leave it by itself for long, but I need space. That was like being in a squeeze gate. Still, I like company. Watch the fire together. Come better weather, we could make the shack bigger. It was polite, even.

I say, "Rosie, Rosie." The wind blows my words off into the hills before I hardly get them said. That name has already bounced off these cliffs sunrise to sunset. Not a creature here that hasn't heard it. I've called her, sometimes by mistake, sometimes on purpose. Sometimes knowing she was dead, sometimes forgetting.

After she died I ran out in a snowstorm naked—and not just once or twice—hoping for . . . what? Death by freezing? I yelled, answering the coyotes, until I was so hoarse I couldn't have spoken if there'd been somebody to speak to. After that I whispered. Then I sat, brooding over the knots in the logs as I had when I first came out here. Rosie needed me. She kept me human. Or should I say, and better yet, she kept me animal. I don't know what I've become. I need this creature as much as it needs me. I'd make it a good meal. Maybe that's what I want to be.

I squat down, my back against the tree. I shouldn't go far. I should listen. Even just waking up and stretching, it could mess things up.

I chose this no man's land. I came here ten years ago. There's a war been going on for a long time, but never any action here—not since I've been around. Missiles fly overhead, satellites float in the night sky, but nothing ever happens here. The war goes on, back and forth above me. Sometimes I can see great bursts of light. I wonder if there's anything left on either side. No man's land is the safest place to be. Had I had the sense to bring my wife and child here, they'd still be alive. Of course I didn't think to come here myself until they were gone, and my life was over.

I don't know how long I sit, the sun is hidden, but I've had no need for time since I came. I don't even keep track of my age, let alone the time of day.

I've never seen a single one of these thick-skinned things until

now. I wasn't sure they existed. I didn't want them to. I felt sorry for them even when I didn't believe in them. How can they have any sort of life at all? Seeing this one, I think perhaps they can. (Or this one can.) But here they are in the world in spite of themselves. No fault of theirs. And in all kinds of weather. If they get sick, I suppose they pine and die on their own.

The creature seemed . . . rather sweet, I thought. Fine-fingered hands. Womanly arms. Perhaps it really is female.

Then I hear the scraping and thumping of something who hasn't hardly room enough to turn around. My poor friend, Zero Seven. I hurry back as best I can, clumping through snow a foot deep in spots. I open my door and go from a wall of softly falling flakes (softly *now*) to a wall of shiny green.

I push my fist into its side as one does to move a horse. I hope it feels my push. I hope it's as sensitive as a horse. "Let me in, friend."

It moves. I hear something falling over on its far side.

"Do gum in. I'mmmm afraig I. . . . Mmmmm . . . as you ksee."

I slide myself in—scrape myself in, that is: It's the wrong direction for the scales.

It turns toward me as best it can and seems to almost bow, or perhaps it's a nod, one elegant little hand at its mouth as if embarrassed. I do believe I'm right about the sex. It must be female.

"Kh kvery, kvery, ssssorry. I'll leave mmmm-nnnow."

With me in the way, it can't turn around to go. Perhaps not even with me not in the way. It'll have to back out.

"Don't go. Sit down." It's in a half-crouch already. It goes down into a squat, its stomach on the floor, feet splayed on each side—long-toed, gruesome feet with claws I wouldn't want to argue with.

I slide myself around the creature to the stove on the far side. I should have had the dishes washed and put away. Well, no matter,

they're tin. A few more bumps and scratches won't make any difference.

No doubt about it, it's sick. I can feel that as I move around it. Though how do you know if a reptile is sick? But there's an odd stickiness to it, and I imagine it normally doesn't have any smell at all.

"Stay. You're sick. I'll make stew. Rest again."

It shakes its head. "Mmmmmukst go."

"I don't want to find you out there dead."

"Dhuh dhead in here iks worssse for mmgh . . . mmyou."

It shows its teeth. There are lots of them. Is that a grin? Can that be? That the creature has a sense of humor? Rosie seemed to grin, too. I take a chance. I laugh. It opens its mouth wider but there's no sound. We look each other in the eye. Some kind of understanding, lizard to mammal, passes between us. Then the creature shivers. I pull a blanket off the bunk, big Hudson Bay, but it only covers the creature's top half like a shawl. It helps to hold it on with those tiny arms, and nods again.

"I'll build up the fire and get us something to eat. You just rest."

"I hhhhelp-puh."

"Please don't."

It grins again, mouth wide, that row of teeth gleaming, then huddles close against the wall opposite my kitchen area, trying to make itself small. Still, I step on its toes as I work. When I do, we both say, "Sorry." "Khsssorry." We both laugh. . . . Well, I laugh, and it shows its teeth.

How nice to have somebody . . . *something* around that has a sense of humor. They must have left in some odd rogue genes by mistake.

I start to make stew. I have lots of dried chanterelles, and I hope it likes wild garlic. It watches me as Rosie did, mouth open. I hum a song my grandma taught me. I thought hardly anybody knew that song but me, but then I hear the creature buzzing along with me, no

doubt about it, the same song. I look at it. It blinks a slow blink, as if for a wink.

We eat my hare stew, it out of my wash basin. Licks it clean like Rosie always did. At least it hasn't lost its appetite.

"Have you a name other than that Zero Seven on your tag? By the way, I took that off. I had a dog, Rosie. She died. I keep almost calling you Rosie by mistake. It's the only name I've said for years."

There's that smile again. "Rrrrosie is kfine. Kfine." Then Kfine turns into a cough. I heat up some wild rose-hips tea. I always have lots of that.

Then it stretches out again. I pile on more blankets.

"Mmmmmnnno mmno. Mmdon't."

"I insist. You must stay warm. If the lamp doesn't bother you, I'll read for a while, but you should sleep. I'll make the fire high. Wake me if it gets cold. You should be warm."

(My lamp is just a bowl of volcanic tuff with exactly the right hole in the center. I have a big one and a little one. The oil I've rendered even from creatures with not much fat. Even deer.)

I settle myself with a book. I like having company, even if the company takes up most of the room. I think it's already asleep, but then, "Khind, kh hind ssssir. I like being Rrrrrrosie." (It gargles it out as if it was French.) "Bhut who are mmmm kh you? *If* khyou don't mmmmind."

"Ben. I'm Ben."

"Ah, easy khto kkh ssssay."

I think: She. She is a she.

When I douse the lamp (by putting on the lid) and it's pitch black in here, I do have a moment when I worry. She *is* starving. I might be her next meal and a better one than I've prepared for her so far, or at least bigger. What's a little broth and then a little rabbit stew? But I won't be facing anything my wife and child didn't face already, though

my fate might not be as instantaneous as theirs. But I hear her breathing, snuffling, snorting in her sleep, just like Rosie. I'm comforted and reassured by her snores.

Sometime during the night the snow stops. Dawn, in my one and only window, shows a cloudless sky. I watch the oblong of sunlight move down and across the far wall until it lights on her. She's a bundle of blankets, but what little I can see of her shines out. Certainly she's not made for a winter climate. Probably most comfortable in a hot place with lots of shiny green leaves to hide in.

She feels the sun the moment it touches her. (Thick-skinned but infinitely sensitive.) Turns and looks at me. Grins her Rosie-grin. Like Rosie, she doesn't have to say it, it's all over her face: Hey, a new day. What's up now? And: Let's get going.

"You look better."

She nods. Says, "Mmmmm, nnnn. Mmmmm, nnnn."

"We'll go out, if you like. You must feel cramped in here."

"Mmmmmm, nnnn."

I've jerky and hard tack. We breakfast on that, and more rose-hip tea—a pitcher of it for her.

"Keep a blanket around your shoulders. And I think you'll have to back out."

Like my Rosie was before she got old, this Rosie peers, sniffs, hops up on boulders, jumps for no reason whatsoever, skips in the bare spots where the snow has blown off. Sings a ho dee ho dee ho kind of song. A young thing that, sick or not, starving or not, can't sit still. I saw that in my boy.

I take her to my viewing spot. You can see the whole valley. I often see deer from here.

As we watch, another of these creatures comes down the valley, heading south. I haven't seen any until this one sitting beside me, and

here comes yet another, and then two more not far behind. Driven down from the mountain passes on purpose? Or is it the cold?

We watch. Not moving. Rosie looks at me, at them, at me. I love that look all young things have, animal or human, of wondering: What's up? What's going on? Is everything all right?

Then those first two turn and trumpet at the others. Rosie's arms are just long enough for her to cover her ears. (She must hear extraordinarily well to need to do that from way up here.) Hard to tell from this distance, but those others all seem much larger than she is.

When, a moment later, she takes her fingers from her ears, I ask her, "Have you had experiences with others of your own kind before?"

She nods.

"The scars."

"Mmmnnn."

"You weren't supposed to fight each other."

"Mmmnnn."

I want to comfort her. Put my arms around this green scaly thing. (My son had an iguana. We never hugged it.) She reaches toward me as if to hug, too. But even those little arms . . . those claws. . . . And my head could fit all the way in her mouth, no problem. I flinch away. I see her eyes turn reptilian—lose their wide childlike look. She says, "Kh . . . khss sssorry."

"No, it's I who should be . . . *am* sorry."

I reach, and I do hug and let myself be hugged. I get my parka ripped on her claws. Well, it's not the first rip.

Far below us, the things fight and trumpet, smash trees, trample brush. I can see, even from up here, spit fly out. There's no blood. Their hide is too tough.

They fight with their feet, leaping as cocks do. One is losing. It's on its back, talons up. Even from way up here, I can see a little herd

of panicked deer galloping off toward the hills. Rosie covers her eyes this time and leans over as if she has a stomach-ache. Says, "Mmmmmmmnnnn. Not Kkkh kkh krrright."

"What *were* you supposed to do?"

"Kkh . . . khill. . . . Mmmm those like kh you. Khill you."

Below us, the creature that was on its back tries to escape, but the others leap high and claw at it, pull it down, then one bites the underpart of the neck. Now there *is* blood.

I turn to see Rosie's reaction, but she's not here. Then I see her, way, way back, curled up behind a tree.

I go back to her. I put my arm around her again. "Old buddy." Then, "How did you ever turn out as you are?"

"Mmmm mmistake. Gh gho," Rosie says, carefully not looking down at them. "Ghho. Mmmnn . . . mnnnow!" And she's already on her way, back to the shack. I follow. Watching her. Her arms, so like ours, look like an afterthought. Obviously there's a bit of the human in her. I see it in the legs, too. Also in those half-formed ears.

Those others below could push down my shack in half a minute. I need Rosie on my side. "Stay. I need you. I'll push out a wall. I'll make the door bigger."

She stops, stares. I wish I knew what's going on inside that big fierce head of hers.

"I'll start getting the logs for it today."

"I kh . . . kh . . . khelph."

But my food won't last long with her eating washbasins full. Besides, she's starving. We'll have to get food first.

"How have you lived all this time? What have you eaten?"

"Ghhophers mmm mostly. *When* mmmwere gh hophers. Khrabbits. When them. When kh lllaves, leaves. Mmmmmushrooms. Rrrroots. Mmmmbark nnnnot good but kh ate it. Khfish. Hhhard to kh kfish when kh h ice."

We climb higher than my shack so Rosie can fish. The streams up there are too fast to freeze over. She uses her foot. Hooks them on a claw. Her arms seem even too small to help with balancing. It's her big green head and the half of her leftover tail, waving from side to side, that balances her as she reaches. She gets seven.

"Kkhfried?" she says. "In khfat? With khh kh corn mmmmeal? Like Mmmmmama? Mushka?"

"You betcha. You had a mama?"

"Mmmmmnnnn. Mmmmmm. Mmone kh like mmyou."

She bounces off down the path ahead of me, singing an oolie, oolie, doodlie do kind of song. I guess she's no longer sick. Or she's too happy to care. And certainly not thinking about those others fighting in the valley.

(I'm carrying the fish. I strung them through their gills onto a willow stick. I hadn't brought my stringer. I guess I don't have to worry about getting enough food for her. Yet she *was* starving. Perhaps she doesn't like things raw?)

Back home we eat fried fish. I eat two and Rosie eats five. She watches as I cook, just as the dog did, exact same expression, mouth half-open. A dog sort of smile. We settle down afterward and I read to her from one of my books: *Moby Dick*. (I only brought three.) I read that to my son and wife, one on each side of me, and all of us on the couch. Rosie lies, head toward me, eyes almost shut, commenting now and then, her voice breathy, like one would imagine a snake would talk. I'm sitting on my cot. We sip our rose-hip tea. We're both covered with blankets.

Then, "Time's up," I say. "You need sleep." But she doesn't want us to stop reading. "I insist," I say. She groans. "*I kh kread. You ssssleep.*" She reaches for the book with those womanly, shiny green fingers. I put it down and take her hand. "Ooobie baloobie, *do it*," I say. (Ooobie baloobie is another of her songs.) She laughs. (It's more

like panting than laughing, but so hard I think she must be little more than seven years old—her equivalent of seven—to think that’s so funny.) But she settles down right after. Says, “Kh . . . koh khay.” Wraps her little arms around herself. I tuck the blankets closer and douse the lamp with its lid.

This time I don’t worry if I might be her next meal, but I have a hard time sleeping anyway. I keep wondering what might happen if those others find my shack. They could break it down just leaning on it by mistake.

Since *they* all seem to be coming down, we’ll go up. We’ll take some supplies to the pass and hide. I’ve spent the night there many a time. We’ll be all right as long as there isn’t another storm that goes on for days and days. At least we’ll have fish.

I always did like camping out. The view is always worth more than the discomfort. Besides, I do without right here every day. It never bothers me, washing up in a washbowl or an icy stream. Only here is it worth the bother of looking out the window.

Or now, at Rosie, too. She really is quite beautiful, her yellow underbelly and the darker green along the ridge of her back. She’s even reddish in spots.

Rosie hears them first, wakes me with her, “Kh . . . kh . . . kh.” There’s sounds of crashing through the brush. A tree splintering. From the look of the Big Dipper, straight out my little north window, it’s probably three or four A.M.

They’re coming closer. For sure they saw our smoke and smelled us. They push on our walls. I hear them breathe and hiss. No, it’s only one, I *think* only one, pushing the wall on one side. The caulking falls out. Rosie braces herself against that wall to hold it. She picks up the rhythm of the other’s pushing, leans when it pushes. It works, the wall holds. At one point there’s a large hole where the caulking’s gone,

and I see the creature looking in—one light-greenish eye like Rosie's. The thing gives a throaty hiss. Rosie answers with the same hiss. It gives up. We hear it smashing away. We look at each other.

"You did it!"

Rosie's mouth is open in that smile, and she nods yes so hard I'm thinking she'll put her neck out of joint. "Kh khdid! *Kbdid!*"

"Pack up. We'll go camp out up beyond where we fished."

She goes right for the frying pan and the bag of corn meal and puts them in her vest pockets. She's still nodding yes, but she stops when I tell her we have to bring blankets and a tarp.

"Kh . . . kh . . . kh. . . . *Kno! Nnnnnoooo!*"

"*Yes!* It's colder up there. You need shelter as much as I do. Maybe more so."

Like Rosie, she gives up easily. "Kh . . . kh-kho kay." I don't know what I'd do if she didn't. She helps me roll the blankets in the tarp. Says, "I kh kcarry mmmthat."

I have to stop her from taking her books and her fancy green rock. She insists she can carry all the things we need and those, too.

"I kh *likbe* ghrrrrreeeen."

"That's good. Then you like yourself."

She starts up, hop, skip, and jump . . . even with all that to carry. I can't believe it, she's leaping from rock to rock—even across talus. I keep telling her that stuff is unstable. "Dangerous even for you," I say, but she does it anyway. The rocks do teeter, but she's sure-footed. That leaping doesn't last long, thank goodness. She doesn't realize how much all that weight she's carrying will tire her. I warned her, but since when do the young listen to warnings of that sort? She's jumped and skipped and leaped until now she lags behind and blows like a horse at every other step. I take the tarp and blankets from her. I'd take that frying pan, too, but she won't let me. "Kh . . . kan do it. I *kan!*"

I don't let Rosie stop until the halfway spot. "We'll get up where we can see," I say, "then we'll rest."

"Oh pf . . . pfhooo," she says, but she goes on, sighing now.

"You can do it. Fifty more steps."

A few minutes later we put down our bundles, Rosie takes off her vest, and we climb out to the edge of the scarp we just zigzagged up to see what we can see. And it's as I feared, they've found my cabin. Looks like there's not much left of it already, walls pushed in, roof collapsed. I had doused the fire, but there must have been some cinders left. A fire has started, at the cabin and on the ground around it.

She sits as I sit, legs hanging over. How much like a human she is. Sometimes you don't see it at all, but in certain positions you do. Now she looks as if she's going to cry. (Can they cry? Only humans, seals, and sea birds have tears. Anyway, you don't need tears for sadness.) I feel like crying, too. Rosie can tell just like my old Rosie could. We lean against each other.

"At least your stones are all right."

She doesn't even answer with an Mmmnnnn.

I look to see if any trees are waving around down there from being bumped into, but there's nothing. Odd.

After we start on up, Rosie is droopy, not only tired but sad. She thunks along. I feel sorry that she jumped and hopped so much in the beginning. My other Rosie was like that. She never realized she had to save her strength.

Most of my talking has been to keep her going. "Count steps. Maybe a hundred more." "Come on, poor, tired friend." "See that rock? We'll stop just beyond that." Now I mumble to myself—about when I'll be back to sift through my things. I didn't bring any souvenirs of my wife and child. When I fled out here . . . escaped . . . I

didn't even want pictures. I was running away from memories. Of course memories come and go as they please.

Just around the corner and we'll be able to see the little lake I'm heading for, the stepping stones crossing the creek that pours down from it, beyond, the trees and boulders where I had hoped to hide us this first night, but I decide we have to stop now. We stand . . . that is, *I* stand, Rosie collapses. We're both too tired to get out food other than jerky. I tuck Rosie in under an overhang. Just her big back end with the half-bitten-off tail hanging out. I cover her with blankets and the tarp. She's asleep before she can finish her jerky. I pick the chunk out of her mouth to save it for breakfast.

In the morning I wake to the sound of a helicopter. I know right away. Why . . . *why* didn't I suspect before? Rosie not only had an ear tag, but she has a chip imbedded in her neck.

There's no place for a helicopter to land, the mountains are too closed in and too many boulders, but we're not safe anyway. There could be more things in Rosie's neck than just an ID chip. That could be why we didn't hear those creatures down there anymore.

Rosie's in an exhausted sleep. "You have to wake up. *Now!* I have to get your chip out." I don't mention what else might be there. Those others may have been disposed of . . . without a trace, I'll bet. Or little traces scattered all over the place so no one will know there ever were creatures like this.

"Did you know you have a chip?"

I feel around Rosie's neck.

"Hang on, friend, this will hurt."

I don't care about those others, but I'd never like the forest without Rosie in it, skipping and hopping along, picking flowers, collecting green rocks or glittery fool's gold, singing doodle do songs.

She looks at the helicopter, then at me, then the copter again, then

back at me. Again it's that: Should I be frightened or not? Except now *I'm* frightened. I try not to show it, but she senses it. I see her getting scared, too.

The copter circles. I have to hurry—but I don't want to hurt her—but her skin is so tough! And who knows, if I do find one or two things, will that be all that's hidden there?

"Hang on."

She hugs herself with those inadequate arms. Even before I start, she makes little doglike . . . or, rather, birdlike sounds.

"Sing," I say. "Sing your oobie do."

I feel two lumps. I dig in. I say, "Almost done," when I've hardly begun.

Then we run. Without our blankets, without our food, except what Rosie has in her vest.

"They can't follow now." I *hope* that's true.

We stick to the old path that circles over the pass. We try to stay close to rocks and under what trees there are. Even running as we do, I can't *not* think about how beautiful it is up here. When I first saw it, years ago, I shouted when I came around the corner.

She's way ahead of me in no time—those long strong legs. And we're not carrying much of anything. I catch up when she finally turns to look for me. We both look back. The helicopter still hovers. I left the chip and button bullet back there at our camping spot. They think she's still there. Maybe they don't know about me.

She's different from those others. What was she for? That is, besides killing those like me?

It starts to snow. Thank God, or worse luck, I don't know which. It'll hide our tracks and the helicopter won't fly, but we don't have food or blankets.

We cross the pass and dip into the next valley. We find a sheltered

spot among a mass of fallen boulders where the whole side of a cliff came down. Some boulders are on top of each other, making a roof. Boulders over, boulders under—not a particularly comfortable spot, but we huddle there and rest. We take stock. All we have is what’s in Rosie’s vest, a little leftover jerky (we eat it), the frying pan, and cornmeal. We can make corn cakes if we don’t catch fish.

This is just a mountain storm. If we can get far enough down, we’ll walk out of it. If we’re lucky, it’ll last just long enough to cover our tracks. I tell Rosie. She lies at my feet, still panting. I stroke her knobby head.

“How’s your neck?”

“Hh . . . hoo khay.”

She sleeps. Murmuring a whole series of Mmmms, and then Mmmush, and Mmmushka.

As the storm eases and we’re some rested, I wake her and we start down. After an hour we’re out of the snow and wind and into a hanging meadow. I’ve been over this pass but not this far.

I’m worried. Rosie is sluggish and dreamy, flopping along, tripping a lot. Poor thing, all she has on is her vest. She’s cold, and with reptiles . . . or part-reptiles. . . . I don’t want to build a fire but I must. The copter’s gone, maybe it’s all right to now.

“My poor, fierce friend,” I say. She grins. I take her hand and sit her down. “We’re going to have a nice big fire. You rest. I’ll find the wood.”

“I’ll hhh . . . hhh . . . hhh.”

“No, you won’t. I’m going by myself. I’ll be back before you know it.”

She mews, turns away, and curls up.

On this side there’s a lot less snow, so it’s not such hard going. I gather brush, dead limbs, and drag the whole batch back to her, flop down, my arm around her. I see her eyes flicker, though the nictitating

membrane closes as she does it. She doesn't wake. I'll have to make the fire right now.

How does a sick reptile show how sick it is? All I know is, she doesn't look right and doesn't feel right.

I build the fire as close to her as I dare. Finally she seems in a more normal sleep. I sleep, too.

I wake with a start. *Hibernate!* Do they? All those others, too. But she's been mixed with other genes. For sure, some human.

I wake her by mistake as I get out the frying pan and the cornmeal. I'm melting snow, first to drink and then to make corn cakes. She drinks as if she's been out in the desert for days. Then, "I'mmm mmhungry." Then she sees what little cornmeal we have and says, "Mmmmm *nnnot* ssoo. . . . *Nnnot* hungry," she says again. "Ooobie baloobie, *nnnnot*."

"Ooobie baloobie, *do* eat me. Roll me in cornmeal. I'm old and I'm tired."

All of a sudden it's not a joke.

"Kkkh kkkh! Kh khcan't dooo that! Ooooooh!"

"I thought that's what you were made for . . . born for."

"Kkh can't."

"You'll die. Look how thin you are."

"I'mmm tem *po* rary. Temmm *po po* rary." She sings it like a song—like she doesn't care. Does she understand what it means? I wonder if it's true. Perhaps they all are—were.

"Mmmmmmm *all* temmm *po po!* rary."

"What makes you think you're temporary?"

"Mmmmmush kh knew."

"She *told* you? How could she!"

"Kkh kh *nnno!* I sssaw kher eyes. Sssscared. I kh khfound out. I kh . . . kh . . . kread."

"You're only half-grown."

"Have a kh kh tth timer."

I don't know what I see in those lizardy eyes of hers. "Don't you like it here? Don't you care anything about being alive?"

"Oh! Kh! *Oooh!* Kh!" She does a hopping, twisting dance, those tiny arms raised. It tells how she feels, better than her words ever could.

"Mmmmy kh heart," she says, "hasss kth th timer."

"How long is temporary?"

"I sh should dannnce. Ssssing. *Mnnnow!* And lllook. Lllook a *llllo!* *Yésssss!* Lottts. Mmm then kh kgo for goood mmmmbig bh bones."

We'll build another cabin. Here in this hanging valley, sheltered under boulders and trees and next to a good fishing stream. With her help, we'll have one up in no time. We'll dance and sing and look around a lot. At the smallest and the largest . . . the near and the far . . . stars, mountain peaks, beetles. . . .

THE PROJECT

For generations our wives have said, “What? *What!* Why are you men always adoining and adoining, such that you are hither and thither all the time while we harvest and chop, set the traps, make the ropes for the bridges and the ropes for the slings and nets—we even make the ropes for the Project?”

I always answer, “Men are adoining.”

This is the second project. The first failed. The remnants of it lie in the canyons. Only our grandfathers remember. Our boys think the grandfathers failed because they didn’t know as much as we know now, but I think they had tricks and theories. Easy to see they were as smart as we are. I’ve seen their shattered boulders. Some are even larger than our largest, or were before they fell. We no longer attempt to raise boulders of that size.

This has been a part of our lives for as long as even our oldest can remember. We can’t think back to when the Project was not our main concern. Nor conceive of such a time. And why would we want to? Those days must have been useless days.

We are a strong people. You can see it in our noses. None but the strong could have stayed and lived here. Our hair is bleached by altitude. Our legs are stringy. Even our old ladies still jump from stone to stone. Our songs, unlike those of any other peoples, are full of hohs. Some say we don't sing at all, but only shout and growl.

First we built a fortress. This was so long ago we no longer understand its purpose. (We live within its crumbling walls.) Except for the mountain lion, we have no enemies. And who but us would want land such as this with hardly a single flat spot larger than a split boulder?

That lion took our baby daughter. That's why my wife keeps saying, "What? *What!*" She blames me. "Had you been . . . ! Had you but been . . . ! Had you!"

I say, and I say it slowly, "*As. It. Is.* We've hardly enough men for the Project." There are but eighty. We need every single one on the ropes. The stone we raise now is the largest so far. Couldn't be done, they said and said, but we are doing it.

The evening our baby was taken, the owl flew low, looking huge in the moonlight. I thought I could reach up and touch its white underbelly. First I heard the flap of wings. First I thought it was a ghost. Then I thought: It's just an owl, not knowing that it really was a ghost, or soon would be.

As to the lion, my baby daughter must have made but a single mouthful.

I'm not the only one who has lost a child. This happens when game is scarce. It had been a dry winter. The pine nuts were few, so rodents are few. Grouse, hares, the sweet, gray foxes, few. Our wild mountain sheep, eaten to the last of them. We have to depend on our goats for everything now. (Would that my daughter had been penned up with the kids.)

(The blanket my wife was knitting is now for someone else's child.)

Since we lost our little girl, my wife has been blaming me even for the lack of radishes.

"Not even trim the wicks," she says. "It's little enough," she says. "Do I shout?" she says. "Do I sit? Tired as I am, do I sit?"

I say, "Tired as *I* am. Look how my eyes are shutting." I say, "Until you work at raising boulders, you will never understand such a tiredness as this."

Radishes! Wicks! Who would care but somebody's wife?

They said the stones are too big, the mountain top too high, lightning will strike, boulders will turn red, glow, and then crack as if to deafen. I say, "Yes, yes! *Of course!*"

Say what they wish, but it's easy to see all paths lead to our village. One has only to climb to our highest places and look down to see how true that is. We're not a way station alongside some path that goes someplace else. Therefore it's clear there is no need to go to some lower place and look for other happenings, so we have never gone.

Our catamount prowls wherever she wishes. Sometimes at night, I see her eyes shine. Disembodied. Steady on. Then a sudden freezing along the backbone, as if I saw a child on the brink of the brink.

The lion is young. We think she's only recently left the den of her birth. She's thin. It's the young ones, don't yet know what they're about, so all the more dangerous. She's the color of our boulders. She belongs—as much as we do. In fact more.

I'm a strong man. A big man. The biggest. Except for me, we don't look like the people of the valley. We're smaller and wirier. I have never been down there, but now and then one of them climbs up here.

We recognize them right away, and not just because we know everybody who lives up here, but by their cheekbones and their wide-open eyes. We know they're used to shadows because when we look down there, into their valley, we see how, every afternoon, our mountains shade them. We wonder what they're up to, here in the up instead of down in their down.

Down there they call us, "The people of the goats, or of the mountain sheep." They even call us, "The people of the catamount." We are more likely the people of the dinner of the catamount.

My wife says, "Shouldn't the Project be the lion? Shouldn't the lion be first so our little ones can sleep in peace or play capture the peak? If you'll not make the lion your project, then I'll make it mine."

How can she? She can't even draw the bow. And as to the spear. . . . Women use spears as canes to steady themselves as they climb over rocks.

(One evening I saw our house cat leap up and pull a bat out of the air. I know what my wife will have to deal with.)

"If you don't go, I go. What do I have to wait for here, waiting and waiting? For the cabbages to grow?"

Is she really going out to hunt lion, small as she is and always cold without me to warm her?

"Go," I say, "I'm busy with the Project. There will always be a beast, if not this one, then another."

Yet I will follow. Even though I'm not only the foreman, but the most important puller and checker and the finest fitter of all, and my voice echoes out over the canyons louder than any, I will follow. My pock-marked face has made her my one and only. Even my size was against me with the women.

We men of the mountains are not like me. I'm teased that my father was not my father but that my mother was raped by some valley

man and never confessed it. “Out picking berries, one can not only come across a bear.” Though they also say my father was a bear—a bald-headed bear. I’d rather that than some valley man.

My wife . . . even she would hardly be a mouthful for the lion. She’s as small as I am large. Her name is Wren, and she’s like a wren.

Our women are named Lark, Titmouse, Towhee, Quail, Redstart, Killdeer. . . . (Killdeer, because we so admire the broken-wing trick and hope to see the same in the mothers of our children.) Our men are named for raptors: Vulture, Eagle, Hawk, Goshawk, Kestrel, Falcon, and such.

(Not Owl. We would never name anyone Owl.)

My name is Harrier. We named our baby Sparrow. Now I can hardly think that word.

I say, “It’s the lion that will be stalking you.”

“I will be adoring.”

Always. . . . *Always* the women take our time from what’s important. The Project will last for generations. Centuries. Perhaps forever. Even as long as our mountain remains a mountain. Women’s thoughts are on the everyday. I want to say, “What about the monumental? Have you ever thought of that?” And I would say it, except I already have and more times than I can count.

What I think as I follow my woman down, and then up, and then up and down and down and up again, is: How fortunate to be alive so far! The turkey vulture soars. One tiny cloud. For a while a raven family keeps one step ahead. I’m thinking how the Milky Way is still up there shining all across the sky, there, even though you can’t see it in the daytime. I’m needed elsewhere, but I will enjoy the day as it is right now, though my wife, my wren, hurries away from me with all my weapons.

Whenever I top a rise and look back, I see them struggling. My

group at the top—all the strongest pullers. I see skids and ramps and wedges, pulleys. . . . They won't make much headway without me. (I didn't ask leave to come, I just came. Who would want their wife out here in The Nowhere, much less in The Down?)

Did Wren look back and see I wasn't there? I would have been easy to spot because of my bulk. Now, as I look, I can see that all are, just as they are, mountain men and small. No wonder they joke that I'm the bastard of a bald-headed bear.

She's easy to follow. We wear red, the mountain color. The better to be seen. She wears a red bonnet and her fuzzy red sweater. She has her boots and her mittens tied on the back of her pack. She wears moccasins but crosses the streams barefoot and wipes her feet with a red towel. But I wear the color of the lion and stay well behind. The black straps of my pack across my chest, my wide black hat, imitate the cracks of the mountains and make me even more like a piece of half-split rock.

She goes lower, then climbs up again into a cozy pass, cozy black basalt cliffs on one side, and tawny, more rounded granite on the other. Behind the black side, an iron oxide peak looms orange. There's several patches of frazzle ice to chew on. There are overhanging rocks. I'm thinking this is a good place for a lioness. Then I know this *is* the place. I don't know how I know, but I can almost smell her.

Here is where my wife, my lion's mouthful, decides to spend the night. I guess if the lion finds it inviting, everyone would.

She doesn't look frightened as she settles in. I suppose one who has just lost a baby doesn't feel any fear for a long time afterward. Perhaps never.

I stay close. Then I come closer. I watch my wife sleep in the moonlight. All the nights since the baby died she hasn't slept much, but now she does. As if the very danger is comforting. As if what has

eaten our baby might eat her so the owl would fly again.

I take back my weapons, dress myself in a leather apron. Surely the lion will come. Surely the lion is here already.

I see her—first, just eyes reflecting moonlight, then a shadow. She comes out from a low overhang, exactly where I thought she'd come from. I'd never have seen her if I hadn't suspected she'd come from there. She stands still and looks at me. Even though I knew . . . even though I hoped she'd be there, I feel that edge-of-a-cliff feeling, myself, about to fall. Or the Project about to come loose and crash down on us.

I want to lure her away from my wife, so, like the killdeer, I limp. Down from the cozy pass, down into the switchbacks below, behind boulders, away and lower. I don't want even the sounds . . . neither my sounds nor cat sounds. . . . But if we're this far down, why would my wife think they had anything to do with me? Many's the time we've awakened to the lion's midnight yowls, howls, screeches, caterwauling, up there near our village, and turned to each other, and said, "It's only the young lion, fresh out of her mother's den."

Why would my wife think anything of it, except to reach for me and find me not there?

When we're far down, lioness and I, and in a flat, clear place where trees are few and the moon shines through and I can see clearly, I turn.

It's this leather apron between me and her claws that saves me. And, of course, the inexperience of the lioness.

She had a look in her eyes of wondering about the world. My daughter had the same. And when I killed her, she had a look as if to say: I can't be, and already, dead. No doubt my daughter had the same when that moment came to her. When I saw that, I hesitated, but it was too late.

I carry her carcass to the side of the clearing. No doubt about it, she was starving. No doubt about it, she'd have come after my wife. Perhaps my wife wanted her to. Warmth to warmth, fur to skin, as lovers. Or herself as gift. Or simply to close a circle.

I limp back—this time the limping is real. I expected worse. I brought herbs and bandages in case. Back under the lioness's overhang, I bandage myself. I stow my weapons and the leather apron in a corner.

Then I go lie down, again not far from my wife to guard her. As I had told her, there will always be a beast somewhere out there at the edges of our lives.

Pain keeps me from sleeping. One can't get close to any sort of cat without having wounds.

I had thought my wife would turn around and go back, but she goes on. She doesn't know the lion is dead. Should I stop her? Try to? Tell her the lion will be gone to the buzzards before midday? Show myself? But one look at me and she'd know all there is to know. I'll not yet show myself.

I chafe with all this hithering and thithering. I regret every minute I spend away from the Project. We say, "What's worth the doing is worth dying for, or why be adoin?" I might well have died here in the middle of nowhere. I had always thought to die for the Project, not from cat scratchings.

My wife goes on down, not knowing she's stalking nothing. Might as well be following her own stepped-on mosses. Might as well look up and back and over her left shoulder for the special place where dead babies congregate for each other's company—all the dead babies who have just smiled their first smiles.

None of us know anything about The Down, and we're proud of it. There'll be bears. There'll be snakes and bugs and goodness knows

what. Things we never heard of. Trees and bushes are already changing. And they grow closer together.

From here I get a good view of this flat land. Flat as far as you can see. We know nothing about it nor care to. We don't ponder fields or horses or cows or plows. We say, "That which is highest is its own reward."

Those big, ugly men, hunking around down there. Altitude makes them puff. Their lips turn blue. We offer them our best food, knowing they'll refuse. Always halfway along that last and steepest climb to our fortress, they throw up.

If they can't see the importance of the Project, then there's no explaining it, neither to them nor to our women, who keep saying, "What in the world!" and, "Why! Why ever!"

I told her and I told her, you can't stalk a cat. Where does she think she's on the way to? Does she want to see for herself all that we are proud not knowing? Or is it that (curious as a wife) she simply wants to find something different?

And she already has. I never saw flowers as large as these. I see her peer and sniff. I see her stroke the velvet of the petals. She leans as she leaned over our baby.

I do. I do love her.

I climb a mound and look back (mound is all one can call these lumps of The Down. These silly hills make me even more proud to be a mountain man.). I can't see my men anymore, nor pulleys nor ropes, but the Project is clear, bright white against the sky. Exactly as we planned it. When we cap it with that last and largest boulder, we'll have done the impossible.

My wife stands and looks and listens. She imitates the call of a bird I never heard before. (She can imitate all the bird calls in the

mountains, but this is a new sound to us.) I see she's here for whatever she can find that's different. There'll be no stopping her. She studies the ground and then steps carefully so as not to crush anything, even something small.

I'm beginning to feel as she must be feeling, that this is to be seen and known about. I look around as she looks around. The sky is flatter than I thought. Distances are different. I'll have to walk it to understand it.

And there the hornèd cows. Without them, I'd not have had a leather apron tough enough to save me.

But this is *our* water. It all comes from us. As we climbed down, always we heard rushing water sounds and thought nothing of it because, up in our village, it is the sound of our daily life. Here they've forced it into straight lines all across their land. Until now, I had wondered what those straight lines were. Nothing is as straight up there except split rocks. When the sun shined all the way down here, I had thought the waterways were of silver and that that is where our bracelets came from.

My wife has hurried on as though to reach some new thing before some other new thing, but it'll be dark soon. She will have to find a bedding-down place even here in this pasture land. Once away from the mounds, there's not a single boulder. None have rolled this far. But now and then there are trees and sometimes bushes, especially along the ditches that tame our water. My wife finds a place to hide. She has already taken off all her red, back in the lower hills.

What will they be thinking of her here, where everything is large? And what will they think of her trousers and her fine, bleached hair? I, being the size I am, could hide as one of them, whereas she could never. Except I wouldn't know how to live here. What do you say to a horse? What do you whistle to send a dog off and around? And what of bulls? I've heard things of bulls.

They say time is different down here. It goes at a faster walk. In The Up our steps are slower because the ground is rough. But even these people of The Down can't walk away from time.

Before she goes to hide in her bushes, she studies the moon. I see that she sees as I do—how life depends on water and on sky. She gestures, one palm up. She seems to make a wish. We say to children, catch a moon beam, make a wish, but you need a pinch of mountain aster for it to come true.

I lie down, next bush to her. This time I do sleep. Though I wonder, what of bulls? And what of dogs, and how large do they grow down here?

This time, when I finally wake, she's stepping away from the shelter of the trees. She's in red again, showing herself on purpose. Nearby, at the edge of the field, there's what I know is a plow. We have none such. She stands beside it. I'm so stiff and sore I can hardly get up, but I do.

Here, already, there's a flatland man coming straight toward her. The man is riding sideways on one of those horse things. I had not known there'd be so much hair at the ankles. All kinds of straps hang down. So many one wonders how he knows to hook them up. He jumps off and leads the horse to the plow and to my wife.

They stand one to one. They speak. He, with the swallowed Rs of The Down and no clicks on the Ks. He calls her little lady. "Little lady of the mountains." He reaches out his fingers. Is it as if to be smelled? Does he think she's an animal?

I can see he looks like me. Except no pock marks. (I could never grow a decent beard because of that. His is decent.) For a moment I see myself as if a long time ago when I hated my size, as everyone else did and said so to my face. There came a time, though, when I won every fist-fight. Then they hated me even more, but that all changed

when I was old enough to work on the Project. I was foreman at seventeen. This man would scare every mountain man but me. He's even larger than I am, but my muscles are the muscles of those who lift boulders.

He and my wife reach out slowly. Touch hands as if the other is a miracle of strangeness. Then he reaches as if to touch her bleached hair. Reaches but doesn't touch, though almost. Her hair has hardly any color, not enough to call it yellow.

Something is happening between them. Something instant of the instant.

"I want to see," my wife says, "all the things of here."

I will show myself. I will risk, as Wren does, whatever it is they do to people from Up, but mostly risk so my wife will see my miserable condition and know that I've saved her. I look at myself . . . my bandages leaking, my shredded sleeves, and trousers shredded everywhere where the apron didn't cover. My limp is not a pretense. My legs wobble. If I fall, it won't be on purpose. Will either of them notice?

Does she understand what we add up to, I and my sweet Wren? That I've saved her and all the village, and the children can play capture the peak? For now, until some other beast comes around.

I will speak. I will say, As to the two of us. As to us. . . .

And I do speak, but what I say is, "As to myself and the Project and the meaning of it. . . ." For a moment it's as if the Project is before me, just as it has been every day and all the days of my life until now, shining, polished, white against our sky, which is of a darker blue than this pale blue of The Down. The Project as hub of all paths. I think to say more of the things that are important, but I start to shake. I go down on my knees.

They turn to me. I see my wife seeing what I wanted her to see. She says, "Oh!"

But he says, "*You!*" and again, "*You!*"

It's he who comes to me, lifts me and hugs me as if a brother found at last, kisses each cheek before I have time to think to pull away. I haven't the strength to, anyway. This is not the mountain people's way. The horse leans and noses me. I don't know if he'll bite or not. His head is much bigger than I thought a horse's head would be, and bonier.

Though I'm almost as big as this man, he lifts me over his shoulder and then pushes me up upon the creature. Sits me sideways. (The creature is warm as a wife. Warm as the lion was when I carried her away from the trail.) The man walks us toward the village. The movement of the horse is painful to my scratches. I gasp, but my wife is looking up at this man, not at me. She walks beside him as though it was the most natural thing in the world to be crossing this flat land with grass all over it, with a stranger, and with me on a horse.

Other men, sideways on their horses, are coming out, one by one and two by two, to their fields. As we meet the first, the man says, "Here's our long-lost bastard half-brother. We've waited all this time for him to come back to us. And doesn't he look just like his father?"

I want to say: A bear! A bear was my father, but I'm too tired and sick to protest. I think my wife should do it for me, considering the state I'm in. I want her to say how I'm a mountain man; how, if I could walk, you would see it in my walk; and if I spoke, you would hear it in my words; but I fear she may no longer be proud of our mountains, though she knows full well the mountains are where everything begins, where even this very water, here in this very roadside ditch, rolls down from, even where the weather is engendered, else why would clouds hang at their tops? How can it be that one look in one single moment to one man almost as ugly as I am is enough to change her mind?

I must protest. I don't know how much these people know of important things. Perhaps there's no such thing as marriage as we

know it up there. We always say they're in need of speeches down here, so I begin, even just to these two men and these two horses who swivel their ears toward me, listening. I had not thought to mention the Project, but I do. I say, "How would we know anything without the Project be the reasons for it? How figure elevations so as to know the highest and therefore most important of all the mountains?"

But my wife interrupts me right in the middle of it, "What are you saying! Even here among the strangers of The Down, you speak of such things! Here, sick and bloodied, and having done it for my sake, even as you faint, you speak of unimportant things!"

I say, "You speak as if of turnips."

"Make a speech if you must, but you would miss my turnips if I never grew them."

If she loves me still, or ever has, it's for everyday things that amount to very little. I lose hope. I, the foreman of the Project, the killer of the lion, having made everybody safer, fall.

I must have fainted at that very moment of losing heart; because of it, in fact. Next thing I know I'm in a bed, and a large dog is licking my face.

I've been washed and rebandaged. My scratches no longer hurt. I'm covered with a quilt the likes of which I've never seen. It's as light as a froth. There's a smell of stew. I had not thought The Down would be as comfortable as this.

A woman sits near me. She's dressed in long skirts and no red at all unless you count her rough, red hands. They're as large as mine, and are in her lap with her darning. Her face is wide and flat as the wide flat land that must have made it so.

And here's my wife, also wearing the skirts of The Down and no red. (Those skirts must snag and tangle in their legs. They will have to be holding them out of the way.) She looks so odd I have the

thought that she'll even talk as they do. I wonder what she's been doing as I've been lying here unconscious.

She comes to me from stirring pots, still holding a wooden spoon. She pushes the dog aside so that he licks my hand instead and tries to get under the bandages. "So," she says, "and after all this time."

I don't know if she means that I've finally awakened or that I've finally killed the lion.

"The catamount! The catamount!"

The way she looks at me. . . . Her eyes must seem strange to the people down here, they are the bleached blue of us mountain people (except for mine), but she looks at me as though *I* am the stranger. She says, "So you finally."

I think to tell her something of my love, so I say, "I have feelings for more than just the Project."

She shakes her head, disgusted. She's still . . . even *still*, put out with me. Is there no gratefulness? From anyone? Lions can roam great distances, even in a single night, and they're not easy to kill. It not only takes skill, but also a willingness to end up with scratches and gashes, top to bottom. Our lioness may well have taken children from here also. All peoples will have profited from my daring.

"I have risked the killing of it."

"Did you know, all this time, your name isn't Harrier? Has never been? They've kept track of you down here. You're easily seen from halfway up. The large in you belongs to them. Look how this chair is large. Look at the bed. Look how even their pots and pans are large." She waves the spoon at me. "Here, look, a spoon as if for a giant."

"I have risked," I say, and then I turn away. She turns away, too, and lets the dog lick my face again. At least the dog. At least him.

Time goes along here as there and I recover some. First I can do little more than sit outside, I and the dog, his big, wide, flatland head on

my lap. It's just as I used to sit of an evening up home with a dog all the way on my lap. I sit and learn things of The Down. I hadn't thought there'd be so much noise down here. Even all night long, cows and horses, dogs running off barking at other things yipping with high voices. We don't have coyotes up there.

Later I walk around and see things. There's both more and less mystery to it. I see how a plow works, how to yell out to cattle and yet keep them calm. "Curious as a cow," they say down here, and it's true, every time I hobble down their road, cows come to see what I'm about and then follow me.

The people call me Hosh. It has no relationship to any bird that I know of.

It seems Wren has become a sort of personage down here. I think because of her eyes and her size and that she's bleached all over and that her fingers are long and graceful. Since she has few skills besides knitting and cooking and looking out for goats, what other reason can there be? Her grace should be for my eyes and none other. Her hair also, for me only. Her cheeks. . . . (I saw that first man we met, he's called Boffin . . . I saw him touch her cheeks, one forefinger on each side of her face, as if he thought to measure her.)

(Why have they named me something without one of their endings on it, as Boffin, Duggan, Mawlin, and Algun? Is it to insult me? Do they laugh behind their hands at the shortness of my name every time they say it?) I'll not be brother to the likes of them who look at Wren the way they do.

So then I look at these women swishing around in their skirts (as Wren is swishing now also). They've fed me, spoonful by spoonful, washed me. . . . They have salves for my lacerations. They've been doing all the things that Wren should have been doing. They even look at me as Wren looks at Boffin, but everything about them only

reminds me of myself. Even their necks are as wide as my own. I could borrow their shoes.

Every day I wonder, where is Wren? When I see her in the distance, I always take her for one of their children at first, before I see it's her. There's always several men around her. I've killed the lion only for her.

There comes a day of bad weather. Thunder and lightning, off and on hail even, right here in The Down as if on the mountains. *Our* weather—they say so themselves—come all the way down here, just as our water does.

Rain is so rare everybody is out to see it and feel it, protected only by their sun hats. Even I, though I've already seen more of it than I need to. Clouds roil. The light is as if twilight. We all stand outside looking toward the mountains.

And then, out from under thunderheads, *exactly* over the Project, only there, the weather suddenly clears. It's as if the Project had done it. There's only that one place with blue sky, and I see. . . . Yes, it is! The capstone *is* raised. *Perpendicular!* Atop the eight holding stones. Around it, a circle of clear weather, as though caused by it. And why not? With that last boulder, the Project is the highest of all the peaks surrounding it.

In my wildest speculations I hadn't thought such beauty. I'd thought: Monumental, majestic, exalted even, but not this loveliness. And from down here, such delicacy. And with the sun on it, such sparkle. This will show my wife the importance of important things, and the need. What would the sky be without it? Just look at the faces of the people. And my wife, as wide-eyed as any of them.

"There!" I say, "That's what we mean. Look! That's what I've always meant. Can you say it wasn't worth it?"

Even so, wide-eyed as she is, and all glittery with the look of *our Project*. . . . Even so, she leans toward me and whispers, "But Sparrow."

"And I'm not there," I say. I know I sound as though I don't care about Sparrow. It's that I don't know what to say. What can I say? What should I answer? I say, "But I'm not even there."

She says, shouting, "Don't shout!"

Everybody looking up. Every single one of them—stunned at first, rain and tears flowing down their faces. Then the lightning lights their grins. They're saying, "Well, well, *well!*" and, "The little brothers of The Up have done it," and other things of that nature. They pat me on the back. Little pat, pat, pats. *Pats!* As if it hadn't taken years. Generations. As if it wasn't a grand and noble, even an impossible thing. Do they realize the Project will be there longer than their little lives? Do they know I was the foreman?

I limp away, I and the dog. I've done with them.

They have their arms around each other's shoulders. They're in a circle, doing a skipping sort of dance, which, seeing how big they are, makes them look more ridiculous than ever.

(They'll be dancing up there, too, stamping, jumping, also in a circle, though not touching. There was a special beer saved for just this day.)

"Hosh," they say, and they open a space for me in their dance. "Little brother. Come."

To have more pats?

They say I'm not well enough to return, but I'm done with their over-watered fields (wasting *our* water), their slippery grass where even the horses skid and go down, let alone the people. On the mountain we have more dangerous dangers, but they're dangers more to my taste.

If, for instance, some night we should steal a horse and ride out, fast, through the long, straight, flat places. . . . (I have said to myself and long before, that I wouldn't return without Wren.)

I'll tell her I've loved her just as if she was the Project and for as

long. Since she's finally seen it as it should be seen, she'll understand the importance of my love. How it sparkles. How it will last beyond either of us.

But she won't come. I know it ahead of time. Yet again she'll say, "What, *what!*"

I'll say, "I killed the lioness only for you."

She'll humpf.

(It's the dog will follow me as a wife should. Try to. He's old and arthritic. He likes somebody who limps. We'll be two of a kind.)

I'll say: You stay for the love of radishes the size of turnips, for chairs too big to sit on, for spoons that don't fit your mouth. I risked my life, I'll say. I say it, "I risked myself."

This is the beginning of everything that happens afterward. This and lightning, and hail, as it's falling now, big as walnuts. I look up straight into it. They've all run inside, even Wren, but I'm used to worse. I suppose they're afraid of ruining their hats. *Hats!* The meaning of the meaning of life, nor beauty either, has nothing to do with hats.

IT COMES FROM DEEP INSIDE

I saw a painting and fell in love with it. I don't know why. It wasn't that well done, and it was clear the artist didn't know anything about art. I know art. I've been through art school, I've had aesthetics, I paint, but I didn't care if this painting was well done or not, I loved it at first sight. I fell in love with the artist, too, though I'd never met him. I figured he was gentle and noble in a simple way, just like his painting. The name in the lower right-hand corner, in rounded, careful . . . actually childish writing, was Sam Gray. One would wish a more colorful name for an artist. Gray! How could that be? Well, all the more like the painting with its billowing yet innocent gray clouds.

The painting was of a storm over the mountains. The clouds took up three quarters of it. At the bottom, as though insignificant, were the mountains, all in a row. Also at the bottom there was a small, square, red thing that I finally figured out was a cabin.

Right away I recognized Basin Mountain off to the side, so I had an idea where that cabin was and where Sam Gray might be. The painting cost a hundred dollars. I couldn't afford it. I knew the artist

was inept and untrained—had no eye whatsoever, but I bought it anyway. As I gave the money to the lady in the little art gallery, I asked questions. She said lots of art came down from that place, paintings of gnarled trees, meadows of wild flowers, tumble-down shacks, gray granite cliffs with a dun mule or two in the foreground, or gray granite cliffs with lupine and fireweed.

It's from the painting that I discovered the art colony. Their secret place is deep in a canyon—a high canyon, up in the mountains. I came in on them from the only way there is to come. (They could close off this one trail and keep their art unadulterated by outside influences forever if they wanted to. I suppose not very much that's postmodern will find its way up there.)

I packed up and started out for Basin Mountain. I dressed the part, not for climbing, but for art. My running shoes are white, purple, and green. (I always wear an orange blouse in case of getting lost, and with long sleeves in case of bugs.) I wore slinky green pants even though they were wrong for hiking, but artists always wear the wrong things on purpose. I looked like an artist without even trying. Or, rather, only trying a little bit. But you have to dress the part, else how would anybody know you were one?

I had bug spray and sun goo. I had breakfast bars. I had apples. I had a big floppy hat.

I wonder about the man called Gray—if he might be dressed all in gray as an arty trick, sort of like how city artists wear black. But considering the innocence of the painting, I doubt it. If he's all in gray, it's more likely to have been what he happened to have handy on this particular day. That is, assuming I find him on this particular day.

I follow the creek that rushes down their canyon. I'm pleased with how the trail winds round and round. It was shady from the start. I'm

pleased with the trees. No vehicles of any sort could ever come up here. I was pleased with that, too.

As I climb I practice art talk, such as: "It's a distillation of the vitality of my inner experience. It contextualizes my life." But maybe it shouldn't be all about me, but about the spirit in the world right now. I'll use the word *zeitgeist*. Maybe *gestalt*.

(I may try a little high-class French when I come upon them. I'll say, "*Vous voilà enfin*." Or should I say: *Tu*? Especially if the first person I meet is Sam Gray?)

Suddenly I'm stopped. Both sides of the trail fall away and I'll have to cross a dangerous unstable ridge of talus. Isn't it just like artists to make you cross a place like this to get to them. Here, in life as in art, the danger of slipping—of crashing down into the chasm of nonentity. . . . (I do know reminders of death are always a good thing in art.) I can't decide whether to cross the dangerous ridge or sit down and do a dangerous drawing instead.

(I wonder how they bring their art across this to the shop in the valley. Mules would do, I suppose.)

I tell myself to take the most difficult way in art as in life. I sit down to draw. All the better if I can come across Sam Gray with a drawing under my arm. I'll try to make it simple and naïve, but splashy. When I meet him, I'll hold the drawing so he can't help but see it.

I make several so as to have choices. I keep drawing, on and on, until it's too late to try to cross the ridge tonight. I move back and set up my tarp, eat a couple of breakfast bars. I try to write a poem describing exactly what I see, as my poet friend said to do, but talus and scree are not conducive to poetry. Even the snowy peaks, and more snowy peaks behind them. . . . I mean how many snowy peaks can you describe at one sitting? I let my poem blow away. I think to

drop my drawings, too, but I need something to show Sam Gray. I decide a not-so-good-drawing is better than nothing. Besides, how would he know the difference, being such a bad artist himself?

I look at my drawings to pick one. Not necessarily the best. They are full of happy accidents, such as ground-in dirt and blood from my scratched elbow.

I can't sleep on these rocks. (I didn't bring my pad because I thought I'd be there by now.) Also, I start to worry about the end of art as we know it. In art as in life, you can go too far. Perhaps art has gone too far already.

In the morning I wake to a gorgeous sunrise. I try to describe it but you have to be fast. I write quickly: Purple to orange to yellow to pink, funny lenticular clouds. . . . I'm so busy writing it down I don't have a chance to see it at all.

But now there's the narrow ridge to cross; or should I not, so as to live to paint another day?

I sit and worry for a while. I think, you can get too old for art. They say you can't, but you can. It's because you've already done everything—gone through the bad language and the language play and then the odd punctuation; done the sex part (dildoes and menstrual and such). Pretty soon you find yourself using the same old tricks you always used. You can get too wise, too. And then you get dizzy as you age. You'll hardly make it to your easel. So dizzy you'd never be able to cross a ridge like this. I'd better cross it now, while I'm still in pretty good shape. I'll go fast and I won't look down.

After the scary ridge, it's all easy. The trail widens to where artists could walk hand in hand, which makes me think all the more of Sam Gray.

As I go I keep looking around. I think to find him sitting on some

outcropping, painting. I think I see red and orange and black paint on the stones, but that turns out to be the usual lichen.

Pretty soon I see their houses . . . bungalows, that is, each one is entirely different from the other. And there's that red shack at the far end. The only person I see is a boy with thick glasses and a sharp-nosed, intellectual look. He's painting. He has green and yellow paint on his jeans. Of course. Children do art all the time. Try to stop them. I'm shocked. I didn't know there'd be children.

"Are you all artists here?"

"Yeah."

I can hardly breathe with the wonder of it. I've always wanted to belong to an art colony.

"Sam Gray," I say. "Is he handsome?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

Of course he doesn't know. To a child, only the very young are beautiful. To a child, everybody grown up is old.

"Where is everybody?"

"They've gone up by the glacier to paint ice. I didn't want to. I wanted to paint our house instead. See, I already did."

And there it is, a big, bad, muddy painting. But the boy is only nine.

But art should speak to the common man, and young and old alike. I guess it does—in the long, long, long run, that is. I mean nobody anymore thinks Beethoven is just the cackling of hens and the braying of donkeys, as they used to say. However, if I paint with dung, I won't tell anybody. If I paint the virgin, I won't say who it is. If I mix urine with my paint as a protest against how we live now, all slicked up and shiny, I won't say. It'll be my secret protest.

I head off towards that funny little red cabin.

"Nobody's home."

"All the better then."

I look in the windows. It's just jammed with art in there, on the walls and on the floor—my favorite kind of mess. There's even art in the kitchen. And hardly any dishes. As far as I can tell from here, all the art not very good.

I'll die if I can't be part of the colony, with or without Sam Gray. Every single friend I'd have here would be an artist of some sort. There'd be nothing but art talk all day long. People will be eccentric of course. I'll be eccentric, too. I wish my drawing was splashier some way. If I knew how to make it that way, I'd have done it in the first place, though how splashy can talus ever be? Of course there is that little smear of blood on it.

Here they come now. You can tell they're all artists even from this far away. They have flowers in their buttonholes. Some have earrings in the wrong places or safety pins for earrings. They're hopping about and patting each other on the shoulder or (actually!) their rumps. (Trust artists to be doing things like that.) They wear all kinds of shiny things, and big hats just like mine, and some shirts . . . well, you'd think it was Hawaii, only the designs are all squarish or diamonds or like streaks of lightning. One wears a cape that billows out behind him. Some of the women toe out. They seem to be walking around in a sort of third position.

I'll be kind, even to those who paint better than I do, just as one always is kind to those who paint less well.

There's a piñon right next to the red hut. I hide behind it and look them over. There are lots of women—some a little horsy. Their boobs bounce when they walk (of course no bras)—but several men, too. I see one I hope is Sam. He has a nice straight nose, lined face, and bushy eyebrows, but he isn't dressed like an artist at all, more like a gas station attendant with an olive drab jump suit. He actually has his name embroidered on his pocket. Jasper. Maybe he's the handyman.

Every art colony needs one. Even so, I like his looks.

There's another man who looks pretty good, too. And much more artistic. This one looks French. Except Gray isn't a French name. Perhaps it used to be Gris. His mustache is ridiculous. Did he form it like Hitler's in order to shock? It does. That's one kind of art.

I wonder what it feels like to be able to shape something on your face like that—to form it to some sort of arty addition you might want on your upper lip. Hide defects, accentuate good points. No wonder women are always putting on make-up. They might not if they had something to shape on their faces.

There's another man, but he's too chubby. You get that way from sitting around writing poetry and reading too much. He's wearing red plaid pants. None of these men stops at the hut.

The handyman hangs back to pick up waste paper. I come out of my hiding place and catch up to him. He's startled to see me. He stares and looks shocked.

"Where in heaven's name did you come from? We're the only ones supposed to be here."

We? I wonder if he considers himself one of them even though he's only a handyman. He's not Sam Gray, unless he's wearing somebody else's jump suit, though of all the men I've seen so far, he's the one I had hoped was. I ask anyway.

"Shhhh."

He takes off his hat and wipes his sweaty forehead on his sleeve. His forehead is pure white, innocent and young, while his lower face is tan and old. I want to tell him to put his hat back on or his forehead will get to be as weathered as the rest of him.

The inside of his hat is full of little slips of paper on which I can read a word here and there. I see, MAJESTIC, IMPOSING, MAGNIFICENT, STATELY, NOBLE, ELEGANT. . . . All sorts of poetic words. At first I think he's not a handyman after all, but then I wonder if these bits

of paper are discarded words from the poems of the others, and he's been picking up after everybody else, and he's carried the rejected words home in his hat so as not to pollute the region with too much grandeur. With so many artists around, it probably wouldn't take long for this place to get to be a rubbish heap of discarded elegances and ornamentations.

He says, "Leave as soon as you can."

"I would die for art," I say. "I would even die for not-very-good art."

As if inadvertently, I let my drawing of the talus fall out of my pack and unroll. I see now it's as boring as I feared it was. Why did I make it so symmetrical? I tell him, "That's my blood, there in the corner."

I thought my little scratchy lines would make it more interesting. I gave it black shadows. None of that helped. It's still just as boring as talus is in real life. You'd think I'd sketched a pile of helter-skelter shoe boxes.

I say, "Talus is dangerous."

All this talk doesn't make my drawing any better.

"I'm an artist just as you all are. Doesn't that count?"

He's already taken a good look at me but he takes another. He stares at my drawing, too. He has black, beady eyes. I don't know whether to think of them as sexy or scary.

"Art," I say, "comes from the heart," and, "It comes from the fires deep inside. I feel it here." I squeeze my left breast with both hands.

I can see he's interested.

I think up titles not-very-good artists might like. I say, "I'll paint pictures called THE GOLDEN CHIMES OF SUMMER or RAINBOW OVER IMPETUOUS RIVER. I'll cling to my mood swings. To my melancholy, if necessary." (Would a good title make my talus drawing more interesting?) "I call this one TALUS THREATENING THE PATHWAY OF LIFE."

One look at my drawing and they think I'm perfect for this place. Turns out I get to have a funny little bungalow. So far I haven't made it my own in any artistic way. I don't know whether to spend my time on it or on my art. I know some artists get side-tracked into making their living space their art and never have any time for anything else. Or they work on their very selves. I wear things only artists would wear, but I don't spend a lot of time on it. I let my hair fly around. I flow, waft, whistle things like Beethoven's Ninth.

Even so, I didn't get off to a very good start—unless crying is arty. Maybe it is. Artists are supposed to be super-sensitive, so I guess it's not so bad that I cried all day my first day here (or, rather, tried not to cry and *mostly* succeeded) because Sam Gray had painted my favorite painting and yet here he was, nothing but a little man half my size and as gray as his name—eyes, hair (what there is left of it). Clothes. They looked as if they'd been washed, colors with whites, until everything got dulled down to one dirty color. He squinted and blinked. His eyes teared all the time. He thinks he'll go blind pretty soon, so he's painting more of his bad paintings as fast as he can. He has no time for anybody. I like all his paintings more than I would admit to anybody. I don't even like to admit it to myself.

Sam's is the smallest hut of any, yet has the most art. The others I'd call bungalows, his I call a hut. He's the most dedicated of all of them. The day I came he was painting away at wild roses in front of a dead juniper. He's too old to climb around with the others looking for good subjects. (I'll bet he couldn't cross the ridge if his life depended on it.) He doesn't take the time to think if he should paint this or that, he just paints it.

After meeting him I had tears rolling down my cheeks all day, so I got lots of sympathy. The fat man brought me a bouquet of dried grasses. One of the horsy women brought me cookies in the shape of . . . well, either leaves or vaginas. Another brought me a Frisbee in the

shape of a winged phallus. It flew as well as any Frisbee I ever had.

There's Leonora, America, Nicco, Montgomery, Heather, Melody, Harmony. . . . There's actually a Minerva (one of the horsy ones). Their names are so arty I wonder if they chose them themselves. (Too bad I already told them my name is Mary Anne.) I wonder if Sam Gray is really Sam Gray. Could be he wanted to be different from the others, simpler maybe, like his paintings, and changed his name from something fancier.

The handyman seems to be head of the whole thing. Now how did it happen that a handyman got to be so important? Even so, he's the one I wish would notice me. I look as sad as I can when I'm near him. Maybe I'll leave some words around for him to clean up. Love words, or sex words, better yet commitment words. . . . Though when have artists committed to anything but their art? Ardor, passion, that's what artists have, and they go wherever that leads. Except I like Sam Gray's painting for the opposite reasons, so tender, simple, innocent, and so committed.

Since we're all second best here and some of us are even third best, you'd wonder why we bother with art at all. It's the art of it, is why. It's the tripping little steps and the scarves. It's the hand with the thumb always towards the two middle fingers, first finger and little finger out. It's pointed toes. It's the sky (turquoise, pink, salmon, mauve), splashed down in big, watery brush strokes on expensive paper.

They tell me they've. . . . I should say "*we've*," now that I'm part of it. We've been warned that we're not the sort of artists wanted in the world, and that there's much too much art anyway. (We know that.) We've heard that the better artists of the world would like to destroy this place and all of us in it—finish off the not-so-good art in one

attack. They may even now be amassing in the valley.

We know their coming and destroying us would be a good thing. We agree with them—art shouldn't be allowed. It should be done secretly in attics. Nobody should ever get paid doing art. It's a privilege. You should be arrested if they catch you at it.

On the other hand, it could be said it's an offense to *not* do art. Like not looking up when a flock of geese honks by. Like not dancing when the beat is lively.

So even though there's much too much art in the world, how can we not keep doing it anyway?

Rejected by Sam—though no more rejected than he rejects everybody—I think to return across that dangerous ridge. I wonder if I still have the guts. Maybe I could cause a landslide that would make the ridge even more dangerous than it already is so that the better artists couldn't get at us. It wouldn't take much. If I could find even a little bomb of some sort around here, I could do it. I could be the one to save us all.

If they do have a little bomb, I wonder where they keep it?

They're going to have an art dance for the Fourth of July. We're supposed to come in costume. I can't imagine what the costumes will be like. How could they find stranger get-ups than they already wear every day?

Since the dance is in the afternoon, this will be a good time for me to leave with my bomb. Though artists understand when you want to be alone.

Sam won't be going of course. He'll be painting as usual. He says his eyes are worse than ever and he doesn't have much more time.

The handyman will be going. Surely he's the one has our bomb, if anybody does. Artists don't have things like that. So now I've two

reasons to woo him, and since one has to do with the good of the whole colony and isn't just about me, I suddenly have the courage to do it.

First I ask him right out, "How do you defend yourself here, just in case?"

"In case of what?"

"Attack by. . ." I'm about to say, "the first-rate artists," but that seems rude. I wonder what to call them. But then I think, if Minerva can have flying phalluses as her art, why can't I have a bomb?

"How do you make a bomb? It's for art."

He doesn't look a bit suspicious.

"Will you help me? Or do you have one handy? You know, in case of attack."

Jasper is coming dressed as he always is—in his gas station jump suit. I ask him: How come he's the only one doesn't want to look like an artist? I say, "Since when do you have to be an artist to try to look as if you are? I mean, just one little thing would do it, like one earring or longer hair. It doesn't take much."

He says, "I don't dress any other way than this."

I don't wonder about it. I've known lots of men like that. My father wore the same shiny-seated navy blue suits as long as I knew him. He must have had three or four. Maybe more, how could you tell? I knew a man who wore a baseball jacket zipped up to his neck no matter what the weather. I've known men who never took their cowboy hats off.

"But about bombs?" I say. "I'm coming dressed as a bomb. One that's already exploded. I need to know things."

He says, "There's grenades and sticks of dynamite. You know what they look like."

Turns out it's true, he does have things: "Just in case." And he shows me.

And he shows me more than that. And more.

He's a hairy man. All over. Not what you'd think artists would be like, so I'm all the more sure he's not one.

His hut is different from the others, too. It's as simple as his jump suits. There are several more suits, all just alike. I know because he doesn't have a closet. He keeps the clean ones hanging on the back of his bedroom door. (He shut the door to keep his cat out so we wouldn't be disturbed.) (Trust him to have a clean animal.)

If he does art, or has any, it's not in here. Neither is the bomb. He brings it out from a back room. A grenade.

"I'd like two."

He actually lets me have them. Maybe because it'll be the Fourth of July.

But this is after.

He makes love as if he were the way I thought Sam Gray would be, before, when I fell in love with his painting. What I fell in love with was how Jasper is, though I thought he wasn't. Jasper is the kind of man that comes down hard on his heels and glares around, side to side. You'd think waste paper was the main enemy, *and* anybody who didn't put it in a trash basket, so I was a little worried. But he's not like that at all. From the first touch, middle finger across my upper lip and then across my lower, then along my chin, my collar bone. . . . After that I knew how it would be.

Everybody is getting ready for the party, except Sam is, yet again, painting his little red hut. It's almost like a signature, the way it appears even when you know it wasn't there in real life. Sometimes it's hardly more than a red speck. But this time the hut is in the foreground, large and much too red.

Who ever heard of the big red side of a hut, not even a window

in it (he's painting the back), being mostly the whole painting? Just a little tan and green around it and a little blue along the top, almost as if a frame. It'll look even funnier when it does have a frame. Even my pile of helter-skelter shoebox-sized talus is more interesting. But as usual, I can see that I'm going to like it. Maybe most of all. Maybe I should wait until it's done before I go.

I sit behind him as he paints and watch his bald spot. Usually he complains when people watch him paint, but this time he doesn't. It's as if he wants me there, and even that he guesses where I'm going. Or maybe (more likely) it's that I'm the most inept, most recently arrived, and least important person here, and he thinks he can push me around. Besides, he knows how I like his paintings.

"My paintings are piling up." He doesn't even look back at me as he's speaking. "I need for them to be taken to town. I *need* them to be sold."

I can't imagine what he needs money for. We don't use money here. Besides, artists don't care about money. I think somebody gave a lot of grants for this place. Maybe the government. What does the government know about art! Or maybe some of these people were on the grant committee, people sympathetic to any kind of art at all, and the artists used the grants to set this place up.

"Why sold? You can't need money."

"No, no, I care nothing for money."

I can hear I've insulted him.

"Nor fame either. Not for myself, at any rate. What I need is for my paintings to be out in the world. I need for them to be studied. For their own sakes. They should be deconstructed." (I can't believe it, he knows about semiotics. You'd not think so from the look of his art. Of course, *I* know all this stuff, and it doesn't make *my* art any good.) "Get them the notice they deserve."

He has ten or so packed up on a little two-wheeled cart all ready to go.

"If I can have the one you're working on now, I'll take them."

He doesn't even say thank you. He knew I'd do it. It's as if he knows I was in love with him before I met him. Of course, I'm not anymore.

"Don't let them stay all rolled up. It's not good for them."

I could say I'll take them and then let them go up with me and my bombs as part of an art-bomb happening. "Performance art," they call that. Sometimes "destruction art," like when Nam June Paik broke violins. And then there were all those pianos getting chopped up. Those were supposed to be the death of music. This will be the death of art. Maybe the death of me, too. The paintings will be going up with me, which will make it all the more meaningful.

The day of the party I take all morning to make my exploded bomb costume. Then I put it on, on top of my backpack with the bombs in it, and I go to check up on the party. Just as I figured, everybody seems dressed pretty much as usual, though a little bit more so. Portia has come as a big vagina (or a cookie). Minerva is a winged phallus. One comes as a big turd. I can't see who that is under all that goo. That French-ish man comes as Hitler (he looks a lot like him anyway, but now he wears the uniform) in order to shock everybody even more than turds and vaginas.

The party's only just started and Jasper is already cleaning up out from under people. His usual way. You can't put down a half-finished drink before it's cleaned up right out from under your nose. There's a lot of homemade beer made out of all sorts of things: Elderberry beer, gooseberry beer. . . . All of them the best I ever tasted.

Everybody likes my costume. I'm wearing a lot of pieces of things plastered all over me and hanging down. Some are stuck on with wires Jasper gave me so chunks seem to be flying off. It's easy to hide my backpack under all this junk, but it's not very comfortable. I'm thinking maybe I should forget the whole thing and just sit here and drink

beer. But then I think how it's for the good of all these second-best artists—that they should be safe to brew their beer and have their parties and paint and dance.

I want to say goodbye to Jasper some way, but I don't want him to know I'm going. He's so busy cleaning up I have to grab him to stop him for a minute. "Jasper! Relax and have fun. Drink some beer. Dance."

If he does, I won't go. I'll take off my backpack and dance with him. I'll get drunk and not worry about saving everybody.

But he doesn't.

My bombs weigh quite a bit, and everything else does, too, and the costume is getting in the way. I can't move my arms very much. Pieces of my costume that are on wires hook against the trees and bushes when the trail goes through woodsy places. I pull and sometimes push the cart with Sam Gray's paintings. It hooks on rocks. I'm getting blisters.

Even so, I try to stay aware as I go, because they say the present moment is the only one that counts, and these might be my last, so I'm aware of my costume rubbing against my knees, and my backpack pulling on my shoulders, there's my blisters. I'm sorry that these have to be part of my last awarenesses.

I'll get recognition of a sort. Maybe not for art, though why not? For sure it'll be a happening: Big blast, broken talus flying up. I hope I get to see it—start to finish, not just the start.

Should I cross first and then set off the bombs, or should I set them off on this side and not cross?

I hope I don't inadvertently make it easier to cross.

I hike up and down and up again. The trail gets harder. Coming here it was more down than up—*after* I crossed the ridge, that is. I stop to

rest and think. This is right where the trail broadens out so artists can hold hands. I sit on one of the stones on the side and prop the cart against a bigger one or it'll take off back down the trail by itself. I throw away some of my costume that sticks out, though from now on the trail is above the tree line.

I think how, if I blow myself up, then right now I should be doing something I enjoy this last hour of my life. Of course the last few moments before the bomb gets to me will be spectacular. At least I'll enjoy that.

For sure it'll be exciting, and for sure more exciting than anything I could paint. Or even anything Sam Gray would. The only trouble is, nobody will see it but me. Sort of like that tree that's always falling in the forest and nobody there to hear it. It's the same problem. Will it be art if I'm the only one around?

Here goes anyway. For the sake of the gesture. For the sake of the shock. For politics and art and for the good of everybody down there and especially for Jasper.

I cross to the far side (with the paintings) and, one after the other, I pull the pins and throw. I always said I'd die for art if need be and now I'm going to.

Well, maybe not.

I'm dizzy and I have a lot of dust and grit in my mouth. My face must be all scratched up. It probably looks like my hands. I'll bet I look not only like an exploded bomb, but, definitely, as if I've been in an explosion. I feel like it, too—kind of wobbly. If I'd planned it for weeks I'd never have come up with a work of art this good.

Also the paintings are not as badly off as you'd think. I unroll a couple and take a look. They're shredded around the edges; dirt has gotten in. Actually, they're better than they were. Performance art paintings. I'll bet they're worth more than ever as destruction art

where the art is only partly destroyed. As if the artist couldn't quite decide if he wanted to destroy art or not. As if Nam June Paik had only broken a little piece off a violin. It's a whole new movement. The half-destruction of art. This is a big contemporary thing. My not dying, and only getting dizzy and bloody, is part of the same movement. I hope it's more than *épatéing les bourgeois*.

I don't look back to see if I made the ridge easier to cross or harder. I head down towards town. I'm weak and dizzy, but I can manage, down to where those first-rate artists are massing. I can join them now because this costume and all this added dust and scratches and blood makes me a really good work of art. I'm probably more outrageous than any of them. It was hard getting to this point. Nobody ever said art was easy, but I didn't expect it to be quite this hard. I didn't expect to have to leave my lover . . . my maybe lover, and my bungalow, and to have to almost die. I should have known, though. That's the way art is. That's what has to happen for an artist to get to be good.

They've called my work, and all our work up there: "Socially irrelevant in a time of crisis." They won't ever say that again about mine.

Too bad the people down in town and those back at the colony have missed the best part. Actually, I did, too. The explosion itself is wiped right out of my head. I don't remember a thing about it. I feel half-dead; though, on the other hand, I feel more alive than usual, too. Really good art always does that.

PREJUDICE AND PRIDE

All those old-fashioned ways of holding back on sex until you can't stand it that the lovers are still apart. Why don't they call out to each other instead of waiting till the door shuts between them? Why don't they turn around at the last minute and do what they ache to do? Why keep holding back, as though for the reader, that the reader should read on and on, faster and faster, skipping pages to the next part where the lovers (yet again!) do not say that they love each other? And he, Fitzwilliam, having glimpsed her ankle . . . or not even that, focused, rather, on her long, pale fingers as she plays, and of course rather well, the piano-forte. Her fingers make him think of her body, though he can hardly dare to let himself do so. He can think of other women's bodies, but not hers. The thought of hers is too much for him to bear.

And she . . . reads his eyes, though she hardly dares to look straight into them. His gaze turns her stomach as though upside-down every time she almost looks at his face. Of course she doesn't think about his body. But, yes, she does, though doesn't let herself know she's doing it. And she sees more than she admits to herself, her

eyes lowered, looking just there. But after all, she is a country girl. She can't be ignorant. They have horses. (Seeing them, with their sex down, almost to their hocks sometimes, used to frighten her when she was a child.)

Then there is that left ankle he has glimpsed, and the other also. When they finally do marry, he will fondle her pale, narrow feet. When they finally do marry, it is assured that he will get an erection at the proper times, for even the lightest, slightest brushing of his hand over her (as yet covered)—and almost as though by mistake, though they both will know that's not so—breast will be enough.

Afterwards, at breakfast, they will stare into each other's eyes, she, by then, daring to look at him.

They are rich, and the servants will bring a breakfast of the rich: Eggs, sprats, ham, tea with cream, a sweet yellowish bread with raisins. . . . But they will hardly eat any of it. Instead he will kiss all ten of her fingertips, and then back again, all ten, in the other direction. Then each knuckle. (He will have said that her fingertips touched to his lips are all he needs of nourishment.) When he kisses, and for several seconds (how warm his lips are), the palm of her hand, she will feel it up and down her spine.

This will all have taken place in the garden on a spring morning, they having been married in the spring.

Of course at first they don't like each other. Except there is always this electricity that passes between them. Thank goodness he keeps getting invited to places where she is visiting, and vice versa, he, so proud and mysterious, with mysterious, dark, Roman good looks, but with the bright, light eyes of the Picts. When her uncle accuses him of being too proud, her aunt says, "There is something a little stately in him, to be sure, but it is confined to his air and is not unbecoming."

He has secret sorrows: The almost-rape of his little sister and

recent deaths in the family. Of course these make him all the more appealing.

Her name is Elizabeth, though it might just as likely be Margaret, Charlotte, Eleanor, or Constance.

He said of her, "She is one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance," but this was much later. At first he had said she was "tolerable," but not handsome enough to tempt *him*.

I once saw a roebuck stalking a doe. He was about the size of a Great Dane and had a full set of antlers. The doe was grazing as though unmindful of him, but he wasn't interested in food. He never, for a second, took his eyes off her. Such was his concentration that we tourists were as though invisible to him. He moved stiffly; step, then freeze; step, freeze. . . . This was in a virgin forest, streaks of sunlight slanting down—on them and on us. At first we had thought he was the statue of a deer. How else be so stiff and still? But he had taken a step—half-step, really, and then become like a statue again, hoof raised. His concentration on her more sexual than any act of actual sex could ever be.

This is how Fitzwilliam looks at Elizabeth, and she feels her heart tip over. His gaze, like the roebuck's, steel wires between herself and him. Though his eyes are pale . . . blue-tan, still they pull. . . . No, simply hold in place. The roebuck was not trembling, but he was *almost* trembling. Fitzwilliam also does not tremble.

When they finally do go to bed (trembling), Fitzwilliam (how could it be otherwise?) comes too soon, hardly having penetrated her. They will *not* mention it. (He had only touched her breast a little bit, and it was covered up still, this time by her nightgown, but that touch was enough—or, rather, too much for him to contain himself.) But a little later he will try again, and this time all will be right—her first

bumpy ride of sex, and painful, too. The sheets will be as though a chicken had been killed there. Or was it only in southern countries that that was done? At any rate, there will have been no need for a chicken. ("Oh, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, have I caused you pain? You whom, of all people in the whole of the wide world, I would want least of all to hurt?") (One would expect that they went to Bath or Brighton on their honeymoon.) They will probably not be able to make love again for a few days until she is somewhat healed, so it's good that, two nights later, when he actually fondles her *bare* breasts, he, again, comes immediately.

It is to be hoped she does not die in childbirth.

Sometimes I think I would like to have lived back in those times, but had I done so, I would probably have been the scullery maid. I would probably be called (curtly) Hill or Rodgers or Morgan. Not have a name anything like my own foreign-sounding name—neither my foreign-sounding maiden name nor this one.

And you, Old Man, you'd probably have been the man's man. But no, you haven't the manners nor the mood for that. You'd have been the swearing, sweating coachman. And did you ever look at me like that roebuck we saw last summer looked at his doe? Perhaps you did, and perhaps it is my own damn fault that that look, if it ever was, is no longer there.

REPORT TO THE MEN'S CLUB

*"There was nothing else for me to do, provided always
that freedom was not to be my choice."*

—FRANZ KAFKA

Respected members of the Men's Club, you have conferred upon me the highest honor that you are capable of conferring, though it is certainly not, in your eyes, your highest honor. It is, in fact, something that you yourselves take for granted, even though I am sure you are always, on some deep level, aware of the magnificence of it, so that you walk with a surer step, see with clearer eyes, and always have a little half-smile hovering about your lips. Needless to say, it's something that I never hoped to achieve . . . could not possibly have hoped for, and, therefore, could not have striven for directly even though, on the other hand, I can say that some part of me has been striving for it all my life, from the very moment I began to understand which of us were the girls and which were the boys.

Yours is a unique group. In any other similar organization, I might not be fully accepted as one of you (though it's true, often those like me have been accepted at an entirely different level as lesser members of some such group), but here in this group, after the reception you have been kind enough to give to me as well as to my researches, I am

sure that I am, at long last, to be numbered as one of you.

It was not after the formal initiation, where you allowed me to partake in the solemn ceremony—very moving, I may add, and of great beauty—of the drinking from the golden cup, the wearing of the crimson hood, the slow marching to that unique beat that is yours alone . . . it was not after that that I felt most particularly one of you, but it was in your allowing me to take part in the informal initiation. I mean no disrespect by this comment, but it should not be hard for you to see that that particular ceremony should be the most meaningful to me.

And I realize, gentlemen, how hard it must have been for you to go through with that ceremony and to paint the blue stripe just there. How you must have yearned to avert your eyes, turn away, in fact, from the whole business. You must have felt, deep inside, that you had made a terrible mistake, but you went on with it. You persevered. And I, I would have lain as still as possible in order to help you, but I knew that it was customary to fight, and so I fought with all the strength I had, and I'm proud to say that I, and you, too, were as covered with blue after my fight as you were from the fight of the man the week before. By now the blue has worn off, but not the memory of it, nor my gratitude for those hilarious moments of brotherhood.

We are the sons of hunters, not of lovers. (I trust that now I may use the word "we" and include myself with all of you.) If all the lovers of the world were laid end to end, they would not be able to make one tiny dent in some great concept of the universe, and so we are not lovers. We put aside the body and pay little attention to its messy functions. Particularly messy, I must admit it, Gentlemen, particularly messy are the functions of the body of a woman. Birth itself a messy business and more than most men can stomach. (I speak from

experience.) We are best left out of it altogether. And I, in spite of having once been enmeshed in such things, am, by your ceremonies, by your blue paint, if only figuratively speaking, now am cleansed.

All my life I have been a student of mankind. *Mankind*. I have watched men. I learned their ways, the thoughtful stroking of the chin, the walk with elbows out, the long, wide stride. I repeated what I saw. I sat with legs apart, and, if not an "I can lick you" look in my eyes (for, after all, I couldn't), then certainly my gaze was level, never coquettish or cute. In fact, "cute" was what I never was, I'm proud to say. I made sure of that from before the age of three. I refused, above all else, to be cute even if I was forced to chop off my own hair to accomplish it. Mother was frantic. She wanted bows in my hair. (I can honestly say that I have never worn a bow for longer than a few seconds.)

Mother was not a woman to be reckoned with, but rather to be swept aside as one hurried towards the important things in life. A sad fact, but a true one. I saw this as a small girl when we went to the beach. Mother sat under a big umbrella with the baby while Father, along with all the other fathers and older children, frolicked in the water. "In the swim," as it were. I ranked myself, then and there, among the fathers and vowed that when I grew up I would never sit on the bank with a baby (though I must confess that I have done it, and more than once).

I have been thought to be amenable to training by many of the men I have encountered, not to mention my father, to whom I will be forever grateful for giving me a name (Leslie) that could be of either sex. (Lucky for me I had no brother, though too bad for Father.) It was from him that I learned never to be without a graphing calculator

in my back pocket (though it was hard to have a back pocket most of the time). Perhaps my father saw something in me from the start—something of the enigma I wanted to be. I was frantic to be noticed by him and put on the most outlandish performances, sometimes climbing trees and screaming from the topmost branches (though I was terrified of heights) in hopes of attracting his attention.

But men are, as you know, Gentlemen, preoccupied with more important things than one small girl could ever hope to be, even one at the top of a tree. I did attract his attention, though not in ways I hoped. Often it was simply in the matter of climbing down. Mother could not help me in that regard (another sign of her inferiority).

Father always said a girl should know how to give one swift punch to the Adam's apple or one swift kick to the you-know-where. I practiced these. Perhaps I sensed, even then, what the future held.

Of course there soon came the problem of having breasts. What were these things doing on, of all bodies, *my* body? I had thought that, simply by the strength of will, I could at the very least stay neutral—not take sides so completely in this matter. So then I thought, at least I'll not be a woman like any others. I'll keep the faith with men. See their side of every question. And I'm happy to say I've done so to this day.

Also I'm happy to say that my mind is uncluttered by the imagination, that I stick to the facts, have not veered off into emotionalities. (Even when I had children of my own, I made a point of avoiding any talk of them in favor of more important subjects.) And I often make snap judgments worthy, if I may say so myself, of a military man.

But do not think I have lived without ecstasy. Though it is exactly that ecstasy—that falling gently into the damp, erotic, messy needs of the

body—that misled me for a while. I became confused. My sources of pleasure were, after all, the very same as my sources of disdain and shame. I suffered in my ecstasy. I suffered, hardly knowing that I did, and yet, looking back on it, I know I did. I had come down from my trees, my rooftops, my high dives . . . down from all my dreams. In short, Gentlemen, I fell in love with one of you. Every day I asked him how he was coming along in the world I had left behind, and he answered me cheerfully enough for a while, but he soon grew tired of my endless probing, though even after he no longer answered me except in grunts and clearings of the throat, my goal still was: How improve the quality of life for the opposite sex. For myself, I hoped only to *inspire* excellence in him and in my children. I did not hope to find any excellence in myself.

Only a lunatic, you will be saying to yourselves, would have put up with this for a minute. I can only agree with you, but that's where ecstasy can lead those of my sex.

But you are wondering, when was it that I began my preparations for being one of you in earnest? When I was not quite in my fourteenth year, I began a series of tests. Even I could not guess the meaning of them: Ice-cold showers, hands held over candles, a knife wound in my cheek, and so forth. I bear the scars to this day, as you can see. (As to the life I subsequently led masquerading as a boy, strange to say, I have few scars—though, since the initiation of last week, I've used a cane and have this sling.)

Was I self-destructive? Obviously I was, no matter that I would protest it and no matter how many reasons for it may have been in the forefront of my mind at the time. Or, and more important, was I mainly yearning for my freedom? Ah, there, gentlemen, well you might have thought so, but that would have been your biggest mistake, for freedom has never been my wish. I can assure you of that. I

wanted to take my place among the powerful. Note that I don't say I wanted power. I simply wanted to be numbered among those that make the history and the money. I wanted to be among the people that the word "mankind" refers to.

But I soon saw that I might well destroy myself altogether if I continued to show myself no mercy. There was nothing for it but to attempt a daring escape across rooftops, fording streams, and off into the bogs of the arboretum. . . .

As can well be imagined, guards to keep me prisoner in my life, as it should be lived, were everywhere, for it was in everyone's best interests that I stay. Children were on the stairs (their skates, their jump ropes to trip me, hoses in the garden, rakes left, tines up), Grandmother in the kitchen, Mother in the backyard, Father, though he had seemed to be in sympathy with my earlier efforts to better myself, was now aligned with all the others and stationed himself at the front door. (By then, my husband was long gone.) At night, too, someone was always awake and watching, if not a child with the pretext of a bad dream, then a grownup with insomnia. But I managed to bide my time until my oldest son was just my size, and, dressed in his clothes, my hair cut short, I walked past all my jailers quite easily one beautiful spring afternoon.

I brought nothing from that place except that one suit of clothes. After all, I had not earned a penny for all the work I did each day. I felt that nothing there really belonged to me, not even the apple that I put in my pocket. I left with all my longings newly kindled, but even then I could not put a name to what I wanted. It is you, Gentlemen, who have made it all come true at last—that for which I longed most.

What, after all is said and done, distinguishes us . . . us men from the women. What but the fact that we are *not* enmeshed in the body and that we do *not* fluctuate at the mercy of our glands—that the moon does *not* affect us. Isn't it, then, by all these *nots*, as well as by all

our male values and virtues, that we are set apart from simply “being”? It is, in fact, exactly these questions, as you all well know, that I have made the essence of my investigations, and which I have recorded in what you have, most kindly, called: “Extraordinary detail,” and that I have published under the title *Man . . .* simply *Man*, for that one word is enough—has always been enough. You have found this work worthy of some small notice, and for this I thank you.

But I have spoken too long already, and so, since I have presented my most important points, I'll not bore you with any more of my personal history: How I joined, for a time, a gang of runaway boys; nor will I mention the kindly intellectual who found me half-starved in the gutter and who took me in and brought me up as his own son. (I had, by then, reached a fairly early menopause, possibly due to my hardships, so more children were, happily, out of the question.) Without the help of this man, I would certainly not be here among you. I wish to give a special thanks to him.

So, as I step—or, rather, hobble; I've still not quite recovered from that wondrous initiation—down from this podium, I'll not be stepping down at all, but up. One giant step up into *Mankind*. Too bad Father isn't here to see me now, though Mother would probably say (not even knowing she was quoting Kafka) that it was hardly worth the trouble.

OVERLOOKING

If you want to hug a tree, here's the perfect place for it. They all belong to us, and we wouldn't bother, but we don't mind if *you* do it. There's no better ones than these to hug, stunted, weathered, half-dead. They're more used to hardships than any of us, so, good to hug them.

We're crepuscular. And grayish, which makes us hard to see. We're wide awake when you're tired.

You bring dogs to sniff us out, but we outwit them. If caught, which is rare, we lie about ourselves. We pretend we're *you*.

When it's cool we wear squirrel hats and jackets. From a distance, you think we're those wild furry people you keep talking about, but those wild people are of another sort entirely. But if you think we're them, all the better.

In certain spots, way up here, there are more of us than of you. You come in small groups or alone. It's *us* you're looking for. Sightings? If we want you to have them, then you'll have them.

But we watch *you*—follow you, here and there; set up blinds you think are piles of brush. We use your own field glasses. (You often lose them. When we come out to clean up after you, there they are.

Sometimes cameras, too. We don't use those. How would we get film developed way out here? Though sometimes we play a joke on you and take pictures of each other and then leave the camera back where one of your kind will find it, develop it, and wonder: Who are these odd people making funny faces?)

We giggle when we see you, crunch-crunching around, your big feet on dry leaves or slipping on wet moss. We giggle when you think you've caught a glimpse of us. *That's* not us.

Lately the woods are full of you—and tin cans *and* plastic water bottles, sunglasses. . . . There's hardly a place to sit alone and contemplate anymore. And God forbid (your God) that we should stand, anymore, at the top of anything, silhouetted against the sky!

Don't think we don't have weapons. Silent ones, unlike yours. You don't know you're hit till you're hit, and you never know which direction it came from. Crossbows with darts. So silent, we can shoot and miss more times than several, and *you* don't know you're being shot at until you're shot.

As to *your* weapons, we make sure our babies' first words are, "*Don't shoot.*"

I'm the mother. I don't mean really. I mean I'm the oldest and wisest. I lead my group around at an arthritic limp and everybody calls me Maaaah. I haven't had any other name since . . . I can't remember when. If I approve of something, then that's what happens.

When one of us gets hurt, it's me they call. They know, by now, that I know about all there is to know around here.

In order to avoid *you*, we have nothing to do with the highest and therefore most popular mountains. What difference does it make, high or a little bit less high?

But we've captured one of you.

I was sitting here reading from your manuals about us. Most of the books insist we *do* exist. A few say maybe. Some say we don't. There are many of you who swear you've seen us and have pictures to prove it. They're lying and the pictures are fakes. Others write about how those people are crazy. We're like flying saucers, maybe *yes*, maybe *no*. Except it's not exactly us they write about. It's those others who live farther back. It's said those others are so cold they sleep with rattlesnakes to keep them warm. We don't believe that, any more than we believe we don't exist.

You say we're seven feet tall and fuzzy. *That's* not us.

So I was sitting here in my favorite shady spot reading when they brought one of *you* in. An old man almost as old as my own old man got to be. I wondered why they'd bring a grown man up home this time of year. Our women are running around as if it was mating time. All because of this poor old man. It's the gang caught him. They'll do anything just to be different or to shake their elders up.

I like the old man's looks. Grey-haired like us and nice and bony. Younger men are too baby-faced for my taste. I never liked that look even when I had a baby face myself. Such faces are all right for the young, but softness of that sort is scary in a man when one must trust one's life to him. Mostly it's our men who keep *you* from us. They will sacrifice themselves if need be.

You can see on his face that this man can't figure out if we're us or his kind. I suppose we look odd. (*You* never look odd to us. We've seen you much too often.)

This man has the usual paraphernalia: Camera, backpack, field glasses, big notebook full of notes and maps. In his backpack, food, including three little easy-open cans of apricots. I sample one right

away. Since I'm the maaaah, I have the right.

I ask the gang, "Why have you brought this one up here among us? If you don't know that's got to be the end of him, you should go down with the fathers and stay there."

"He knew."

"He didn't, but now he does."

"He did, too."

"There's nothing to know."

But then I see he's hurt. His arm hangs in an odd way, and he's holding on to it.

"We didn't do that. He had that already."

I don't trust these young ones. They're at a bad age. Well, but they usually tell the truth.

"Bring him here and hold him down."

(Up this close those young ones smell bad. It's a sign of maturing.)

I put my foot in the man's armpit, grab his wrist, and pull and twist and pop his shoulder back in place. I bandage him so it won't move.

If he didn't look good to me, I wouldn't have. . . . Well, yes, good-looking, or not I would have. Would I do less for a wounded turkey vulture than for this man? I nursed a vulture all spring. Everybody knows that.

I give this man broth. I don't tell him what's in it. We know *you* better than you know us. Best he not know. To him it'll taste as buttery as snails.

"I'm Maaaah," I say.

Right after, when he says his name, I don't listen. Why know a thing like that when . . . well. . . .

I've been inside your cabins lots of times—even when you were there. Sometimes, as I walked right past you, I could hardly keep from laughing out loud at how you didn't even know I was in your shadows.

I made myself peanut butter sandwiches. I drank your milk. There was one particular cabin—large for a summer house. It was all woody inside. Smelled of cedar and pine. Big wood pile outside. . . . (You never miss what wood we take.) Usually your cabins have chandeliers made from wagon wheels and horse shoes, but here there was a cut-glass chandelier, small though; in the cabinet, tea cups with gold on them; on the table, silver candlestick holders. I really did want one of those. Each held three candles and had silver leaves all up and down it. I went up to our home and thought about it for a couple of days, and then I came back down and took one. After all, there were four. After all, I'm the maaaah.

I could have made this man soup from *your* supplies, because once your campers get started, you don't realize how heavy your packs are and how tired you'll be, and how you'll lose your appetite because of altitude. You hide things along the trail that you think to pick up on the way home. We watch from our watching spots, thinking: Ha, ha, you'll search and search and wonder how you could have forgotten so soon, and only a couple of days later. You even wrote where you hid it in your little book on flowers or the little one on birds or the little book where you write about this trip you're taking right now, and you still can't find that food.

(Why do you leave your food so as to cut down on the weight and not your books? More often we find glasses and cameras than we find those little nature books or your notebooks.)

By now this man will be wondering, where are those furry ones? You're *always* getting us mixed up with them.

I say, "I can take you where you want to go."

But he has to rest up a bit first, so I can still sit here in my shade listening to the ravens. It's the stone that doesn't roll—that sits as I

do—that gathers moss. That accounts for my greenish tinge.

I say, “You can catch a glimpse of them.”

Now look at this. Already he’s clumping around, snooping, peering but seeing nothing, standing right on our vegetables. Of course our gardens don’t look like gardens to *you*, they just look like the normal forest floor. (Our walls look like just more greenery or random piles of sticks. You walk right through them. This man already has done it several times.)

But our rattlesnake is waiting there, in the garden.

I should have listened when that man said his name. I hadn’t thought there’d be any need to call him.

I say, “I’ll go with you and lead the way.”

(I’ll go with him even though the gang thinks he’s theirs.)

This year those young ones won’t wear hats. Even in the rain. (They chew your used-up gum. Smoke your cigarette butts. They want to try everything.)

I do love that gang. I love the overgrown, the clumsy and wild and insecure and smelly. Or, on the other hand, I love the stunted, the dry, the half-dead. This old man has eyes as gray as shadowy water.

What attracted me right away were his stringy muscles, the hair on his arm, that wispy mustache, mostly white. What attracted me was how he laughed when he tried on our hats.

There has to be a reason why he came. What if he’s tired of being one of *you* all the time and would rather be *us*?

Helicopters come, flying low. They keep searching back and forth. They’re noisy. Even the noisy gang doesn’t like it. Even this man doesn’t like it. If he wanted to, he could show himself and get himself rescued. I couldn’t stop him.

The gang goes out and cavorts around in plain sight. We're as pale as the slate-like fragments of limestone we sit on. We wear cobwebs. They make us wispy and dim. We can disappear right before your eyes.

Since the man isn't showing himself, he might as well look out over those fuzzy others in their habitat.

"*In situ*," I say. "Just look over, don't go down. You have to promise not to."

I give him a lesson for the journey as I've already done, and many times, to the gang. "Some mosses you can eat, and some pine needles. You can eat the roots of Solomon seal if you don't mind a little—quite a bit, that is, of grit. You can eat ants. You can roll in dust as a sun screen or plaster on mud."

He's taking more notes. (I *do* love the way all of you cling to your notes and your bird books.)

When I was young I once showed myself right in the middle of the trail. I just stood there, all greenish and gray. It was to one of you about my own age, climbing up, geologist's hammer hanging on his belt. I liked his looks though I couldn't see much under his hat. Well, I liked his *legs*, strong and brown and covered with curly golden hairs.

I stood in a spot where the sun streamed—one of those shiny golden streaks—down—just on me. I wanted to be his vision of a forest nymph of some sort, and that he'd never forget me, but he looked at me, staring so, that I got scared and skipped away, not as gracefully as I'd hoped. It turns out I'm the one has the memory forever. That man might have been this man right here.

There was an episode in a cabin, I the succubus. It was dark but not completely. There was a moon—gibbous, of course. I'm not sure who the man was, but it might have been this one. (I caught a glimpse

of legs with curly hair.) I was no more than a shadow in a shadow, but I was hoping there was a glistening around my edges.

At first he didn't want to, but I don't think he was frightened. He resisted. Just in case, I had feathers in my hairdo and a bag of wild strawberries. I whispered things. I sucked.

Then after twisting about a bit, one position and another, I lay under, as a succubus should.

Once he got started, I lost count of how many times. After all, he was a mountain climber and in perfect shape as all those who come here usually are. I felt he loved me. Too bad I hadn't seen his face, neither then nor on the trail in the shadow of his hat.

Misty or Dandy, I forget which, could be his own son.

We begin the journey to the looking-over site.

I flit and flutter, slither and slide. My old man used to say I was like a hummingbird or a butterfly. I wonder if this old man can see that? We always think of you as not noticing much.

He takes my picture.

He says, "I've always believed in you creatures. When I looked out the windows of my cabin, I saw shapes dancing. I locked my doors, even so I saw, in the corners, shadows that seemed on top of shadows. Now and then I missed a package of frozen green beans." (Maybe *I* took those beans.)

Flit and flutter, skip and slide and so forth. . . . I wanted to be "Shrouded in mystery" as you always say we are, but I was thinking too much about how I looked flitting. I'm the one who stumbles. I had not thought such a thing would ever happen. *You're* usually the ones who fall. I scrape myself, top to bottom. I hurt my good leg. I tear my grays.

That man picks me up. His arm, my leg. . . . We'll have to help each other. At least it's *my* forest.

So, and with many hardships along the way, including the aforementioned, having climbed up and over from one valley to the next, having slept in a hollow with leaves over us, having chewed on wintergreen, having eaten whole meals of nothing but chanterelles, we arrive at the looking-over point.

I dress him in a stick hat and a few vines. He'll look like that candelabra of mine (or perhaps it's his), leaves all up and down him. He gets his camera ready and we enter the blind. I push a peep hole for him, and one for myself, and we look down on the fuzzy ones' habitat.

Cottages of stone and wood, gardens with little flags to label the vegetables, bird baths, goldfish ponds, here and there a ceramic rabbit. There's an iron deer.

I say, "There's a deer," and, "Here they are, the furry ones. Don't they look nice, all glittery in their golden coats?"

Except they're not there. He'll think I made this all up.

I say, "Their little ones are *so* cute."

He's got his field glasses out now. He says, "Where? Where?"

"You can't see it from here, but their eyes are green."

Why am I saying all this, *I'm* the romantic notion. *I'm* the hope. *I'm* the story. He's been writing me down every day. We're the wish-you-existed-after-all people.

I think he's going to go on down even though he promised not to. I don't think I'm strong enough to keep him from it.

I say, "We're as important to the forest as these fuzzy ones. If we weren't here, some other creature would have to take our place. Put that in your notebook."

But he's going on down.

Of course the gang has followed us. There's not a place they don't roam (or anybody they don't follow), outskirts of towns, back yards,

mountain tops. . . . Those young ones not only won't wear hats, this year they expose their navels. They cut cute little three-inch holes in their shirts. Where did that idea come from? As if it has to come from anywhere. Those young ones think all sorts of things. But it could be worse.

We try to keep them out of danger, but they don't listen. I used to be that way myself. They're at an age when they're easily mortified, just as I used to be, and they never apologize.

However, it's when your little kids get lost in the woods that our young ones show their best side. First they take them by the hand and lead them to a place full of flowers. Then they feed them berries. After that they take them to where *you* can find them, and they sit with them until you do. Or, if you don't come, they bring them home to us.

He says, "Well, where are they?"

I say, "But it's *you*: The mysterious ones and don't even realize it. Perhaps it's even *you*, the ones important to the trees. You hug them and kiss them. You sit in the tops to protect them. Sit sometimes for *months*. What could be more like us than what *you* do?"

But he's crawled out of the blind. He's standing up in plain sight, field glasses at his eyes, camera dangling.

"Why don't you sit and contemplate for a few minutes. Give them time to manifest themselves. There's one now. Over to the right, half-way behind the rose bush." (There isn't.)

I could have sneaked away and gone down there myself in one of our fur suits, but I forgot to bring one.

I have my crossbow and a dozen darts. I told him the dangers are few, but one never knows. I said, "No harm in being ready."

We always aim for the lower leg.

Then, there they are at last, the fuzzies! A dozen. Of course it's

our young ones. I can practically see who's which by the way they cavort. Dandy, the thinnest and oldest, doing his usual leaps over hedges. They're doing everything right, climbing fruit trees, digging in the marigolds. . . .

Except it's too late already. My finger's on the release. There'll be just a little swishing sound. I let go right where I aimed, into the big muscle of the lower leg. Those darts are small and sharp. At first he doesn't know what's happened, and then he's on the ground. Not so much because of pain. *Yet*. But because his leg gave way. He thinks it collapsed by itself.

It's too bad, but I don't think he even had a chance to take one single picture of the furry ones. (Nobody would have believed the pictures anyway.)

Does he realize I'm the one who shot him?

I throw the bow into the brush. Best to pretend I don't know he's shot.

There's no blood. There never is.

He's examining his calf. He's going to pull the dart out.

"Don't do that! . . . till I get my bandages ready."

He won't be able to go much of anywhere, especially not in a hurry.

Those young ones finally realize what's happened. They come up to us, still wearing their fur suits. Dandy is the first to get up here. He's more or less the leader. I suppose exposed belly buttons was his idea.

Oh, for heaven's sake, they've even done that to their fur suits—cut little holes. They love to take chances.

I say, "He got shot."

"We didn't do that." They all say it, practically in unison.

"Well. . . . I suppose not."

It's so easy to put the blame on them. They expect it, too. All I have to do is keep my mouth shut.

“Make one of those little stick stools. Four of you to carry him and two can help me. Then, when we get to the edge, you know what to do.”

And they do it. Showing their navels and all. And with clicks and clucks and lots of giggling. They don’t even realize, but when have young ones ever?

There’s this longing in you. *All* of you. Even if you were sure we didn’t exist, you’d still hope. We intend to live so as to fulfill *your* dreams and expectations—be of some worth to those of *your* ilk. Who would there be to sneak and follow? Come upon you suddenly? Who would live at the corners of your lives? Who would there be to be *us* if not us?

You stop and listen. *All* of you do. Every snap and rustle has a meaning. You look. You turn around fast to see what’s behind you.

You want to believe in us and we . . . *I*, especially, want to be believed in. It’s always been my main goal.

That man went over with his field glasses and camera and notes and birding book and tree book, even one left-over can of apricots.

I wish I knew which cabin used to be his.

I wish I knew his name. I should have listened when he said it.

I wanted to keep him, but of course that was never possible.

Well, at least we didn’t break any of our own rules. At least I don’t have to know what happened. I mean, not *exactly*.

WATER MASTER

If the Water Master says yes, then your apple trees will grow. If he says yes, you'll take a bath, have a drink, and you might even have a little patch of grass.

He checks the irrigation ditches and gates all day long. Leans over to pinch the sand between his fingers. Never looks up to see the birds or the mountains. Never notices the sky except as it's reflected in his water. He has to watch for secret ditches or for open gates that are supposed to be closed.

When I say hello, and he answers the same, he doesn't look up. I don't know what color his eyes are. Blue, I would imagine. I would hope. He always wears a wide-brimmed black hat pulled down low. I don't know what his face looks like except that it's lean and lined. I don't suppose he cares who I am. Besides, I only grow prickly pears, squaw tea, tepary beans, and mesquite pods. I don't need the Water Master's water. At least not much of it.

Water is what's on his mind and rightly so. I can understand that. Nothing is better, how it bubbles up and sparkles, silvery in the sun, frothing, foaming as it rushes, roaring down from way up there to

here. How it leaps so high over rocks. How it trembles in backwater pools. How it tastes. Cool. . . . Cold. . . . How dangerous it can be.

Those who steal water are the worst, therefore the Water Master wears a bulletproof book of *The Hundred Best-Loved Poems* over his heart (given to him by the town; we need to keep him healthy) and pistols at his sides. Shoot first, think afterwards, that's what a Water Master does. *Has* to do. Those who open gates in the middle of the night after the Water Master has closed them . . . those people are in trouble even if they think they're doing all right so far.

He lives way up by his dam, in a big house, or so they say. All the things to build it but the stones came up on mules. Furnishings, too: Bathtubs, beds, mirrors so large you wouldn't think they could get around the switchbacks. I've heard tell there's an orchard and grapes and artichokes and rosebushes. There's plenty of water up there. That's where it comes from.

Even so, I'm sorry for him, looking at the ground all day long, seeing not much more than lizards. Lizards down here that is, goodness knows what crawls around up there. It's a hard, long climb to where he lives, but he goes up and down almost every day, checking our raging river as he goes.

His name is Amos Acularius, but nobody calls him anything but Water Master. I think his grandparents and parents were shepherds. I wonder how one gets from shepherd to Water Master. It doesn't seem right. They say it's the river chooses its own master. I don't believe it. And even if true, why would it choose a shepherd?

Even though all those Acularius's were nothing but shepherds, and even though Amos Acularius is so thin there's nothing much to him, and even though he wears a fringed jacket which makes him look even thinner, every girl would like to marry the Water Master and live in that big house. They've heard how shiny the floors are, how the roof gleams with copper, how water runs icy cold from half the faucets

and, even though hard to believe, hot from the other half.

I, on the other hand, have long-since decided never to marry. In fact, that's been my policy from the start. It was because of diapers. (I changed my first diaper at the age of seven.) Because of dishes, too. (As the oldest child in my family, I had plenty of both of those.) Besides, by now I'm too old for marriage anyway. Except so is Amos Acularius.

There hasn't been much snow on the mountains this year. They say our Lake of the Mountain is low. Many of the ditch gates are shut in order for the lake to fill. Even so, it isn't filling. Onions and rutabagas and apple trees are dying. Perhaps my tepary beans will save us all.

Nobody is supposed to go up there. That was decided a long time ago when the first Water Master was appointed. (I say appointed, but everybody else says chosen by the river.) That's his private place where he can work water wonders in seclusion. Bring a wife up and live his own life. Have his little Water Master children. Little skinny mountain-goat kind of children, I suppose, brought up on the cliffs.

But something is wrong. Nobody has seen Amos Acularius for several days. They've formed a group to go up. A sort of posse. They're angry. They think maybe it's a lie that the lake is low. Maybe there's plenty of water, but Amos Acularius has been persuaded to let our water fall over to the other side of the mountain into some neighboring town or other we don't know anything about. There's talk of bringing up a bomb.

Even if he is skinny and ugly (though I've hardly seen more of his face than his unshaven bony jaw with deep lines at the sides), I wouldn't want him hurt. I'm going up by myself. Secretly. And before that posse goes. They're still getting themselves together. Arguing. Even though they're angry, nobody wants to go up this time of year. It's not only harvest time, but this is the season for mountain storms. I

wonder if any of them will actually get around to going up. But I'm going. I'll hide and watch what happens. I'll be there before any of them even starts. All I need is lunch and a sweater. It's a perfect day for a climb.

As I go I keep looking back to see if anybody has started up behind me yet. Nobody has. I like looking back at our little town, nestled in close along the riverbank, even though that river is dangerous. Folks have drowned. Folks have been swept away—God knows where. I won't be able to see it much longer. A fog is rolling in—up here, of course, not down there. It's all blue sky down there. I've seen these clouds before, hanging around the mountains. Pretty soon the tops will be hidden from everybody down there, and I'm about to be swallowed up in it. I won't get lost. It's easy to see when I'm on the path, and all along I've been listening to our waterfall. I could follow by the noise alone.

When I'm most of the way up (I *hope* most of the way, I've climbed for three hours), the fog begins to seem a little wispier. I see . . . I *think* I see Amos A. in the smoky distance.

I feel my heart lurch—in fact my whole body lurches, just from thinking it *might* be him.

I follow, well behind. Luckily the fog is still fairly thick. I climb right on through it, up and out the other side. Suddenly the air is clear, and the sky—such a dark blue. Below me, everything is all fogged in. I can't see our town at all.

I look ahead. I'm at the edge of a lake. I gasp. I can't help it. This is it, *the* lake. *Our* lake. Here's where everything comes from. Without this lake and the torrent rushing from its dam, there'd be no town. There'd be no us. Here it is, all shiny in the sun. Little lapping waves. And here the dam itself. The dam of life, the water roaring out.

I fall on my knees (I don't mean to do it, but I do), I fall and look

and keep looking, and keep thinking: This is it. *It! It's it!*

The lake is nestled in a bowl. A golden bowl, because, on each side, aspen are in their most golden phase. I'm not exactly on the shore. I'm up above the dam. The lake is longer than I had imagined—I can't see where it ends. In the distance there's a row of snowy mountains.

I finally come to myself and look away. Now where is that big house? All I see is a hut partly built into the granite. Even my own little place is bigger than this.

And where's that orchard and all those roses? Nothing here but stunted lupine and pennyroyal. (I don't see the pennyroyal, but I can smell it.)

I knew it, I knew it. There has always seemed to me to be something wrong with Amos Acularius being our Water Master. He doesn't look right. He looks more like a half-starving, beaten-down servant than lord of the water. Here he is, living like a sheep-herder. At the mercy of his dam and his lake and his torrent.

And here comes the Water Master himself, come to lift me to my feet. I see up under his hat for the first time—those blue, blue, *blue* eyes. I knew they'd be like that. I get all shaky again. I feel a rush of heat. It's the eyes—that must be the reason he's Water Master.

And the scars. He has scars all over him, face, hands, and all. Perhaps that's why he always keeps his head down and his hat pulled low and always wears long sleeves down there in town. Scars and blue eyes. He's wearing a torn undershirt and I can count all his bones.

I'm so trembly I can't get up even with him pulling at me. His hands are rough and callused, but his voice is clear as water. "Come. Come, get up." If we were any closer to the dam, and he not leaning so close to me, I'd not hear him at all.

I can guess the reason for the scars and scrapes. I'll bet he went down in his raging torrent. That's what the scars look like, anyway. He couldn't have come down from here, right under the dam.

Nobody could live in this torrent. It must have been farther down, much nearer the town.

(If he came partway down in his raging river, he'd have ended up by my house. You'd think he'd have come to me for help. Did he walk away after? Right past me? I wish I'd known to look out the window. I could have been harvesting my tepary beans, and he could have walked by me all bloody and bruised, head ducked down as usual—though probably hatless for once in his life.)

When I can't get up, he says, "It's always that way when you first see it." But that's not the reason (anymore) that I can't get up. It's that I'm looking straight up into eyes that exactly match the sky behind him. He needs a shave, and his cheeks are deeply lined, his eyes have crow's feet at the sides, but his nose is a Water Master kind of nose, sharp, regal, and with a bump in the middle. Clearly, he's as old as I am. We're weathered about the same.

He never came for one of us girls. He must have known how we all wanted to come up here, but he never came for any of us. When I was younger (and he was younger, too), even I had wishes. I didn't admit it to myself. I always said the opposite.

Perhaps he went down the other side and took a wife from somewhere over there. But if this hut's his only home, all the girls would have been unhappy. And what's up here to be friends with except jays and marmots? I couldn't live here. I wouldn't, even if he asks me to.

I do manage to get up, though my knees are wobbly. I have to hang on to him. What a bundle of strings his arms are. The sound of the water roars all around us, more so as we get nearer the dam. I can't even think with that going on. I'm beginning to believe everything they say about the river. It can overpower anything, even your thoughts.

He leads me (his hand holds my upper arm in an iron grip) towards his hovel.

Inside it's dark and damp. Smells damp, too. Not like any of our

places down there in the desert. We smell of sand and sage.

It was so shiny outside, sun on the water, little silvery waves . . . I can't see a thing in here. Now where is that wife of his, come over from the other side? I want to see if she's as ugly as he is, though I couldn't see her if she was right in front of me. But pretty soon I *can* see. Nobody's here. I feel another sort of lurch.

Surely there's no wife—or if there is, she's a messy one. But there's all different kinds of messes. This one is odd. It's mud. All over the floor (actually, after a few minutes I can see that that mud *is* the floor). There's muddy clothes lumped under his little table, muddy boots by the door—two pairs, equally muddy. How could any wife live with this mud floor and all these muddy clothes?

I can think better in here with the door shut against the sound of the torrent.

"Sit down," he says. "I'll get tea. Are you all right? You were red, but now you're so pale."

I *thought* I was blushing but I hoped he hadn't noticed.

It's cool in here. I hug myself, not for warmth, but to hold myself together. My legs feel as if they'll give out any minute. I sit. The chair wobbles. Either the floor is uneven or I'm sinking in. I start to lean back, but the chair has lost its back. I stop myself just in time. I lean forward instead and put my head on my hands to try to hide how nervous I am. Even his scars make me nervous. Even his ugliness. If I had a hat like his I'd pull it low right now to hide how I feel.

Even here, in the dim light of a dirty window, his eyes look like two little bits of sky left over from out in the sun. All the bluer with his skin so brown around them.

He goes to a hook behind the door and gets a cleanish shirt that he puts on over his torn undershirt. A yellow slicker with a hood is hanging there along with his pistols on a cartridge belt.

He looks shy and pleased as he hands me the tea. (You'd not think

such a weathered man, nor a man his age, would be shy anymore, but I suppose he's not used to people.) The cup is . . . hard to believe, here with all this mud, but the cup is fine china, translucent and gold-rimmed. Just the sort of cup all of us thought would be up here in the big fancy house.

He does look as if he has a secret. A happy secret. There's an odd smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. As if there *is* a fancy house somewhere up here, complete with orchard and mirrors, and I just haven't been able to find it. It's not just his look, but his elegance. Mud along the bottoms of his pants, but he sits, and on the edge of his table, as if in some fancy living room, and holds his cup (tea, for goodness sake! Who would be drinking tea up here?), holds his cup as if it were the finest china. Mine is, but his is stoneware, thick and chipped.

Down there we always say nobody ever hears him laugh or even sees him smile, but right now he's smiling a little V-shaped grin and looks as if he really means it. Why has he kept this smile of his secret all this time?

I should warn him a posse is coming up, and people are angry. But I don't want to spoil his smile. I don't want to say how angry people are. Instead I say, "I suppose there's nothing you can do." Of course he stops grinning anyway. I might as well tell him. It isn't fair not to. "They're angry. A posse's coming up. I think they have a bomb. I came to warn you."

Of course I didn't. I just wanted to see what would happen up here when they came, and to see for myself if all the water was going down the other side.

"Nobody has seen you for a week, and the water is less and less."

"What is there to do? Did you see how low the lake is?"

He grabs his fringy jacket and tells me to put on my sweater. "I have a lookout spot up on that ridge."

He doesn't take his pistols. Should I remind him?

"Is your poetry book with the metal cover in the pocket over your heart? It should be."

"What poetry book? I haven't time for poetry. Except maybe to look out at it everyday. There's a lot to do even when the gates are shut. Now that the water is low, I've been clearing out the dam."

Is nothing they told us down there true, neither poetry book nor big house? Not even one single thing? It seems that what we believed was true, isn't, and what we believed isn't, might well be.

We go out into the shine and sparkle of the lake and the gold of the aspen. Everything numinous. He's right about looking out at poetry, though I'd call it . . . I don't know, looking at religion, maybe. I almost drop to my knees again, though why should a good view be any more religious than a bad one?

(I wonder what it would be like to live here and see this every day? Maybe it's worth the mud.)

We have to cross the dam first. There's just a narrow walkway with a railing only on the side where the water comes down. You wouldn't last long if you went over the dam here, even with the water this low. There's a lot of spray, too. I'm shaky and I grip the railing so hard I can hardly make myself let go when I take another step. Amos A. strides along as if it was a perfectly ordinary path and doesn't look back until he's on the other side, and here I am, only halfway, and it's not even that long a dam. All the water is funneled through this narrow gap. It's hardly as far as our little bridge in town, but here the water leaps towards me as though to pull me down into it. Globbs fly up as though it had hands.

He smiles. (I never would have thought, all these years, that he'd smile a smile so like a child.) He comes back for me. Holds my hand the last few steps.

At the far end we start up the cliff above the lake. I watch him ahead of me. Nobody should wear such tight pants when their legs are as skinny as his are.

It's *much* steeper than the climb I climbed to get up here. I'm breathless, not only from that, but from Amos Acularius right here in front of me. He's a nimble man. He'd be at the top by now if not for me, and he's not even breathing hard. He reaches back now and then to help me. When he does, I look up under his hat again. Even if I had something to say, his eyes wash the words right out of me. All I want to say is, "Your eyes are blue."

We follow where a little foot-wide waterfall used to be, but now it's dry. He points at it with his thumb and says, "I can't help this."

At the top we turn around, and there's the whole lake below us. The view is even more spectacular than when I first came upon it. Mainly because we can see more snow-capped mountains in the distance. The white sets off the gold. There's still fog lower down where the trail from town comes up. It feels as if we're on an island in the sky, and there's no outside world at all. I wish it were true.

Here at the lookout point, there's a gnarled limber pine. Reminds me of him. We sit under it. He's not even out of breath.

Sit and look. Except I'm more conscious of his knobby knees and his muddy, worn-out pants right next to me than I am of the view. I wonder how long this silence should go on. I wonder if I should say something, but I can't think what.

Sit and look. Then he says, "They always blame the Water Master."

They. That's us—us townspeople. Probably even me, though I never needed much water. Is that why he's hardly ever looked at us or talked to us? He knows already how we blame everything on him. Especially anything bad. Maybe he knew that one of these days we'd hate him.

"Just because I control the dam, they think I can control the clouds."

I want to answer that *I* don't think that, and maybe I don't now, but I did. Even though I didn't think about it, I blamed him—even before there was anything to blame him for.

We sit quietly again. There are so many things I want to ask, such as: Did you notice how I didn't need your water? Did you notice how I didn't need a ditch? And: What about all those scars? But what I *really* want to ask is if he's married, so instead I say, "Where are the children? Are they safe?"

"What children?"

Well, that's a relief. Though he could still have a wife somewhere. Maybe she didn't want to bring children into such a muddy world, and where they might fall into the raging river just as her husband had. Or did she jump in and he jumped in to rescue her but couldn't save her?

"Is your wife going to be safe?"

"There's no wife."

But of course not. Who would marry such a countrified, sheep-herder kind of man who lives in a shack with a mud floor and has stunted lupine for flowers?

"Do you actually live in that little hut?"

"Where else?"

"Isn't this a bad place to bring up children? I mean, in case you have some sometime. Your wife would go crazy, what with the mud and the danger and nobody to talk to—though of course there's you."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I have no wife."

And a good thing his hat is low again (though at a rakish angle this time).

Then here comes the posse, out from the fog—well, one of them, anyway, carrying a rifle and with pistols at his sides. Goodness knows what's in his backpack.

"This has happened before," Amos Acularius says.

"They'd prefer finding you dead—guarding your dam to the death."

He looks over at me. Smiles. I'm all right this time because I'm looking at his lips. I'm already thinking (I can't help it) how I'm too old to have any little Water Master babies that would have eyes like that or V-shaped smiles. Then I'm thinking: Will he mind . . . about not having any children? And then I'm thinking: *I'd* mind.

He says, "I would."

He's talking about dying for his dam, though it takes me a minute to realize it.

"I don't want you to." I'm blushing again.

He actually puts his sweaty, bony arm across my shoulders. I suppose it's a kindness for the blushing. Thank goodness we mostly keep looking down at the dam.

"I may have to," he says. "It depends."

We watch the man go into the hut. When he comes out, he has the pistols from the back of the door. He holds them by their cartridge belt and looks all around as if to hand them to the Water Master—as if he doesn't want to shoot an unarmed man.

Why is the Water Master up here at his lookout spot, and without his pistols? You can't guard a dam from here. Though so far there's only one man to guard it from. Except does he have a bomb?

We wait. No more men come up out of the fog. They must be far behind, or maybe this man is the only one. I wonder why they've sent him up here all by himself.

I know that man. I recognize him by his hat—brown leather and with a shorter brim than most. I'm not surprised they'd pick him to come up first. He's always the angriest about everything. I don't think I've ever seen him not. The look in his eyes is what I used to think was in the Water Master's, and that that was why the Water Master

wouldn't look at anybody. Now I think the Water Master didn't look at people because he thought he was ugly (which is true) and because of all those scars.

The man puts down the pistols and unhooks his rifle. Then he takes off his backpack, rummages inside it and pulls out a package. He walks a little ways along the dam and sits on the edge with his legs hanging over (just seeing him do that scares me) and eats his lunch.

Amos A. and I look at each other. He's so close this time, and his sweaty arm still across my shoulders. . . . I look away fast.

We're still in the shadow of the tree, though the shadow has moved.

Amos Acularius takes his arm away and moves closer to the edge of the bluff we climbed. Out from under the shadow of the tree, he'll be visible from the dam, though I don't suppose the man will think to look up here.

I study Amos A.'s back. How he has such a longish neck. There's something delicate about him (translucent like his tea cup), though I've felt his strength as he helped me climb.

The man has finished his lunch and is taking longish, tied-together, red things out of his pack.

Amos Acularius says, "You sit tight."

Before I can think to answer—to shout, *Don't!*—he's sliding down the slope in front of us as if it was a long, long child's slide.

It took us twenty minutes to climb up here, but he's at the bottom in less than half a minute. I can't see him because he's made a landslide. And he makes a racket—a swooshing, gravelly sound, and a great cloud of dust.

I'm scared to jump off the edge and slide, but I'm not going to sit up here all by myself waiting and watching—maybe watching bad things happening to Amos Acularius. Rocks are still coming down behind him. I jump anyway, shut my eyes and jump into his landslide

and make my own. I'm all the way down before I have time to think about it.

It keeps on trickling down after our plunge. I can't see a thing. Then I finally make out Amos A. at the edge of his dam, a grayish figure, his black clothes covered with dust.

I see the man look across at Amos. Amos A.'s arms are out at each side. The fringe hanging down all along them makes him look not only like a Water Master, but master of all the gray granite. He's so dusty he's like a part of the cliff we slid down.

The man stands still as though startled and maybe frightened—surely impressed. Amos Acularius even impresses me and I can only see his back. Except he always has impressed me, even when he toured his gates down there in town.

But maybe his arms are out like that for a different reason. I move up next to him. He's shouting. Maybe he's swearing. Even this close I can't hear because of the rushing water. Except he doesn't look angry. Maybe it's a prayer—for or to the rushing, roaring torrents. Could that be? Could he be talking to the water?

The man comes to himself after a minute and he starts shouting, too. *He* looks like he's swearing, though of course we can't hear. Knowing him, he probably is. Then the man sets his dynamite, carefully, in the middle of the dam. Lights the fuse. Amos Acularius does *nothing!* Keeps talking to himself. Just stands there and lets them be set and lit.

I want to shout: You can't depend on prayer or spells with dynamite. I pull on his fringe. "Amos!" (I dare to call him Amos.) "Do something! Hurry!" But it's as if I'm nothing but a fly—hardly even a bother.

As the man moves off the dam, we move onto it. Amos A. grabs my hand and trots me across. He'd go faster if he wasn't pulling me. He's still mouthing things, but I can't hear. I'm too scared about the

dynamite to be scared of the water rushing down so near, and with hardly any railing. We cross right by where the fuse is fizzing, and Amos doesn't try to stop it. I keep yelling, Amos, Amos, as if he could hear me. I try to hold him back but he pulls me on. I try to pull away so I can put out the fuse myself, but he won't let go.

At the other side, he throws me face-down and himself on top of me, his arms wrapped around *my* head, not his own. I've always done the protecting (all those brothers and sisters). I've never, in my whole life, been protected by anybody—not that I remember—though I suppose as a baby I must have been.

I feel his body all along my back—all along where I've just been scraped and bruised, but I like the feel of him, even though I hurt. I hope we never have to get up.

The dynamite goes off, but with the sound of the water I can hardly hear it. Mostly I feel the shaking of the ground.

Stones clatter down around us and on top of us, though hardly any on me because Amos is protecting me.

We lie still until it stops. It feels like a long time, but I know it can't be. Then we look up, over, and down at what used to be the dam. It sounds out even louder than before, and the sound is different. Angrier—though it always sounded angry.

"Well, they've got water down there now. Will in a minute, anyway." Amos Acularius, still on top of me, speaks right into my ear or I'd never have heard him. How can he say that so slowly and calmly after what just happened? "For a while, more than they bargained for. Are you all right?"

"But you? You must be bruised all over your back."

He helps me up.

I think he's saying he's all right, but I can only guess since he's not that close anymore.

The man is staring at the Water Master. You can see the rage on

his face. He's yelling, and for sure it's cursing, though we can't hear. He pulls one of the pistols from its holster, cocks it, aims it right at us. Shoots one shot. We hear it ping as it ricochets against the rocks.

Amos Acularius walks right straight to him. Grabs him, gun and all. They tussle. Amos is clearly stronger. It only takes a minute before Amos turns him around and bends his arm up behind him and walks him towards the riverbank. The bank is in a different place now. Already the lake is even lower, and yet the torrent below, where the dam used to be, is much higher and much more vicious. I've never seen anything like the way the water rushes down now.

Amos walks him to the new edge and throws him off. I see a brown hat fly away and I catch a glimpse of feet in boots. Then, in less than half a minute, the man is long gone.

Amos Acularius stands on the broken edge watching the water rush down. I come up beside him. He leans close, his hand on my shoulder. Is he going to kiss me? I'm not sure if I should pull back or lean forward, but he just wants to speak into my ear so I'll hear above the sound of the water. I feel his breath on my cheek.

"He won't die," he says. Shouts.

"How can he not?"

"The river won't let him. The river will save him. Throw him from pool to pool and never pound him into the rocks. He'll end up looking like me, that's all."

He takes his hand from my shoulder. He walks up to the weapons, picks up the rifle and throws it in the river, then throws the man's and his own pistols in, too. He takes off his fringy jacket and throws it in. "This goes with the job," he says. "It belongs to the river."

He takes my arm and leads me, just as he did before, into his shack and shuts the door against the roar of water. "I'm free," he says, and begins packing up his things, bunching them into a muddy duffel, clean and dirty lumped in together.

I plunk myself on the wobbly chair. I look down at the rips and scrapes all over my pants.

"This happens after every major drought. There's a new Water Master every time. Takes about twenty . . . thirty years. He'll be it now. That's how you get to be Water Master. I'm free."

Then he notices I have my arms around myself again, and I'm shaking more than when he first handed me tea. That seems like a long time ago. He stops packing and gets me tea again. Sits beside me on his table as he did before.

"I didn't mind being Water Master, though you can never really master water (you think you can, but you can't), but I don't care that much for the townspeople. They hate you for spoiling their town—like it's being spoiled right now, as we sit here. They'll hate him. They never learn it's not his fault, nor wasn't mine, either. I'm glad to be rid of them."

He reaches as if to touch my shoulder, but doesn't quite. As if he wants to caress but doesn't dare. "But I'm glad you came."

"I know that man. He's cruel. He doesn't care about anybody."

"He'll be different once he knows water. Once the water knows him. Water changes you. And living here alone will change him. Seeing gold, like it is now, and the silver lake. That'll change him, too."

"But you never looked up. I was sorry for you, never looking up."

"I did. I looked out at it every morning and every night. And down there in the village, I looked. I saw you."

He takes the empty cup and saucer and wraps his clothes around them. "It's my grandmother's cup. The only thing she had of any value." Then he unwraps it and hands it to me again. "Would you like to have it?"

"Where are you going?"

"Some place where they never heard of a Water Master nor ever needed one. Where there's no hanging mountain lakes and no dams. Will you come? I noticed you before—how you never needed water."

He's looking straight at me again. Maybe his eyes can hypnotize, and I've been hypnotized all this time. But I like it.

"Grandma's tea cup. It's yours if you want it."

I don't expect he'll ever be able to say, I love you. I'm not going to wait around for that.

I hand it back so he can wrap it up again.

"I'll come."

ABOMINABLE

We are advancing into an unknown land with a deliberate air of nonchalance, our elbows out, our hands on our hips, or standing one foot on a rock when there's the opportunity for it. Always to the left, the river, as they told us it should be. Always to the right, the mountains. Every few miles we stop and telephone back to headquarters. Over the phone the Commander says we are already in the area of the sightings. We must watch now for footprints no bigger than a boy's and of a unique delicacy. "Climb a tree," the Commander says, "and call out a few of the names you have memorized." So we do. We call out: Alice, Betty, Elaine, Jean, Joan, Marilyn, Mary . . . and so on in alphabetical order. Nothing comes of it.

We are seven manly men in the dress uniform of the Marines, though we are not Marines. But this particular uniform has always been thought to attract them. We are seven seemingly blasé (our collars open at the neck in any weather) experts in our fields, we, the research team for the Committee on Unidentified Creatures that Whiz by in Pursuit of Their Own Illusive Identities. Our guns shoot sparks and

stars and make a big bang. We carry only a few blurry pictures, most of these from random sightings several months ago. One is of the wife of the Commander. It was taken from a distance. We can't make out her features—she was wearing her fur coat. He thought he recognized her, or at least the coat.

So far there has been nothing but snow. What we put up with for these creatures!

Imagine their bodies as you hold this little reminder of their possibilities in the palm of your hand . . . this fat, four-inch Venus. The serious elements are missing. The eyes are simple dots, the hairdo almost covers the face, the feet and hands aren't there at all. Accept the challenge of the breasts, of the outsized hips, and then the biggest challenge of all. . . . If we pit ourselves against them, can we win, or at least finish without their analysis of our wrong moves?

Here are the signs of their presence that we've found so far. (We might almost think these things had been dropped in our path on purpose if we didn't know how careless they can be, especially when harassed or in a hurry, and, since they're nervous creatures, they always *are* harassed or in a hurry.) Found in our path, then, one stalk of still-frozen asparagus, a recipe for dip using onion soup mix, a small purse with a few crumpled-up dollar bills and a book of matches. (It's clear they do have fire. We take comfort in that.)

And now the Commander tells us to leave the river and go up into the hills even though they're treacherous with spring thaws. The compass points up. We slide on scree and ice all day, well aware that they may have all gone south by now, whole tribes of them, feeling worthless, fat, and unloved. The possibilities are endless, so any

direction could be wrong, but at the first sign of superficialities we'll know we're on the right track.

One of us is a psychoanalyst of long experience, a specialist in hysteria and masochism. He says if we find them they will probably make some strange strangling sounds, but that these are of no consequence and often mistaken for laughter, which, he says, is the best way to take them. If, on the other hand, they smile, it's for the purpose of disarming us. (It has been found that they smile two and a half times as often as we do.) Sometimes there's a kind of nervous giggle. It's essentially sexual in origin, and, if it occurs when they see us, it's a good sign. He says if they get angry, we should be careful that their rage doesn't turn against themselves.

Grace is the name of the one in the picture, the Commander's wife. She must be all of fifty-five by now. Slipped out of a diner one moonlit night when the Commander was looking at a younger woman. But what was there to do but go on as usual, commanding what needs to be commanded? He said she had accepted her limitations up to that time. He blamed her leaving on incomplete acculturation, or on not seeing the obvious, and did not wonder about it until a year later.

I have a lot of questions to ask them. Where did we actually come from? How come we're so unlike? How did we evolve interests the opposite of theirs? Do they manage to survive in this cold by living deep underground in vast, warm kitchens heated by their ovens? Is there, as they say, always the smell of gingerbread? Are those of child-bearing age perpetually pregnant from the frozen semen of some long-dead movie star? Do they leave the male babies out to die in the snow instead of, as is usual, doing that to the females?

But now the sudden silence of our first sighting. She's on the heights above us, huge and in full regalia, as in the Commander's photograph, mink and monstrous hat, the glint of something in her ears, motionless, head raised and on one leg. She was gone when we reached the spot a half hour later. The psychoanalyst waited by the footprints all night, ready with his own kind of sweet-talk, but no luck.

One of us has said for sure it was just a bear. The sun was in our eyes. He said, right after standing on one leg, it humped down on all fours, but *they* might do that, too.

The information has been phoned back to the Commander. ("Tell her I think I love her," he said.) It has been decided that we'll put bananas out in the snow along the trail. When they come out to gather them, we'll follow them back to their lairs, down into their dark, secret places. They'll like being followed. They always have.

The bananas are gone before we have a chance to catch up to them.

Next time we'll not lay the bananas out in such a logical straight line.

They won't sit still. They don't take anything seriously. There's nobody to coordinate their actions, so they run around in all directions, always distracted from the task at hand, always jumping to conclusions, making unwarranted assumptions, taking everything for granted or, on the other hand, not taking anything for granted (our love, for instance).

When we finally step into those kitchens! The largest mountain completely hollowed out, my God! And the smells! The bustle! The humdrum everydayness of their existence. We won't believe what we see. They'll tell us things are better than ever. They'll be thinking they

no longer need to be close to the sources of power. They'll even say they like places of no power . . . live powerless, as friends, their own soft signals one to the other. They'll say we hardly noticed them anyway or noticed that they weren't there. They'll say we were always looking in the other direction. Well, we did sense something, and we've felt a lack we can't quite pinpoint. Unpaid creatures, moneyless, but noticed even so. We'll tell them this, and also that the Commander thinks he may love one of them.

They have refused the bananas this time. What we offer them is never quite right. What they like today they don't want tomorrow. We'll try one more time. These glass beads that look like jade, a fine ceramic pot, a self-help book, *How to Overcome Shyness with the Opposite Sex*, but (especially) we offer ourselves for their delight as sons, fathers, lovers. . . . Their choice.

The psychoanalyst says they're entitled to their own opinions, but we wonder how independent should we allow them to be?

Well, if I had one, I'd wash its feet and back. Venture the front, too. Let her hair hang down. I'd take some time out now and then, even from important work, to do some little things like this of hardly any meaning. I'll listen to its idle chatter, or at least seem to.

We're telling old tales about them around our campfires in the late evenings, but it's not the same kind of frightening tales it used to be when we were young. Tales about the snapping vaginas with razors inside them. Since they may be lurking out there in the shadows listening, we have to be careful what we say. What's scary is we have no idea of their size. On the one hand, the Commander insists all of them are quite a bit smaller and definitely weaker. Others say they are capable of swallowing us from below. Some say they may be the

missing link we've searched for so long and stand somewhere between *Pithecanthropus erectus* and us. Some wonder if their orgasm is as specific as ours is, or is it more diffuse? The more romantic among us think they are cute and loveable even when they're angry. We wonder how best to penetrate their lines of self-defense, and their defensiveness. Playing the role of the dominant partner won't be easy; how nice, even so, to have a group of beings whose main job would be to tidy up.

Pedestals have already been set up for them.

But now we have had a disturbing message from the Commander. Important politicians have said these stories of sightings are hoaxes. It's been proven that the photographs have been doctored. In one case a gorilla superimposed on a snowy mountain, in another a man in drag. Several people have confessed. Some had never been in the area at all. Only two pictures remain unexplained. Perhaps we have a hoaxer even here among us, stealing the bananas himself and making footprints with an old shoe on the end of a stick. Besides, think if we should discover that they do, in fact, exist. We would only be adding to our problems. Cures would have to be discovered for cancers in peculiar places. A huge group of Sunday poets and painters would be added to society which society can well do without. Why should we come searching for them simply because they're there, as though they were Mount Everest? Anyway, the funding for our search has run out.

We're all depressed by this news. Some of us feel sure there *is* something out there. Some of us have seen a flash of color out of the corners of our eyes as though the invisible had been made *almost* visible. We're thinking, too, how, later, socks and underwear might return magically

from under beds to be found clean and folded in a drawer, and cups of coffee could appear out of nowhere just when most needed, and the refrigerator might never run out of milk or ice cream.

For a while I think seriously of going on by myself. Perhaps if I crept back, alone, sat quietly dressed, not in the Marine's dress uniform, but in something that blended in. Maybe if I sat still and made no proud gestures, they'd get used to me, even eat bananas out of my hand, and come, in time, to recognize an authoritarian figure, and perhaps learn a few simple commands. But I have to obey my orders.

Still, I want to make one more move toward these creatures. I sneak back along the trail and leave a message where it won't be missed—something they'll be sure to understand: A heart shape, and the words *I Love You*. I sit for a while and listen for sighs. I think I hear something. And I think I see something, white on white in the glitter of the snow. Invisible on purpose, that's for sure—if there at all.

Well, if that's how they want it, let them live as was said: "In the shadow of man." It serves them right.

I ask the psychoanalyst, "Who are they, anyway?" but then I change it to, "Who are we?" He says about ninety percent of us ask that same question in one form or another, while about ten percent seem to have found some kind of answer of their own. He says that, anyway, we will remain essentially who we already are whether we bother to ask the question or not.

DESERT CHILD

*An unbeliever once wrote: God is alive and
well and living in the desert. She wrote,
“Surely if he’s anywhere at all. . . .”*

—SUSAN COULSON

You can smell him, strong and bitter. He pricks and bites. There’s either too much of everything or not enough. When water, too much water, when dry, too dry. Too cold at night, too hot in the daytime. The ground shakes. All summer long, smoke from distant fires. You hear him in the buzz of bugs, the rattle of rattlesnakes.

There’s no wind now, but there has been—winds that pick up sand and swirl it into devils.

Whatever God—He, She, or It (laughing, ah *ha!* ah *ha!*) . . . whatever’s out there—brings, it’s never reasonable. As though there could ever be reasons for any of this.

You’d think we wouldn’t live here. You’d think we’d let the ragged, mangy, fearsome creature slither back, fill our huts with sand, return our little oasis to the desert that It owns and won’t let go.

There's this man . . . whatever desert thing that's out there left him to make do with what there was to make do with. Stretched him to nothing but string and bone. Dried him, scarred him, gave him a limp, took away his voice so there's nothing left but a whisper. His gray handlebar mustache is the only flourishing thing about him.

I don't think he's as old as he looks. I'm trying to build him up with oatmeal and goat cheese. That's all I have to build somebody up with.

I can count on him for help, though, even if I don't ask, and I don't. He sees a thing needs doing and does it. After, I sometimes see him lean back and stretch as if his back was sore.

We don't even know what his name really is. They call this place Archer's Corner, but there's no corner and he's not Archer, though he was here by himself before we came. First I met him, he said, "Everybody calls me Red." And I said, "They should have changed that to Gray a long time ago." At the time I thought he might have smiled, but maybe he just squinted. Now that I know him better, I know he doesn't see well.

Though he was here before we came, he always acts as if it's he who doesn't belong. I suppose he has squatter's rights. Nobody's tried to kick him out so far.

There's something about him that draws me. Not grace, but it's as if there's a special grace of the graceless.

It's not quite so desert-like here. We have our creek, coming down icy cold. We have willows along its edges. There's a wild blackberry patch. We only have to go down the path a little way for water. The creek was inclined to swish your pail away if you weren't careful, but Red (Gray) made a dam of stones and pulled over a log to still the stream in one place so the children could get water by themselves. He walked along the river a while ago and brought back two pails, mis-

matched socks, diapers, all hooked on branches way downstream.

He does all the work the other men either won't do or don't have time for. He put up the swing and the teeter-totter for the children. There's only five children here, and one's just a baby, but he thought it was worthwhile anyway.

It's because of him, I can sit down for a minute. The wood gathered, my goats safely in and milked, the water's brought for the men to wash up, the soup's at the back of the stove in the mess hall, there's bacon and corn bread. Red chopped the firewood and brought the water up. For now I have a minute to sit and darn a sock and think about the child.

No-see-ums, sand mites, crows, the magpie, and now this girl. They say a magpie is a bad omen. I don't see why. I always feel good when I see one, though I always salute, as they say to do, to ward off bad luck. I don't believe in bad omens, but I salute anyway.

I live apart from the others (by choice) in a hut under a cottonwood, past the cook house, and the little cold cave where we keep the goats' milk and cheese, but not far from the playground.

Our village isn't much. Nine huts, some little more than tents or half-tents, some little more than doghouses for men. We'd call our village Dog Town if there wasn't already a gold mine by that name, for the same reason. The huts are set out helter-skelter, paths between, leading to the mess hall and beyond, to the river.

No huts are far from the river except mine and Red's. Horses and carts are kept farther downstream. My goats are near me. I want to be able to hear them in case of trouble. That's another reason I live away from the others. They don't want to be near my goats. The goat pen is coyote-proof. Even mountain-lion-proof. Red built it for me.

The men are here for the tungsten. There are only a few women

and children, come to be with their men and help out. I've no people of my own here. I was hired to help with the cooking and the laundry.

Last night I heard the squeak, squeak of the swing and looked out the window and there was that girl.

Who ever heard of a child alone out here in our playground swinging in the moonlight? Though I expect she goes into the goat pen to be safe, maybe cuddles up with the kids to keep warm. There's no place for her to have come from. We're a long ways from anywhere. It's as if she dropped from the sky.

She must live off the smell of sage. How else could she stay alive, scrabbling about from rabbit brush to black brush? Perhaps she milks our nannies in the middle of the night.

The children saw her first several days ago, but they never said a word till Jenny told me. They knew their mothers wouldn't want her around, considering they're always talking about another mouth to feed (that's what they say about Red all the time, and he eats like a bird). They saw her in the playground swinging just as I did. She runs every time they get near, but she came out once to Jenny. Wouldn't you know . . . to somebody three years old. I suppose she thought Jenny couldn't tell about it, but she could and just as clear as could be. Jenny said she was dirty and that she had funny eyes and that she'd been whipped. "Worse than any of us," she said, eyes wide with the wonder of it.

"How do you know?"

"I saw the marks."

I'm the one looks after all the orphaned and wounded creatures (including poor old Red). The mothers are right, we don't want another mouth to feed, but a child is a child, and right and wrong is right and wrong.

I went out when the moon was high and put a piece of corn-bread on the teeter-totter, then came back and sat in the shadow on my stoop and watched. I had a lariat looped and ready to go. Who I caught (in a manner of speaking) was old Red/Gray. I told him what I was doing and how, so far, she hadn't shown herself, though the moon was about to go down. I told him what Jenny had said.

He sat beside me and rolled himself a cigarette. It was the closest he'd gotten to me (or anybody) in all this time. Any other man would have taken the lariat from me and said he could do it better.

With the moon still up and the old man's company, I felt as happy as I have in a long time. We didn't say a word, just looked at how everything was silvery, and listened to the creek—sounding silvery.

Finally he said, "When we get her, what will we do with her?"

I liked how he said we. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"It might be harder than you think. I'll bet she won't be anything like these children here. Jenny's right, she's been treated bad."

I had a funny feeling he was talking about himself more than about this girl. "*You!*" I said, but I stopped myself from the rest of it, though I got chills up and down my spine from thinking of it. I changed my "*You!*" (which I'd shouted out louder than I meant to) to "*You'll* help."

He looked at me as if he suspected what I was really going to say.

I said, "If I could just coax her to come to me." (I was thinking, if I can coax her, maybe I can coax him, old Gray/Red, to come out of himself a little.) "If I could just convince her we don't whip children. Anyway, *I* don't."

He looked at me. Thought. Said, "She won't come."

"How do you know?" But I knew how he knows or thinks he knows.

"You'll have to tame her first."

All the time I was thinking: Well, just how tame are you, old man?

I wish I could think of things to talk about that would make him tell me about himself, but I don't ever hardly even dare say thank you for all the things he does for me.

We sat a while longer. Coyotes howled, and I started to worry about the girl. I got up, thinking to go take a look in the goat pen to see if she was safe.

"Don't," Red said.

So I didn't. Then I said, "It's time we gave up for tonight."

"Leave the corn-bread."

"Goodness knows what'll eat it."

We don't have that much cornmeal. You can't grow it here because some critter always gets the ears before we do. Red fenced a tiny garden for me—fenced it a foot deep under the ground and across the top, too, because of the gophers. We got some squash and green beans, but you can't grow corn that way.

There are a couple of men here I stay away from. Most of the men are more bluster than bite, but there are two. . . . They shot my tame raven. (That raven could even say a few words: "Land's sake," and, "Oh p'shaw." Things I say to myself when I'm alone. It could bark like a dog. I'd named him Jack.) I saw one of them shoot it while the other stood by. I thought to run out and stop him, but I didn't dare. They already call me old witch and old crow. I was glad Red was off someplace that day. He'd have tried to stop them and got himself hurt.

Anyway, two nights later, somebody shoots the girl. I don't know who did it, but I suppose one of those two. I heard the bangs as if right in my ear. Two. Whoever did it must have been standing by my window. I heard the crunch-crunch of somebody running off right after. If I talk about it, next thing they'll be shooting me. They'll say they thought it was a coyote. A coyote on the swing? They wouldn't

say fox. Everybody knows how much I like foxes. Or maybe they would say fox just to torment me.

I run out. Red is there already. There she is, not dead though.

She's not a cute child. Stringy. Starving. And I've never seen anybody this dirty. She's wearing a sort of sack and nothing else. Scratchy. Not burlap but might as well be. There's something odd with her eyes. The iris is striped both black and green, and there's a membrane at the corner that isn't supposed to be there. As if she were a lizard. Tied around her neck with a blue cord there's . . . a thing. I have no idea what it is. Smooth, gray—looks to be basalt with green streaks of copper across it. You can find rocks like that around here, but this one is polished and shaped and contains a square chunk of magnetite.

She's conscious but she doesn't make a sound. Like any wounded wild thing I'm afraid she'll bite. Red is, too. We both keep back. She looks to be shot in the side. One bullet must have missed. At least they didn't use the old buffalo rifle. Looks to be a .22. Thank goodness.

Then she reaches up to me and I know she won't bite. Besides, the way she reaches, bite or not, I don't care anymore. She says, "Ah. Bah." I take it as "Ma." I reach for her. But it's Red gathers her up first, gentle as could be, and puts her in my arms after I stand up. I take her to my cabin and put her on my table, my pillow under her head. Red boils water and sharpens a kitchen knife. While I'm waiting for him to be ready, I cut the sack she wears off with my sewing scissors. I cut away a lot of her matted hair, too. There's just not going to be the combing of any of it.

We try to give her wine to knock her out some, but she won't take it. Locks her mouth and turns her head away. Red says to leave her be, so we have to get the bullet out while she's wide awake. She doesn't make a sound. In fact, she has no expression all through it, neither when refusing the wine nor when Red is cutting into her. I wish she'd yell. I wouldn't feel quite so bad if she'd make a noise.

Getting the bullet out, Red knows what he's doing. I'm not surprised. It's as if I always knew he could do most anything.

Poor old man. Afterwards he looks older than ever, exhausted and in some sort of pain of his own. I try to get him to drink some of the wine before going off to his tent. "Elderberry," I say. "I made it myself." But he won't.

We wrap her in the quilt and put her on my cot. After he leaves, I lie on the floor (my clothes on), but I can't sleep. I'm cold. The girl has my quilt wrapped around her.

Later I hear her crying. She does it so quietly, at first I don't know what's making that breathy, panting sound. I think: It's about time she let herself feel something. I want to touch her, but I know better than to show I heard.

At first she's in no shape to be out and about. I don't think people know we have her . . . except maybe the one who shot her. Or they don't care. And nobody cares much what I do as long as I keep doing my jobs, and nobody cares what Red does at all. He stays with her when I'm out busy with what I was hired for. He tells her stories. One evening I came back and sit on the stoop listening—that whispery voice of his that doesn't sound out. I can't hear much, but just the raspy, breathy sound is soothing. I hate to go in, because I'll have to make supper for the girl first thing and she won't eat it anyway. She's starved for sure, but she won't eat just anything. She sniffs, thinks, then decides. As if she's not used to our food. I try to tempt her with special things, but her taste seems hit-or-miss. I just can't tell what she'll hate next. When I finally do go in, Red has already made stew. I should have known. She's picked out all the carrots, laid them carefully on the quilt, but ate the rest.

"Well, I can tell you're not a rabbit."

She hides her head under my quilt and says her usual, "Bah. Ah."

So far that's all she's ever said. I don't think that "Bah" is "Mah." I'm beginning to wonder if she can talk at all. I think there's something wrong with her tongue. I try to look in her mouth, but she scratches me. I don't have to look all the way in. I can see her tongue when she says "Bah." It seems too short. And I think she never saw a teapot or a fork. She turns things over and wonders about them. I don't think she ever saw an oil lamp or matches.

As soon as she's able to be up and around a bit, and we leave her alone now and then, she steals. Hides things in packrat places. Knives, scissors, food (even carrots), summer hats, winter hats, sweaters, canteens she fills with water or goats' milk (the milk sours quickly). She doesn't eat the food she hides. She wraps it carefully, as though she thinks to keep it. I have to smell it out when it gets rotten. (Mice are coming in more than ever.) There's a purpose in all this. She's getting ready to take off. Though I can't imagine how she could carry all this or where she'd go.

I give her things, but it doesn't help. I give her my warmest wool socks. First thing I know they've disappeared.

So far I've managed to avoid calling her anything. Odd, because I always name my wounded or orphaned creatures, my crows, my baby skunk. . . . (Red says it's a wonder I haven't nursed a wounded mouse.) They all had names. I think it's that I'm a little afraid of her. What does she want with knives and scissors? Then I come home one evening and hear Red calling her Sage. "Better than Snake Weed," I say, though I'm thinking she might be more like snake weed.

I've already put the rest of the sharp things up where I don't think she can reach, but I know she could get anywhere she wants. She's a lot smaller than I am, but she's a lot more spry.

Then there's the lamps. I keep them in the wall sconces all the

time. I hide the oil and the matches up in the eaves with the knives, but if I can get up there, she could get up better. I think the matches are going, one by one.

By now everybody knows she's here with me. They're calling her the witch's child. They call her that because I'm their witch. Any woman of a certain age and even moderately ugly, one that likes to live away from others, gets to be a witch. Once everybody got sick and they blamed it on me though I got just as sick as any of them. And they're suspicious of anybody that takes in wounded wild things as I do. Of course having a raven made me all the more a witch. It's as if instead of a black cat.

Sage has mostly been quiet all this time. I always did like quiet people—like Red—but I'm thinking I should talk to Sage or she'll never speak. Maybe she could at least understand a few more words than my, "Oh p'shaw!" I start naming things. "This here's a cup. This here's a lamp. This, a blouse. This, a sweater. Feel how this is wool. And this, cotton. This here we're doing is washing our hands."

She likes my blue blouse with the lacy collar best. (On her, it's a dress.) She looks frightened whenever I take it to wash it. She actually sits under the line waiting for it to dry. Then puts it on still damp.

Now that she's been cleaned up and hair cut. . . . It's too short, but she doesn't look bad even so. Her nose is small and pointy, her hair is white-blond. My blue blouse suits her better than it does me. She looks not at all like a witch's child, much more fairy—more fey, though they don't stop calling her that. Knowing them, I know they never will. (I'm the one with witch-colored hair, straight, black, streaked with gray.) Her eyes make her look so odd. Even I wonder, now and then, if she really *is* a witch's child.

But then she starts being the witch's child in truth. She starts to steal knives from everybody, not just me. When the children try to get

near her, she claws them. Of course she clawed me earlier on when I tried to look in her mouth. I should have cut her nails a long time ago. They look extraordinarily strong. I wonder if I could have.

Then. . . . It's a soft, cool, moonlit evening—everybody outside to be in it. Lopsided gibbous moon. Shadows long. The shadow of the teeter-totter and the swing looking out of shape. Catty-cornered. Everything catty-cornered.

We've heard mountain lions screeching and caterwauling, sometimes right here in our little village. This is worse. I have no idea what it is or where it comes from. I think of all sorts of animals, wounded, dying, or, more like it, furious, frenzied. It seems to come from everywhere. It's like a screech owl and banshee and pack of fighting cats all at once. The whole camp stands still. All you can do is drop what you're holding and cover your ears.

Then it stops and I see her—my blue blouse—up at the top of one of the cottonwoods by the creek.

Men gather under the tree. Practically right away two of them start chopping it down, one on each side. They make the cuts, one above the other. The tree will fall exactly where they want it to.

There are several men leaning on their rifles. How can grown men, some with children of their own, even think to shoot a child? Of course they don't think she really is one. And, well, she's been making a lot of trouble.

The tree falls—exactly where they wanted it to, slanting along the river. All sorts of smaller trees come down with it. I can't believe she's not hurt. But then I see my blue blouse off towards another, smaller, tree. They shoot. At first I think at her, and I run forward to protect her, but then I see the dust fly up on the ground around her. They keep shooting. It's just for fun. As if there hasn't been any shooting fun for a long time.

I yell, "Wait! She'll come to me." I don't know why I say that. She never has before. She's never done one single thing I said, even when I knew she understood.

Then—lucky or unlucky, I don't know which—the magpie flies out, straight up from where the tree went down. Flies off with a squawk. Everybody steps back. They all salute. They look at me as if it's my bird—the witching bird, worse than my raven—but they let me through.

I scramble over the brush towards my blue blouse. The brush grabs at me. I'll be nothing but scratches. My clothes catch on the branches, but I pull away and rip them.

I don't know how much language she's picked up. Probably more than she lets on, but I don't say much more than, "Sage," and, "Come," and, "Everything's all right," which it isn't. I say them like I talk to all my creatures. It's the tone of voice that counts.

No doubt she'd be able to get away from me if she wanted to. No doubt she knows they'd shoot her—yet again. I'll not be surprised if they shoot me. Though how are they going to run their mess hall, get all their laundry done, without me? One man has brought out a whip. I'm not sure whether that's for me or Sage.

Where is Red? My poor old man? I hope he stays hidden. He'll get himself in trouble if he tries to protect me.

I reach out to her and she to me. I grab her wrist, my hand circling around it all the way. How thin she still is.

It takes a while for us to get out from under all the branches and twigs. Both of us get more scratches and our clothes more torn than ever. Nobody moves or says a word. They just wait. A boy throws a stone. She deserves it, the way she's been treating the children. One of the men gives him a slap. There's just that one stone. It doesn't start anything. Everybody just stands and waits.

Finally we get away from all those branches. Now I'm really

scared, but they move away as if they're afraid of us. I move carefully and hang on tight to Sage. I start back to my hut, but before we get there, I hear the whip. At first I just hear the crack of it, and then it lands on us. We run. Right on past my shack. We feel the whip once more before we head straight out into the desert.

This is all done in silence. Then I hear one loud "Good riddance." Meant for both of us, I'm sure. They'll have a hard time without me, but I'm sure they think it's worth it to be rid of the girl. Then they shoot a dozen times. I look back. It's not at us. It's in the air. Just for fun again.

By now it's dark, but there's that gibbous moon. At first we go as fast as we can. We stumble and fall, but hurry on. Then I turn towards the stream. I don't want to get lost, and we'll need water. She outruns me. Out scrabbles me. Part of the time she's on all fours. Hands and feet, not knees. It's a better way in the almost-dark. Pretty soon I have to slow down.

Sage is far ahead already, but I have to stop and rest. I think, Well, there she goes. That's the last of her. I sit on a downed willow. Nothing but desert on each side of the creek. There's no place to go except along its banks. It's still warm now, but it'll be cold soon. I wonder how long we'll last. If *I'll* last? Sage has done it before. *She'll* last.

I don't wish she'd never come. Any more than I wish my wounded raven had never come, though he was a lot of extra work, too. And he did peck me, especially at the beginning. That was just in order to find out what I was made of. Could be Sage acts as she does for the same reason. Wondering what I'm made of, same as I wonder about her.

Coyotes yip. Not far off. The breeze is picking up. Are my goats locked in? What with all these goings-on, I suppose the people forgot them. Or they remembered, and there'll be goat stew by tomorrow,

poor things. When they were babies I brought them in to my hut when it was cold. We were friends. I'll miss them. But "Good riddance" cuts both ways. I haven't been happy here. Red is the only person I really like. (Not counting the children, that is.) I hope he'll be all right without me. I wonder where he was through all this. I wonder where he is. Witch! I wish I really was one.

Then I hear crunch, crunch, crunching. Uneven. Somebody with a limp. Somebody breathing hard. I don't wait to make sure. "Red?"

Of course Red. And with bundles and a full backpack. No wonder he's breathing hard. He collapses in front of me but only for a minute, then starts to unpack some of the things, sweaters, blankets, clothes, salve for scratches and whip wounds. Matches. Fishing line. I couldn't have conjured up more good things if I'd been a witch in truth.

He lights a small fire. "They may see it. For sure they'll smell it, but they won't bother with us anymore." He begins to lay out milk and cheese when . . . of course, though this time no crunch, crunches . . . here is Sage, come silently, from the other direction. Hunkering down like an animal as if to tell us, Don't hurt me, I'll not do any harm. She's never liked being hugged before, but this time she lets us. We both hug her at the same time. I get the feeling that Red's hugging me and wouldn't dare do it any other way. I'm hugging him, too, and I wouldn't dare do it any way but this.

Then we both work to soothe her scratches. Then Red puts salve on my scratches and whip marks. (Am I to be thought a witch because I have a cream that takes the pain away? I suppose so. I was the one kept the yeast for the bread alive. That's suspect, too.) My blue blouse is a rag, but Red has thought to bring another, and another for me. Two sweaters, a blue one for Sage.

We change clothes and wrap ourselves in blankets. Sage cuddles up with me. Red, discreetly, behind us. I have a funny feeling, sleeping

next to a thing that can make that noise, but I guess I don't have to be afraid of mountain lions. She could out-yowl any of them. The wind picks up. The fire goes out. Rather than get up and feed it logs, I move back against Red. He turns and puts his arm around us. It feels perfectly natural.

At dawn we pack up and move—upstream, towards the mountains. Red insists on carrying most of the bundles. I hate to see him limping along, leaning over. I think I'm in better shape than he is. I insist on carrying one blanket and some of the food or I just won't move. I make Sage help with a small bundle of food and the smallest canteen. (Empty now. We'll need to fill them later, when the creek will be deep in a canyon and we can't climb down to it.) She doesn't object.

As we go higher, she gets more and more nervous. Or maybe excited. Even with the extra weight of the bundle, she gives a little jump every now and then, but I don't think it's out of happiness. She's starting to pant. Pretty soon she's the one leading. We don't mind until she tries to turn us away from the stream, off into the desert. I'm guessing it's a hundred in the shade. Maybe more. We try to ask her why, but she can't tell us. She says her usual "Bah" and "Ah." She points . . . not as we do with a finger, but with her fist. She punches out towards the left. When we go on upstream, she doesn't follow.

Red says, "Let's let her show us what she needs to."

I had hoped to get higher and cooler. We'll miss the shade. We didn't bring hats. Even Red didn't think to bring any. We can't go out there without them. Before we leave the brush and trees, we make some hats . . . or, rather, hattish things out of branches with leaves. We fill the canteens.

As we head out—into what looks like emptiness, but isn't—lizards scurry, a rattlesnake warns from a few yards away, but Sage hardly bothers to step aside. I wonder if she knows what it is. Stink bugs

raise their hind ends to stink us, a horned toad lumbers away, lucky not to get stepped on, a road runner runs off. . . .

By afternoon we're all worn out. Even Sage doesn't jump anymore. Mostly it's the heat that tires us so. I take the small canteen from her. We've drunk quite a bit from all of them. I'm getting worried we may run out before we can get back to the creek. Of course we could hike back by moonlight, when it's cooler. Cold, actually. We'll have the opposite problem.

But then I hear buzzing. At first I think it's the desert. It does seem a desert sound. I notice it stays with us, and then I see it comes from that stone around Sage's neck. Red and I give each other a look. Sage walks faster, but poor Red. . . . I take the big canteen from his shoulder. He lets me, though he insists on keeping most of the bundles.

We come to a place where rocks have been as if tossed from above. There are more and more as we walk on. And then we come to the edge of a crater, and in it a huge, twisted, shattered thing. Big as a house and kind of like one. *Two* houses. *Three!* One side all black and the other all white. I never saw anything like it. Red and I just stand there while Sage squats down beside us and hugs herself—as if she were cold.

They lived for a while. Four of them. They had barrels of things to drink, but some were broken. At any rate, they're all empty now. They're chubby, soft, with big stomachs and thin legs. I wonder if they'd have been able to climb out of the crater if they tried. They sat in the shade of the wreckage on hammock-like things of wire and cloth, their empty barrels beside them. They moved as the sun turned. You can see the back-and-forth marks in the sand. When the sun rose to noon and no shade at all, they wore bits of metal and cloth for hats. If they're anything like us, they wouldn't last long without their drinks.

What would you do if you wanted to save your child? Or what if she was the only one left who wasn't hurt? And you knew you couldn't last in this awesome and awful place. How far to water? How far to help? You'd send the only able-bodied one out, or maybe out to save herself if she could.

But, no. As Red and I walk in among the creatures, we see an entirely different story. Sage, the little slave, sent to do the hardest, most dangerous work of going for help. The others, too high-class to do it. "We'll just rest here in the shade until you bring back food and water." How could they know how long it would take? The scratches on Sage's back that looked like beatings *were* from beatings.

But then why did she come back here? Eagerly. *Maybe* eagerly. At least agitated. It's that stone she wears. Maybe she couldn't help but come. When we got close enough it started to call her.

Red and I walk in among them while Sage hunkers down hugging herself again, turned away from the wreck, shivering even in this heat but expressionless as usual.

None seem wounded. They're fine. They wear silky things, and they all wear blue—the exact blue of my blouse—while she came to us dressed in that brown, scratchy bag. One by one, Red checks them. All are dead. He also checks the mouth of one of them. "Their tongues are like ours," he says.

We put our arms around each other. I rest my head on his shoulder, and he rests his head on top of my head. We stand this way for a few minutes. Then he says, "We'll hide out for a while. Up along the stream in the mountains."

"She can't talk . . . ever. Did they do that to her?"

"I suppose."

"I'll teach her to read and write."

"And when she gets to be some civilized . . . it's the wild things will civilize her . . . then we'll go to town. The big town. . . ."

“ . . . and get her another blue silk blouse.”

“Maybe two. And some for you.”

Then Red goes to Sage. She flinches when she sees the knife, as though of course something bad will happen to her, but she'll bear it anyway, whatever it is. He cuts the stone off. It's not easy. It buzzes more than ever for a moment, then stops when the cord is cut through. He throws it high and away—way over the top of the crater. A real baseball kind of pitch. He holds his shoulder afterwards. He shouldn't have done that.

It's coming on twilight. Cooling down. Our water's almost gone. We need to get back to the river before morning or we'll be in trouble. We put on sweaters, take a last drink—partly to lighten our loads—and climb the bank.

For once the desert takes us in as if we belong to it, everything luminous, numinous. . . . Radiant. Stars. . . . Turning, turning. The Big Dipper swinging round the Little Dipper. North over our right shoulders. Shooting stars as if for luck.

VENUS RISING

Based on *The Aquatic Ape* and *The Descent of Woman*
by Elaine Morgan

You are of us and you remember it in your dreams. Your nightmares are of sharks (our sharks—the ones we also fear), sharks that look up at you from below with cruel little eyes, or you dream great waves (the waves we also fear) coming closer. At first it seems so slowly that you think you might have time to run up the beach to higher ground, but that's not true and you wake up screaming (like we used to scream), not knowing what it is you are afraid of, just knowing this nameless thing that keeps coming and coming, having turned into a wave of fear rather than fear of a wave, and so it is with us, also, a wordless fear, for we have no word for it, only cries and whistles that mean danger. But you have your good dreams, too, as we do, of floating as though you fly. Also you like to make love in the water.

When your children, as our children, have water, they need no other plaything. Your lakes are ringed with houses, your beaches are always full at the seasons for it. Ask yourself could any ape dive like you do and like our People do? There are places where we, and you,

dive down naked, down and down, and not a single lesson except from our big brothers and sisters. We do it sometimes just for the fun of it.

I say that if those others are your ancestors then you would go on vacation to the tree houses because those others never cared about the water. And then your children would be hanging in the highest branches by one arm and swinging around, and even the old people would get a kick out of getting up on some high limb instead of standing in the shallows or sitting on the beach. When it was smart and cool enough to hang around in the trees, we did do that, and when the future was on the beach, we found out about it and we went there and did that and all that went with it. Those others that stayed in the trees (what trees were left), the trees made them what they have become, just as the beaches changed us and made us and made you as you are, crying seal tears as we do, but as those others never do.

So (and including That One, then) we are the ones that are your ancestors and (except for That One, then) we are as hairless as you are, no more, no less. You might be surprised. Sisters and brothers to the hippopotamus and not ashamed of it.

In those days before That One came, we would never tease a manatee. We called them friends and swam with them as well as with seals and walruses.

Those were good days. Every family had its bay and some People slept where the rocks hung over. They had a good spot. It was so cool there sometimes they even came out of the water to play on the beach before the sun went down.

But usually our children come into the water with us in the morning and don't leave again until dusk. The little ones float around grasping our long, long hair and if the older ones come out of the sea in the day time, it's most often so as to jump into it again from

some high rock. So everybody has a lot of fun and stays cool. If one of us waits long enough to snatch at a fish, it's only because we are tired of easier things to eat, like clams and muscles and periwinkles.

Some of you may think we have no names, but we do, though for a while I didn't have one, but everybody knew who I was even so and I knew who they were whether they had a name or not. And when we saw That One, we knew who he was, though at first we didn't. Some of us have swum far and been told tales of others not like we are and wondered how such people could be and laughed about them that they had hair on their bodies as, at first, we laughed at That One for the same reason and for other reasons, too.

There's a place where we go and steal berries from the Berry People. They have one over there with big feet with six toes and big hands with six fingers. (Those people are always the fastest swimmers. We have People like that over on our shore and we always call them Toes.) The one over there is called Deep Diver for two reasons. Sometimes he's just called with a gesture that means sex so his name is also Middle Finger even though he doesn't have a middle finger. That's another good funny thing. They say he wanted to mate with me, but this was before That One came and changed everything.

I was thinking maybe Deep Diver will be glad to see me this year because I'm much, much fatter than I was at berry time last year. I have come, now, into my good fat and I will . . . but this is what I think before That One comes. Yes, I will go into the water with him. His eyes are as blue as the many eyes of the blue-eyed clam and as beautiful. We'll be like two big fish together, and I think about a child hanging on to my hair.

Ma says: In the beginning this is how it always was, ma and child, ma and child, and this is how it always will be, though if a storm lasts a long time, then let the child be swept off the beach and back into the sea that gave it, for children come from water. They creep inside

while you're making love, so, if a big storm, that's the sign that you should let the child be taken back.

The land away from the beach is not good. Nothing to eat there but a few small things. Here the sea takes care of us and washes up to us all that we ask for. He was a land man, That One, but even he didn't like the land. He was glad to get where we are and chew on our conchs.

There are a lot more places and times in the world than this one, Old Man Lost Egg says it, and not just once or twice. He says that once we were the very best of the best of the tree people, and, in that other time, we came to the water because our trees died. Once, he says, we liked the sun. That was a strange season, nodding to her, then, instead of towards the water, but the sun changed and then the sea took us in and made us happy and gave us all our friends and relatives and all the little soft things to eat and shells to put things in and to blow into. It's the sea, Old Man Lost Egg says, that goes on almost forever. This is also true of the land, so there will be many more times and places and a time also for you. Old Man Lost Egg has heard all this by listening into conch shells.

He got his name from first being Old Man Lost Leg, but Lost Egg is a lot funnier so we call him that. He only lost a little bit of his leg. On land he moves like a seal, but in the water he's just like everybody else.

Other men do not grow old except for Old Man Lost Egg and Old Oyster. We used to call Old Oyster The-Man-With-Seal-Lady because he had a seal for a friend, but That One killed Seal Lady so we call Old Oyster Old Oyster now. It's a good joke, as though he had an oyster for a friend.

Those days lots of us had seals for brothers and sisters and swam with them or lay with them out on the rocks on cooler days.

That One killed Seal Lady. Old Man Lost Egg says it comes from

living too much on the land, which is full of emptiness. That One kills us, too, but before that he killed Seal Lady and ate her.

We had not seen anything like That One so we watched and thought how thin and hairy, and how hot he must be, out on the land. We were not surprised that such a creature would do strange things. It was hard to keep from laughing because he moved so much like People do, yet not, and because he had so many things hanging about him and his penis was almost as small as one of the tree people's, though we've not seen that, only heard tell of it. That made us laugh, and his feet, so much like hands.

He's not happy in his fur, shaking himself and dripping and even sitting in the sun to dry himself after he washed. His hands are almost just like ours, only a little hair on the back, but smooth in front though ours have more skin between the fingers.

He calls that hot stuff he has, *fie*. I was the one he told first. He calls everything by its wrong name and anyway we don't need that stuff because we already have water. By the time he told me *fie*, he had a few of the right words for things.

He killed Uncle in just one second, so fast nobody was sure how he did it.

That One would rather stay over there with the Rocks-Hanging-Over People because of the shade, but they throw stones at him every time he comes near so he has to stay with us. Those Rock People know something about him we don't know, but they won't tell us because what he did was too bad to talk about.

We were wondering how he has any fun if he kills Seal People or Uncle, but maybe he didn't mean to do it, maybe something strange happened, but, to come upon him then made us feel like watching from a distance and we wondered what would happen to him after he had eaten Seal Lady, but he only went down to the damp, cool sand and dug a little sleeping pit and went to sleep almost the same way

we always do. It was in the morning Uncle was dead and those who saw it said it was a flash from the eye. They said That One has an eye to watch out for . . . that no one should look straight at him, but others said it was a rock, like we throw sometimes though we always miss.

"I come from the only place there really is," he said. (This was after he began to talk with me.) But I could see that the place now was this place because he and I were both here in it and the other place could only be told about, and I said so and I asked him which of the four corners of the world it was and which of the twelve times that have been and are to be, but he only laughed. I was glad I had made him laugh. That's a hard thing to do.

Sometimes he says he comes from beyond the sun, but Old Man Lost Egg says that nothing is beyond the sun except that one woman, Sun Ma, who hides behind it peeking out at us. Old Man Lost Egg has seen her.

Like a baby, That One learns to speak and to swim at the same time.

I keep thinking that I'll go out and see if Deep Diver will be with me, except I'm busy teaching That One. I'm the one to do it because the other women won't go near him. They say he has walked on the land too much and the sun has looked at him in a bad way. I know they're right about that, but I feel for him as if he's my little brother. I have no little brother, so who else do I have to be it? But perhaps I feel this because I'm the only one who heard him cry.

We cried. We cried like young seals, first for Seal Lady and then when the other uncles took Uncle out to where the rip-tide runs between the islands so he could be carried away to another time and place. Everybody had a turn holding Uncle in their arms to take him out there. Everybody had a chance to swim with him one last time. And later, That One cried to himself in the night. Perhaps about

Uncle. I heard the crying in spite of the waves. We didn't let That One sleep near us, but I was on the edge and heard and I came and put my hand on him like we do to a young seal that's lost its mother. No one, whether of the land or not, should have to cry in the night without a touch from some other creature. Strange, though, he didn't have any tears. I thought to lick them away but there were none.

That One says he has a name and that the name says he's coming and to move out of his sky. And he says that he is the head man's son of the head man's son of the head man's son, as if Old Man Lost Egg had many sons of sons, which isn't possible because Old Man Lost Egg's son was taken away by a shark and his other son also, something of the sort. Besides we are not so sure of sons except for the six-toed ones who swim so fast. Our sons, anyway, belong to the brothers of their mothers. After he heard that he said he was the head uncle's son of the head uncle's son and so on and on, but I said I wouldn't call him by any such name and I have already forgotten it.

It was that same day one of my big brothers began to walk crabwise along the beach and we began to laugh and do it, too. And then the men began to shout and to dare the land and they ran into it until you couldn't see them anymore even from the highest place. And we women worried, but we laughed anyway, because what else was there to do? And we tried to guess who would come home last and pretty soon everybody came back. Nobody got lost out there that time. And they jumped into the water from the highest place like they were children and then we all did that. That was also the day that That One said he had dared the land and the sea both, but he didn't even dare to jump into deep water from the high place. We hid our smiles behind our hands like we do so as not to hurt the feelings of young seals or children. I have come to know him as if he were my own child, I, holding his chin up as he learns to swim. He holds my hair and I swim him out and in, up and down. I run my hand over the

coarse fur of his back. It feels funny. He's such a strange "child," keeps his strings and stones and things in a hole in the rocks while he learns to swim. He's always frightened. I see it in his eyes—eyes the color of the sky at night, while ours are the color of the sky in the daytime. Always frightened, as though every night was a waiting for the big wave that comes with no warning. I laugh to myself to think he said he had dared the land and the sea both.

Then one of those biggest things of all alive things comes out to die on the beach like they always do—out on Berry Island. Deep Diver came over and told us and said that we could go there and have some of that fat. The People of the Overhanging Rock Place come, too, and so does That One. By that time he can swim well enough to go. I said there was no need, but he said there was a need, and he puts on all his strings and things, and comes.

It's just as Deep Diver said, a dead largest-one-of-all is on their beach. We were sad. What a lot of playfulness all gone now. Such a big thing needs a lot of crying, even though it wasn't a special friend, so we do that first.

The Berry People use some sharpened shells and some of that shiny black rock and begin to make holes so as to give each of us our share, but That One stops them. He tells them he wants to do this his way, that he has a special reason and, since he is the son of the son of the son of many head uncles, we should let him and, even though here is someone who can just barely swim and can't catch a fish at all no matter how hard he tries and who still doesn't know all the words for things, they let him because he has a blade almost as sharp as the black stone ones and larger and stronger. That's the stick he keeps tied to him. It's usually covered up and we thought he had it (before we knew it opened to a blade) because his penis was too small. "Let him do the work, then." Everybody says it, and most of us go out to pick berries which are beginning to get ripe. But the

Berry People sit on the beach and watch him cut into the big happy thing to make sure everybody gets a nice share.

I go with Deep Diver. (We usually mate with the people of the beach of the big stone, but there isn't anybody over there for me and anyway I like Deep Diver best of all.) He says how nice and fat I've grown. He wants to be with me in the water. I say that's what I want to do, too, though I say it isn't the time yet.

When the tide creeps into me as we mate, I know that if I do it with Deep Diver I might have one like him with six toes, because the tides come into the ma by way of the da so that something of the da is let into a ma along with the tide that washes the child in. (Sometimes you can see the babies waiting in the bubbles of the foam.) I want big children like he is so that my sons can be big uncles and the sons of my daughters also. I tell Deep Diver I will keep a little-finger shell near me the whole time, but of course none of this will happen and instead my child will be almost as thin as That One, though not as hairy.

This is the time when That One made the thing he called his bowawa. We don't need things like that. He made it out of that big skin. He stays out there in the berry place and cuts and cuts for many days and gives away all the good parts. What he eats himself he won't eat unless it's been changed by that stuff he calls "fie." We make a song and dance about it. The "fie, fie, fie, fee, fup, fup, fup" dance, and we sing it almost every night out there. The Berry People have six good conchs to blow into, so they do that while we sing and bang stones.

Out there visitors have to sleep in the pools on the rocks. They only have one small beach, and they keep that for themselves. That One doesn't like it because he wakes up choking in the water sometimes. I have to sleep in the same pool with him and help him up in the middle of the night as though he was still tiny. In some ways he

hasn't grown up at all from the very beginning and yet he always wants to tell everybody what to do. The others wonder why I stay near him and help him. They say he should be let die by his own clumsiness but I like his strangeness and the funny things he tells about. I like to wonder about him and where he comes from. I know it's not from beyond the sun, but I know it's not from around here either.

That One thinks the dance and song we made is all about him because he's so great and brought us fie which we don't even use and don't even want. It's too hot. We don't say he's wrong about that song and dance, but we put in some new words he doesn't know and that we'll not tell him, about how it's worth sand. We sing, "Fie, fie, fie, and all worth sand and you, too, worth sand," and we come onto the beach and throw sand up like we do sometimes and People get it in their eyes and have to cry and go back into the water to wash it out even though we're all crying at how funny it is. When we sing that song, That One stands on a high place and swings his arms around and says this is right for us to do for him, but that we shouldn't laugh so much. Well why do it if not to laugh?

I brought him berries. That made him smile. He's so hard to make smile, sometimes I think that's another reason why I stay around with him, just to see if I can do such a hard thing. He said he didn't know we had berries, and I said, "You're glad we do." He looked happy while he was eating them. That was the first time I thought he had a nice face even though it looks so funny.

I'm becoming a talker (which is what I do become). It all starts with That One telling things to me and me telling things to him. So in the future I will be telling everybody all about it so it will be known that all that happened is happening.

He puts together that big skin and bones of the biggest thing of all in a different way than they were before and when he's done he tells me I'm part of the plan and that I have to do it with him.

“You’ll be Zuesa’s woman. You’ll be above all the other mas. There’s no word in your language for what I’ll make you. There’ll even be stars named after you.”

I say no. No is a word not to say, but I say it. (If ma is the first word, then no is the last, or so we always say.) I’m glad none of the others hear me say it.

Then he says (and it isn’t the first time) that I and we all should call him Zuesa and not call him That One anymore. This is his real name which is the name of one so big we don’t have a word for it yet because we’re not that far advanced, but we change Zuesa to Zand for sand and to Zat One and to Zeaweed, and we’re glad we have so many new things to laugh about. Then he says this Berry Place will be called Zuesa’s Beginning because this will be where he starts from, bringing fie and bowawa and many other good things to the whole world. So we mustn’t call it Berry Place anymore. But we decide that we’ll just point to it and laugh. We’ll not call it anything and everybody will know exactly where we mean.

Now he stands on the hill and tells us things we already know. The world is round—as round as the moon, but that can be seen by any child who has gone from swim to walk and can stand on a high place and look out from it. It’s a very large circle. We all know that. We don’t talk about it, we just know it—that we live here on a round place like on the moon, just as he says.

I tell him to stop talking. (This is after all that talk.) I brush his funny belly hair with my hand. As I do it, I see Zat One’s little penis come out and up. I’m just playing with his belly hair and not thinking about going into the water with him or with anybody and he turns and, almost before I know what he’s doing, it’s done already. I hadn’t given him my cowry and there it is, done, and so fast. My first time. Done from behind, too, like bugs, no looking eye to eye, no swimming around, no laughing, not even smiling.

But Zat One is very happy. "You'll be the first mother of the men of fie," he tells me. "There'll be lots, but you'll be the first and you'll be above all the others." Then he turns to do the thing again and from the back again, but I go off into the water too far for him to follow.

This is the beginning of all the bad things.

Out there with the Berry People there are three women that are not pregnant yet. Like me, they've come into their full fat. And there are two girls that are just beginning to get into their fat time though they have their moons at the full of the moon like the rest of us. One dawn, when the bowawa is finished and sits on the sand with some shells full of berries in it, I hear a great noise of brothers and uncles and Deep Diver is with them. They come to me and say it's all my fault, that I let Zat One be here and then this happened, and I say, "What?" And they say every one of their women that were ready for it. He has been with them and not even in the water and not even laughing and not even just one, but all, and in that single night, and he did it in such a way they hardly even knew it had happened. Then they throw stones at me and at Zat One. "Don't be here anymore," they tell me. "You and Zat One also. You both go."

Zat One says that now I *have* to come with him or they'll hurt me, but he has done a very bad thing, and I'm thinking it's true, the land is a bad place to have made him like he is. I say, No, and, No, again, but all the time I'm running with him because I don't know what else to do. I know my People don't mean for me to go away forever, but I know I should go for a while so they have a chance to forget some of this. Zat One and I push the bowawa off the sand and jump into it and they don't swim out after us. They just begin to laugh a lot. They watch us go off this funny, slow way, wobbling in the waves. I have to laugh, too, in spite of what's been happening. And that's not the only funny thing about it. Zat One has made two things of skin, two little moons he stuck on each end of a big bone. He waves these around

and makes them be the arms of the bowawa so it can go along. I lie there in it laughing and laughing and I can hear the people on the beach laughing, too, even though they're angry, and I think what Old Man Lost Egg says sometimes, that, well, it's done so it's done, so if you can laugh, might as well do it.

We go right on past my beach. I feel like getting out and swimming back home to be there when they all get back from Berry Island. When they come with that nice fat and those berries mixed into it, they'll have forgotten all this a little bit, but Zat One says to wait and I'll be glad I did, but I doubt it. He says not to forget I'll be the mother of the men of fie, but I don't even like fie and I tell him so. I know how to make it now. It's no big thing and I can't think of a time I would ever want to do it. Besides, it used up that stuff that the sea washes up to us. I do stay there with him, though, but for a different reason. The water is humping up and I can smell the wind coming. He can't see that or smell it. He goes on talking and pushing the bowawa along in that funny way. I stay because this bowawa will not be very good when the waves get big and I know if I'm not there with him, Zat One will surely die. He's not a good Person, if Person at all, but is he so bad I shouldn't help him? So I let us pass my home beach, but I'll swim back to it soon. Zat One can't last very long anyway, even with me staying. Nobody likes him. I'm the only one that wonders about him and helps him. All he knows is what I taught him and there hasn't been time to tell everything. So I go on, watching after him like he is my little one, and he *is* my little one.



Where I come from, giants rule. . . . Generations of princes, lords, barons, sitting in the royal tree limbs, all the leaders having swung

down on private chutes or air bridges of their own suspending, having entered through the sky gates of the messengers of good tidings, all, feathered like sun birds, and I, permitted to take my place at the topmost royal hearth when the fires burn brightest. Now all gone, my master hat tossed from my head, my strings—except for these colorless copies—slashed; even access to any tree, whether figurative or real, impossible to me. Except there *are* trees. That, the captains surely didn't know. They thought the land too hot and dry. Uninhabitable, they said, and left me here because it *was* uninhabitable. A little circle of green around the edges of the poles, and on purpose they didn't drop me off at either one. I'm to suffer. And I have suffered: Eaten disgusting fish things, chewed seaweed, sucked at things I couldn't chew or swallowed them whole—I can't get that sea-taste out of my mouth. Even the bird's eggs taste of the sea. I've thought many times I'd not be able to take one more breath of this hot air, nor another step across the desert, but I've seen a giant, dried-up trunk on one of the beaches. It would have taken five men with outstretched arms to gird it. I've eaten steaks bigger than they ever knew existed . . . sea mammal steaks. I've had berries sweet as tree-top blossoms. Out of this world I'll build a new one, half me, half these creatures that swim. I'll call the planet Zuesa, so if they ever come back, they'll know this all came from me.

It's clear these once were land beings. As far as I can tell, all the mammals here were also, at one time, of the land, but they've gone back to the beaches and into the oceans. The land got too hot. Under these circumstances it'll be hard to make a decent civilization.

Can there be such a thing as a civilization without trees?

That's always been the question, and I've heard those captains debating it, crouched under their crowns. After all, the trees made us what we are. There was a time when we had shelters of slabs of bark tied about our nests of leaves. There was a time when we packaged

nuts and fruits in tree pods and made strings of fibers in order to make the knots which we used to count the packages, so the stuff of the trees was the beginning of everything. "From the gods of forest," as they used to say, but no trees here that I've seen except for that one old log washed ashore from gods know where. Only that one old log as though a sign of hope to me, and I do hope. It pleases me to think that somewhere, far north or far south, there is a forest of giants almost as big as the giants of home and that, one day, I might be able to stretch my arms again and swing and leap and sleep to the rocking of the wind instead of the rocking of the waves.

I will go north and create a new civilization. It won't be easy with these creatures. You'd think life was all play the way they go about it. She, too, laughs too much. Even so, I think of her as my sister-wife. I call her that because, in times to come, my sons will have to marry their sisters, otherwise my genes would get lost. My ideal is for a much thinner people, certainly with fur, but as tall as these creatures are, and with great showy penises continually exposed, as theirs are, so that when my captains come back . . . but I must keep in mind they may never see any of this—but if they do, they'll get the same shock I did. Here will be Zuesa's men of fire, all with my face, all with the hats and crowns of their status, and all with enviable penises.

Ah, but she. . . . I call her sister, but I also call her by my mother's name just to be able to say that word again and to remind me how a woman can really be. I mustn't get used to these soft gigglers. I want to remember how a woman can be: Thin and stringy, with tiny, woodland breasts, black-tipped. Had she been a man, my mother would have been a warrior. She lived in the upper reaches. Our house was at the top. Mother hardly ever came down. She liked the sway of things up there. She slept in the highest hammock. Her fur was orange-red. She was like fire herself. That's how I'd like my sons to be, thin and fiery, phosphorescent eyes glowing out in the night, not like

the pale eyes of these creatures, all the color of the water that they spend their days floating around in.

I taught them. . . . I taught all her group fire. They didn't like it. How can one like or not like a thing like that? I showed them boat, and they said they didn't need that either, though these are all part of progress. Yet they did sing about me, if you can call that waa waa boo baa singing. They threw sand and blew into shells. They know my worth even though she's the only one who shows it. The rest are afraid. Though they have no castes, they sense a higher rank in me.

But I do realize how much I need her—just as she is, actually—to help me. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have died for sure in the storm. We lost the boat. At first I thought for good, but she found it. I don't even remember how we got to that beach. I came to myself afterwards, when we were already up on the cliff where only the spray from the waves could reach us. More of those creatures were up there, too, waiting out the storm. They don't seem to care how wet they get. None of them, she included, bothered to go up where the spray couldn't reach. I suppose it's that layer of fat that does it. They did huddle together, but it seemed more for friendliness than warmth. Zoe (she doesn't know yet I've named her that), Zoe kept me warm, though, held me to her all night long. I was throwing up and shaking. I think I was in shock. Gods, she's big! Like a feathered nest. I sank right in, stopped shaking, and slept through it as though I was one of theirs.

In the morning, when those other creatures got a good look at me, they didn't much like what they saw, that was clear. Zoe told them we'd go as soon as she found the boat, and she left me there along with them and went out swimming. (I can't see how they do that—swim off with all kinds of weird fish out there. I got stung when a poison tail whipped me, and I saw fish with needle teeth.)

The creatures turned their backs on me. I wasn't afraid they'd do

anything. I know they throw stones, but they always miss. It got hot as usual. I went partway into the water to cool off, and even then, as usual, I felt so hot I couldn't breathe. The young ones came swimming up to me to feel my fur and laugh. They have less fear of me when I'm in the water. That was true with the others, too. Those young ones really laughed to see me learning to swim. Even the young are fat and hairless, except for their heads.

Zoe said the storm felt like taking me but changed its mind at the last minute. She said she would go to see if the storm had decided to take the boat or not. She said she could do it faster by herself. My mother never spoiled me by doing anything of that kind. Mother would say, "Climb up and see for yourself to your kites and gliders or any hot air toy." I had all those toys that ride the tree tops. Mother thought they were good for me, and that was true because I became a great pilot, though what good is that now? I'll write it all down for my sons—for the princes and lords of fire. Though the first priority is seeding them. Zoe's son will be above them all. It's what these creatures need most, gods and emperors. I really am their gift from the stars. I was thinking all this when the young ones splashed around laughing at me and the adults turned away and covered their smiles, and I thought, go ahead and laugh. You'll soon see.

Then I thought it would be a good idea, when Zoe came back with the boat, if I should try to plant some more sons, two or even three if I could be fast about it. (It's a good thing I'm young and quick and have practiced the single-thrust method our highest leaders prefer in order to conserve energy for more important tasks and also to conserve energy in order to impregnate as many as possible in the shortest amount of time.) I must pick out the ones not yet pregnant, those with their shells still near them. Zoe could wait for me with the boat all ready to get out of here fast. It always takes those big uncles a while to figure out what happened. Even the women

don't react that quickly, almost as though they're not sure it happened at all.

❧ VENUS ❧

We have to go away again as fast as we can, though not much stone throwing. Those Cliff People don't know what to do about us, but I know we should go before they decide something. The bowawa needs to be fixed. We have to find a good stopping place, but first we have to get away. Zat One has me scoop the water out as we go. My hands, he says, are made for it. We go along, but not as fast as we could if we were swimming, except Zat One can't swim even this fast.

He's smiling at me when he says my hands are good. That's another one of his smiles. I'm counting up maybe one hand's worth in all, but I'm not sure this one belongs with the other. It's not a good smile so I'm not smiling back at him. "What are you doing," I say, "using up cowry-shell women?" Already I'm not talking like my People talk. I'm talking like he would talk if he could talk as well as we can. I'm asking questions about things that shouldn't be asked about, except things like this didn't happen before Zat One came. "This is a thing to say no about," I say. "It should be learned without having to say anything about it," and I say, "I won't let this happen."

"I have a plan," he says, but I know all those furry children he plans on will be left out for the waves to take. Those thin hairy things won't like the ocean. They will have gotten inside the mas by the way of the air instead of by the way of water as they should get in. The mas won't know what to do with them. They'll be given up to the storms and swept away like they should be.

"North," he says, and asks me if I know what that is. Then he tells me and I see by what he's telling that I do know what it is. It's the

second corner of the earth. I tell him that, but he says there are no corners to the earth, but I know that also. Old Man Lost Egg, when he was young, did as the young ones do sometimes. He swam out and around and only came back much later and much older, saying that the world is as series of circles, and that it went on and on, and that there were People on good beaches and good rocky places and on islands of stones which they shared with the seals.

Zat One tells me, "We go north," and I say, "I'm not going." I say, "I'll go as far as where you can stop and fix this bowawa, but not farther." Then I turn my back and keep on scooping up the water and he jumps on me again. It's over in the time it takes to scoop a fish. I stop scooping out the water so that the bowawa fills up and we have to land in a place that's not a good place. He climbs halfway up the cliff and begins to try to fix the bowawa there on a little ledge. I stay in the water, thinking. He watches me. I let myself drift out with the pull of the tide. He calls. I think he's thinking I'm not coming back. I'm thinking the same thing, and thinking he'll die soon without me, but then I think maybe he won't die as quickly as I want him to. Maybe he'll go on doing that bad thing and live a long time going on doing it. I'll have to be the one to kill him if the sea doesn't do it soon. But then I have a good idea. I swim back. "Come," I say, "we'll find a better place to fix the bowawa."

This time I swim while he pushes the bowawa along. He's so little and light that the bowawa doesn't fill up as fast as it does when I'm in it since I'm so fine and big. We stay just beyond the surf and I find a tiny beach only big enough for us. Nobody lives there, not even a seal. I'm thinking that here he'll learn a whole new thing. He'll be a real Person and smile a lot and then I'll be able to love him and let myself have this child of the air and land.

He thinks to sit and dry himself, but I tell him to lie down. I tell him it's time for something different and that the land has made him

forget himself. "I've heard," I say, "of an uncle who stayed out on the land too long and when he came back the sun was stuck in his eyes so he could hardly see, and stuck inside his thoughts, too."

I start by stroking his belly fur as I did before, but then his penis comes out. I say, "Not yet." I stroke him all over and lick and hold him to my big, round breasts. He plays with the nipples a little and hugs me, but he doesn't do much more than that. He lets me do the playing and I gladly do, but he keeps trying to come in from the back all the time. I laugh and stop him and make him follow me into the water. I do it as we do it. I make him come to me face to face, looking into my eyes. I play until he's tired. He doesn't laugh like we do, but he likes it. Afterwards he falls asleep with a little half-smile on his face. He never thought things could be like this. He's surprised. He didn't know we were as smart as this, but we are and we also know many other things. Now I'll be able to love him. We can go to the second corner of the world where he'll be cooler and I'll go gladly and help him get there.

In the morning he tells me about wree. He says wree is a very good land thing and there are some up in the second corner. He said we had part of one that had washed up to us. He says wree makes shady places where he can live there and stretch his arms there like they like to stretch. He tells me about fruwa and kinds of land berries and leaves that you can eat like we chew on sea lettuce. He says there are places where the land is the best of all possible places. He says when I see wree I'll believe him.

After he fixes the bowawa, he chips at a stone. He chips until the stone begins to look like me. "This is you," he says. "You are the ma of all the mas, and I like you like I've not liked any other creature here. Don't forget that," he says, "no matter what happens," and I'm thinking he's cured of all the bad things. He's cured because of love. He might not know that word, but he has the feeling.

I tell him I love him. I'm not sure about that, but it's always better to say it than not, because later might be too late.

❧ ZUESA ❧

I should have been working on the boat, but I worked on the stone instead. I needed a rest . . . the first real rest since they dropped me off here. And this turned out to be a good time to teach her a few things. I told her about civilization, what it is and how important it is. I told her what she means to me. I confessed that, without her, nothing will come of me at all. I told her how I need to become the big head uncle of all of them, and that I want her to be Big Ma with me. She just laughed, but she really listened when I told her about trees and the climbing stairs and the vines and the kites we ride. I explained about writing and how the trees had given us smooth barks to write on before we invented paper. I told her the trees had given us the ideas for almost everything. This time wasn't wasted, because she began to understand things, and I saw, also, that she's beginning to love me. She said so. I need her to feel this way. When she almost ran off, I realized how lost I'd be.

After spending this sex time on the beach with her, I realize why I'd been able to succeed with the seeding as well as I have. When it comes to sex, they take their time about it. They even consider that a virtue, and I admit they have a point, but one hasn't very often got a whole afternoon, not if one is in charge of several others of lower ranks. Even then I had things I should have been doing, yet I let myself rest. I thought, maybe one more day of it while I finished the statue, which is part of my plan.

I sat and carved, and later I told her about my mother. I told her Mother could fight as well as a man, though I had to use their words

“scuffle” and “tussle.” They aren’t advanced enough to have a word for war that I can tell. I told her I’d never seen Mother cry, even when my brother was brought in so mangled he’d never swing in the trees again, having been beaten in battle (I had, of course, to use their word scuffle again) by the men of the lesser trees. Those little trees, I told her, grow in the mountains, which are cliffs like she’s never imagined could exist. The trees and we men of the valley are larger. All the valleys have larger men. If one of those mountain men had been left off here, they’d really have had something to laugh about, and then she’d have seen how big I am compared to them. I told her there had been thirteen symbols on my headdress. I told her how red Mother is, and how I wanted red sons so they could be my men of fire. She said they would be beautiful and that sometimes the People also have red hair on their heads, though that’s rare. But I said beautiful was not what I wanted my sons to be. I wanted to say impressive and grand, but I couldn’t find the words in their language except uncle or ma or moon or sun. (I thought it ironic that one so huge and so hairless . . . that one with buttocks like buttocks I’d never seen before could speak about beauty. And yet I must admit she was looking pretty good to me. I can see a kind of beauty in her odd, sea-colored eyes and in her long hair, also like the sea in the way it hangs down her back in waves.)

I’ve begun to write all this out for my sons. I’m using the back of my number codes list. I’ll not have any use for that again. First I made an alphabet for them and then addressed them as “Conquerors” as well as “Your Excellencies.” Also I’ve put some writing (the simple humble form) along the sides of the boat so as to teach my new Zoe. I want the first words she learns to read to be “Your Excellency.”

Tomorrow I’ll get back to work. I’ve rested too long and wasted too much seed and the energy to spend it. I’ll sleep turned away.

❧ VENUS ❧

We go, then, in the bowawa and I sit with him so we can be together in it though I'd rather be swimming. I touch his feet that are there in front of me. I tickle his toes. He looks at me like he cares about me, though he doesn't smile. I'm thinking his eyes are the color of the bottom of the sea in a murky place. Then he asks me to say that I'll keep his baby son and not let him get swept away.

"Why would I let that happen," I say, "when I love you now?"

"Say anyway," he says. "Cross your arms over your breasts like this and say it." And I do it though I don't know why I need to when I already said I wouldn't let it happen.

This is one of those strange, cloudy days. I can remember the last time I saw a day like this. It was before I became a woman. I'm hoping there might even be sprinkling like there was that time, and maybe flowers might come out and we could go into the land and cover our heads with all the yellow we'd want and we'd dance and bugs would come out and dance with us. I tell Zat One about it. I tell him I want him to see such a thing as those flowers which I've only seen twice before and that even Old Man Lost Egg has only seen six times in all his long life. And I tell Zat One about the little bugs that come to hop with us. He says he'll not go see it. He doesn't have time. Time, he says, is the most important thing of all and we mustn't waste it, but I think going into land to see the flowers would be using time well and I remember how Old Man Lost Egg says he would like to see those flowers once more before being taken with the tide, so I hope it will happen again now for him.

We go on and the sky water doesn't come. The clouds go away overhead, but hang a long ways off on the edge of the world circle, out where the sky and sea roll into one thing so it's easy to see that

the sea is the low part of the sky and the sky the high part of the sea. I've seen Berry Island, and other islands, too, float on the sky some mornings and some evenings, too, so that if Zat One comes from the stars, as he says, that isn't so strange, it's just a long way around. It's wree that surprises me—that such a thing like a giant seaweed could grow also on the land.

After a while we come to another nice beach full of People. Maybe as many as I would count up on hands and feet if I had six toes and six fingers like Deep Diver. We land there. Everybody pretends not to look, but they do anyway, and laugh behind their hands at Zat One, but they look at me, not laughing. I'm a fine big ma. I'm just what all the People like best, which is why one like Deep Diver wants me and I want him for the same reasons. I never wanted a little furry one like Zat One.

He calls out to them, but they only stare at the clouds that hang in the elbow where the sky rises from the sea. Then Zat One holds up the ma stone he carved and they do come.

They've never seen such a thing as a ma to fit the hand like this one does. Zat One is saying, "This is great ma of the sun and I'm her greatest uncle. I'm here to bring you many new things." Then he makes fie and shows them how to do it, but they're like us, they don't care about fie. They like the little ma stone. And then they call me ma, though no one ever called me that except as a joke when I was thin and little and couldn't have been a ma at all.

I tell them that I'm The One with Zat One, and no more than just what they see. Zat One gets angry when I say that, but I think he can't say no in front of all these People. But then he does and not just once. "No, no, no, no," he says and in a voice more like a sea gull than a Person. The People turn their faces to the elbow of the sky again and I see—and I'm sorry for it—that he's counting up the women who are just coming into their fat, and I say, "No," to him then, so

we are two strange People (if Zat One really is a Person) that say no to each to other.

"I must," he says.

"I will keep you from it," I say.

"This is important. This is what I've been dropped from the sky for."

"This is not a loving nor a playful thing."

"Love has nothing to do with it. I need fie People, and you need them, too, even if you don't know it."

He's yelling this. The People haven't heard such a thing before except if it's a game. They want to make it into something funny. They begin to dance and throw sand and imitate his yelling and everything gets confused and full of sand, so that everybody gets sand in their eyes. During this time I see already he has gone to two young ones just coming into fat. It's as if the anger and confusion makes him even faster and better at it than if things are calm and happy.

Then I'm the one shrieking like a sea gull. I say he's a shark that steals women and right then he's in the middle of having another one.

The People don't understand because it's from the back and on land, but then they see it's true. "Swim him off." I keep yelling it, and pull at him, and he's hitting me. These are real hits. I didn't think he would do such a thing. Then I give the whistle that means shark, which should never, ever, be given except when there *is* a shark. When I do that, one big uncle comes with a stone and hits Zat One on the head as though to open a clam. I've not seen this done to a Person before, nor to any seal or any such thing. Zat One takes that thing like his finger that he wears on those strings he has. He kills that big uncle in one of those flashes. All the People step away, then, except for me. I'm still trying to pull Zat One away. Another big uncle comes, but I can see he doesn't know what to do. Before he can think of something, there's another flash and he's down, too. After that, Zat

One is running to the bowawa, pushing off and going on as fast as he can. They're telling me to get away from their beach, too, so I go. I follow him, but not near. He calls, but I don't come. He's calling, "Zoe, Zoe," which he's been calling me now, but I don't want to be reminded of that land ma he was telling about.

Pretty soon I see him do a strange thing. He passes by an island and there's an otter lady lying on her back in the water near it. She has her little white, fuzzy baby resting on her chest. Zat One floats over there slowly, as if he thought she would swim away, but she's not afraid. Why should she be? She probably plays with those People from that last beach. She might even trade babies with those mas, sometimes putting one of theirs on her stomach while they hold hers. My People do that sometimes, too. Zat One comes closer and then reaches over suddenly and takes the baby. He grabs it by the back flippers and swings it up and around and down against a hard part of the bowawa. The otter lady makes a sad sound that I make, too, and dives away, and I know, even more than I knew before, that I must get rid of Zat One.

He pushes the bowawa on until he comes to a place too small for anybody to live there except maybe one or two, but nobody lives like that so there's nobody there. He makes fie out of dried sea weed and dead grasses. Then he cuts up the baby otter and puts its parts on stones in fie. After that he sits and dries himself in the setting sun. I don't go close because I don't want to see him eat the baby. I sleep resting on the waves out from the shore in the seaweed. It's a nice calm night. I eat a few clams. I open them with a stone on my chest like the otters do. Then I lie on my back and doze.

In the morning I see he's already making another ma stone to take the place of the one that got left back there. This one's bigger. I come in close to get a better look, because this stone ma doesn't have any feet or hands, which is funny. I laugh out loud and he turns and sees

me there. "I know you'll not leave me," he says. "You said you loved me and you don't know how not to say what you mean. You don't even have a word for not saying what's real."

I stop laughing and don't answer.

He carves and chips all that day and eats the baby, which makes me not hungry. The next morning I see he sits sad, maybe because he sees how I am, but maybe not. He used to sit sad all the time, though not so much lately. He sits sad, but he goes on carving that bigger ma stone. It's the size of two, maybe even three hands. Having three hands makes me smile, but I don't laugh out loud. I don't want him to hear me. He's eaten more of the baby and he's stretched the little white fur on bones. I think how my People would gather around the otter baby and its mother and say what a wonderful baby it is. Tears come to me as I think this. I miss my brothers and sisters and all the mas and uncles. I miss laughing together and hugging. I miss my cousin's baby, which I'm thinking of as though she was that baby otter. I'm wondering if Zat One would do such a thing to that baby, too. And I'm missing Old Man Lost Egg's talk about how the world is, and I think I'll have things to tell, too. I can say already how round and round again the world is and I have lots to say that nobody else has had to say. They'll hardly recognize me. I even wonder at myself that I have this thing I have to do because the waves won't do it for me. Even when they had the chance they didn't do it. Why must it be that I must become like a wave and suck away Zat One all by myself?

The next day Zat One puts what's left of the baby in the bowawa, and the big ma stone, and goes off again. I follow, but well behind. He lands on the next big beach with People on it. I see him holding up the ma stone. I can't hear him, but I can guess what he's saying. He's waving his arms around the way he does and pointing at the sun. This time it looks as if he's making the sun the most important one of all, though we all know water is what we can't do without. There

are three red-headed ones here. I know this is important to him so I come in. The People see me coming but he doesn't. I pick up a stone almost as big as the ma stone he's holding and I wait behind him while he talks. This time he says that the ma of the sun is the most powerful because it's the sun that kills. That's proof of its power. "Water gives and the sun kills," he says, "and this is why the sun is above everything else." This is a new thing. I wait because I don't want to be mistaken about him. I want to make sure he's going to do what I think he's going to do. All those People have moved out of the water on to the beach and are looking at the ma stone. Even though I'm behind him, I know his little penis is peeping out because I can see that the People are looking at it and covering their mouths with their hands, and I also see that he has somebody picked out. She's sitting close to him and she's beautiful even though she's not into her full fat. She's one of the red-haired ones.

I'm holding the rock ready to do something but now he's being different again. He's saying he'll leave the ma stone in exchange for the red-haired woman. He says he's been looking for just this one for a long time. Then he asks her to come and be the greatest ma of the sun and I can see she doesn't know how to answer or what to do. I think she wants to say no, but not in front of her own People.

"You have the hair of fie," he says, and then makes fie for them.

These People are a little different about that fie. They seem to like it, no matter that it's much too hot to be of any use. Maybe that's because there are those red-haired ones here. Zat One is telling them that those red People are the fie People and that they're like the sun, but they keep saying they're just like everybody else and that if he knew them better he would know that. Then he tells them he'll take the red-haired Person out in the bowawa. He says, just for the time it takes to snatch a fish, and she does get up to see what that bowawa is like. He leads her to it but then I see that she sees what's left of the

otter baby in it. Most of the baby is touched with fie and doesn't look like anything anymore, but Zat One has kept the white fur of it stretched out on those bones. You can see what it used to be. You can also see, when you're close to it, who the bowawa is made of. She sees that, too, but he pushes her in. I'm behind them and I see he takes her from the back right then, as though that act is a way to push her into the bowawa, and I know she isn't sure what happened to her. I'm not surprised he never feels the fun of anything. I can tell by now that those who don't feel fun are dangerous. I'm wondering if his babies will be strange and terrible. I'm thinking I'll kill mine right away before I get to know it. I'll kill it even if it looks like a real Person. Only the present will go on and on. I crossed my arms and said I wouldn't kill it, but I'm thinking I might change what I said to a better saying.

But now I'm whistling shark again and Zat One is pushing the bowawa off with her in it. One big uncle is coming out to them. That uncle goes right to the bowawa and tries to tip it over and I try to help him. I'm thinking what a good idea, but that it'll take two of us at least. But then Zat One takes that finger thing and flashes it and the big uncle is rolling around in the water like a fish on land and then he's dead. By the time I turn around from that uncle, Zat One and the red-haired one are beyond the surf.

I'm angry even at myself because I had the stone in my hand and I just watched and waited to see if he would be like he usually is, and then he was, and now here's this beautiful red young Person which he's trying to make the ma of some thin, ugly, hairy baby. That young Person should be having her nice, fat, red-haired child, and she should have a good chance to laugh and play around in the water with somebody she likes.

Then I see Zat One is doing another thing I haven't seen before. He's taking some of that string stuff he has and he's tying the red

Person's wrists together and then he ties her to the edge of the bowawa. I'm surprised and I think that this is just as strange as if it were some place else entirely.

They go along and I follow, wondering where is the fun in all this and why do it? Then I think how Zat One may be half-lizard. I've seen a lizard look in his eyes. I feel sorry for that red-headed Person who maybe only just picked out her cowny.

She sees me coming and I see her seeing me. I stay back, but I wave the wave that means I'll follow wherever she goes. Tied up like that, she can't wave back, but she shakes her red hair at me and I know what she means.

I smell sky water. Though I've only smelled it twice before, I remember it. There's not only the smell of water from the sky, but the smell of storm, too, and the waves are swelling up. Maybe Zat One will be swept away if I'm not going to help him, but I have to help the red one. I must find something to cut her free with. Zat One has a nice sharp thing.

I smell wet storm more and more and I know the red one smells it, too, because I see her raise her head and sniff. I'm also seeing the red hair hanging down her back and I think no wonder Zat One has her to be his Zoe instead of me, but I worry that she's stuck to the bowawa and that the storm will come and she won't be able to save herself, so I move closer. "Go on in to shore," I say, "We're too far out," but he says, "No." Then the red one says, "Go in," too. He looks up into the wind and it seems he can tell what we can see and smell. Those clouds are still over at the elbow where they've been floating these last few days, but I think now they'll come. "Go in while there's still time," I say, and he does.

I don't think about you and the future that might be. I want him gone, but not this red one. I think of her like a little sister and I don't think her hair is like fie, but that her hair is like the sweetest berries,

or like when the land gets wet. Mostly it's yellow flowers, but there are a few red ones, too. I think I'll call her Red Flower Person. No one would wonder who I was calling.

There's no good place to come ashore, but we do it anyway because by this time we have to. Zat One won't untie Red Flower Person even now, though I ask him to. I come, then, and help, so we all get there, first to a flat rock and then to a split place and up that to a steep slope. It's not easy with Red Flower Person stuck to the bowawa and her hands tied together, but Zat One makes her stay that way. He says, "Life isn't always just picking up clams as you creatures seem to think it is," but we know that.

The higher we go, the higher the waves come. I think they want somebody and I'll see to it the one they get will be Zat One. If I give him to the storm, maybe nobody's baby will have to be swept away.

Then we see it's not spray anymore and Red Flower Person and I look at each other because it's sky water and even though things aren't so good for us right now, I see a good look in her eyes and I see that she can see a good look in mine. Soon the land will flower. Everything will change. Maybe even Zat One will be changed. How could it not be?

That night Zat One turns the bowawa upside down on himself and sleeps inside it with Red Flower inside with him, still tied to it. Later the bowawa blows off them and almost takes Red Flower with it, down the slope to the cliffs to be swept away, except I hear her whistle even with all that howling wind and go to help. We pull the bowawa to a better spot and put some rocks on it.

I don't sleep. I keep wondering what to do and I wonder even more after that because I should have pushed Zat One off right then but I didn't, partly because of his sharp thing that I think to use to cut Red Flower free and partly because I would have to push him down all the long sloping place before we'd get to the cliffs and by

that time he would have killed me with that other thing, and then who would help Red Flower get free?

I sit and sing storm songs to myself. Sometimes Red Flower sings along with me. I hear her when the storm isn't so loud. I play a one, two, six, six, game. I lick the good sky water off myself. I catch some in my hands and drink. Sky water is the sweetest water of all. The sea of the sky is all made of this good stuff. I sleep a little finally, but I worry about what Zat One is doing to Red Flower in there under bowawa.

It's another day before the storm stops, and there's a good lot of sky water. After it stops I really do sleep and when I wake up everything is as bright as it usually is.

When Sweet Red comes out from under the bowawa, as best she can still tied up to it, I see that good look in her eyes again. We tell Zat One it's a thing we must go see, but he says no. We tell him all three of us should go out into the land and drink sweet water and dance and watch the thing happening which has already begun, but he says no again. Then I think I'll cut Sweet Red free right then. I'll get his sharp thing. Why have I been waiting? I pick up a stone and come to him, but he takes out that thing that flashes and points it at me. I see the lizard look in his eyes, and yet I see that he doesn't want to do this, but I also see that he will if he needs to. I put the rock down and turn my back and sit. So let him kill me, then, except it isn't me who needs to die, and, if me, who will help Sweet Red Flower?

"There's no time," he says and puts that thing away. "Time! I've told you how important it is. We have to get this thing started."

But why can't we wait a few days until the color comes out? This is what People always do. You will do it when your turn comes. You'll go off to where the land blooms for no other reason than to see it. You'll be like us in that.

I had a dream of wrees during the storm. They blew back and forth like seaweed and splashed the land with sky water. Under the wrees the flowers grew so that everything was yellow and the ground looked like the sun and we lived comfortable on the land as if we were Sun People. It was shaded and wet, but we missed swimming around. I was sad in my dream and then I was frightened because howling land sharks came . . . a great school of land sharks and I had no place to go because I was up on the land already so there was no place to escape to.

The water is calm now. We take the bowawa down and we go on as we did go, me in the water and he pushing the bowawa along with those funny things, and Sweet Red still tied to it. Sometimes she splashes herself with water so as to feel cooler. Sometimes I do it for her. Splashing always makes us laugh.

This time Zat One has some of those stones in the bowawa and sometimes he stops to rest and chips at a stone again. Other times he stops and makes marks on that thing he says is for his sons. The ma stones are all still me, not Sweet Red Person. They're all a ma who has come into her full fat.

We pass beaches sometimes with People, but we don't stop, and then, almost by mistake, we do get to see the land flowers. We come to a place where the banks of the sea roll down smooth like I've never seen before, and there are tips of green there already. As we go along we begin to see more and more yellow and then a lot of it and some patches of red. Then Zat One brings the bowawa in closer to take a look. Zat One stands up in the bowawa and Sweet Red does, too, and I wish I could stand up and see better, too. We go closer, but Zat One doesn't come to be in it. He just sits down again and we go on. When he lands, it's on a beach where he chases out some seals, though it's their beach.

This beach is full of stones and will be uncomfortable and it's a

place where we can't see the yellow, though there are some small patches of it back where it's not so stony. It's almost as if Zat One picked it because of not many flowers. It's as if he wants the opposite of fun. Could such a person be?

I'm getting more and more worried about Sweet Red being stuck like that to the bowawa. I tell Zat One again that this isn't safe for her. I tell him she won't run away. "Let her come on back into the land with me," I say, "so as to be as if standing on the sun." But Zat One won't let that happen. He pulls the bowawa up where it's not quite so rocky, turns it upside down and they sleep there. I sleep just out beyond the surf. It's a good night for it.

Zat One sits, the next day, making more one-hand-sized ma stones. He makes as many as two hands' worth.

All this while I bring food to Sweet Red because it's impossible for her to go out and find something to eat. (Zat One eats clams, but I don't get them for him.) I give Sweet Red the best of what I find. I call her Sister Sweet Red and she calls me Sister Sweet Ma though I tell her I'm not a ma yet. "But I'll watch over you, anyway," I say, "as if I was a ma of your own home People."

We talk, but not about what we really want to talk about. (Zat One sits too near. I'm sorry now I taught him so many words.) After a while I go beyond the rocks a ways into the land and bring Sweet Red all the flowers I can carry. I tie them to themselves in little bunches and put them all around Sweet Red and I see I'm making Sweet Red happy even though she's worried about being tied up. We hug and laugh and play almost as if we were in the water though you can't play very well on land. I see Zat One watch us, but I can't tell what he's thinking. It's always some land kind of thought. Even if I knew what it was, I wouldn't know it.

Sweet Red tells me sad things. She says that the big uncle that was killed was her mother's oldest brother. Then she cries. She says he was

called Old Bird because once he helped one of those big black birds. Old Bird fed it fish and it would sit on Old Bird's head when he was standing about in the water or even when he was swimming. And Sweet Red smiles because that's a good memory. "It stayed with Old Bird until it died, but it had a good death right after the land bloomed."

We're in the shade of the bowawa or else we would have to be in the water because of the heat. Even Zat One is down where the waves wash over him. He moves up with the tide, but Sister Sweet Red is stuck above where the water comes. Then I think to cup up water in a big shell and cool Sweet Red. I make her good and wet and the pebbles and sand around her wet and we sit and watch the sun go down.

In the morning I see one of those stingers that maybe I slept close to all night and didn't know it. I'm always thinking what to do about Zat One, so I think about the stinger. It's drifting slowly in. Maybe Zat One doesn't know about those things.

❧ ZUESA ❧

This has been coming out better than I ever thought it could. I've found my real Zoe. I hadn't thought I'd be so lucky as to find a red-haired one. There's a current flowing north, and I think it's grown a little cooler, though that may be because of the rain. I thought, before I leave the beach, I'd make each of them a hat out of seaweed. Some of that seaweed is good and strong. They'll not have had hats before. Even the big one may like it. I worry about her, though. I wonder how jealous they get. It's a powerful emotion, and I only have one shot left. I was saving it for her just in case. She had been looking around for a way to get me even before, but they're all so childlike I

can read everything they're about to do on their faces. They always hesitate. They never just do something. I saw her look and think about a jellied mass floating just beyond the surf, and I stopped that before she got started with it.

I'm glad I didn't let them go out to see the desert blooming. I hope it taught them something. That kind of thing goes with that all-day sex they do, and I've no time for it. I want to see this world begin before I'm too old to keep control of it. I want to be in my prime when my sons are grown so I can help them learn. Rapid seedling is my first priority.

However, I stayed on at that beach all the next day. The little goddesses were finished, but I thought to make not only the hats, but a sun shade for the boat. I wonder that I'd not thought of it before. Poor Zoe. She's always splashing water on herself.

I was busy with the sun shade when she (what should I call the other one now?) went out to get that jelly thing, holding out a shell and piece of drifted-up brush. I thought to teach her another lesson. I took out the zapper and told her to come back and quickly. I said that even though I was about to make her a gift I knew she'd like, I'd not hesitate to kill her. I said she was no more than a seal or an otter to me, which wasn't true. I even told her I'd eat her, and that if I ate her, I'd know everything she knew. Of course, I'd do no such thing. I said it even though I knew it would just add to her superstitions. I don't want to kill her. As much as I can say I like any of these creatures, I like her, but it may come down to a matter of me or her.

The way she looks at me. . . . I've had that kind of look many times before. I've captured those small men from the mountain trees, and I've had four at once looking at me like that. And not so long ago I've had my own captains looking at me in the same how-to-get-rid-of-him manner. But these creatures will never be fast enough to do it.

❧ VENUS ❧

I like the thing he calls hauwa. That's a real thing. It has a nice wideness to it, it balances, it makes me feel like laughing. It's the very first land kind of thing that's a good thing. I'm surprised we haven't thought of it ourselves. And then, when he makes the hauwa for the bowawa, I'm surprised we didn't go around making things like that, too, even for sitting on our beaches. After he gives me my hauwa, I put some of those flowers on it. I don't have to go far. There are clumps near our beach. I do that for Sweet Red's hauwa, too, even more than on mine. Then, when he finishes the hauwa for the bowawa, we go off again, me swimming not far behind. It's good they go slowly because I'm doing a lot of thinking, and I'm still worrying about Sweet Red being tied up all the time, and what will happen to her if something happens?

But now he's landing at another beach full of People. This beach has a lot of big clumps of rocks out from the shore. Zat One leaves the bowawa in the water and hooks it to one. I hide behind the rocks, but I come in closer when those People come out of the water to see what's happening. I don't hide on purpose exactly, I just wonder what to do and when and if. Things are going all wrong and I'm not fixing them. My mind isn't enough like a lizard.

Zat One lines up all the new ma stones in a half-circle and then he begins to say everything all over again and then he's building fie like he always does, but these People have a lot more stuff on their beach to do it with, not only dry seaweed, but a lot of washed-up land stuff, too. Zat One takes all the stuff they have and makes a big circle of fie near the ma stones he stuck into the sand. It's the biggest fie I ever saw and I think maybe this fie really is something even though it has no usefulness and is even hotter than all the others.

Sweet Red is still sitting, stuck to the bowawa. She's in the shade

of the hauwa that's on the bowawa, so she isn't wearing her hauwa. Those hauwas are in the bottom of the bowawa. By now all the People are gathered around Zat One and are looking at the ma stones and at the fie. I swim over behind the bowawa and take Sweet Red's hauwa out. I take that one because it has more flowers on it than mine. I go out a ways, put it on, and then come ashore, standing up and walking through the surf.

I am beautiful. Sweet Red is not yet as beautiful as I am, though she'll be even more so, but now I'm the most beautiful one I know of. My hair hangs down and is whitened by the sun, and I know it shines. I walk in a way I've never seen anybody walk before. I don't know why I even thought of it. I keep my arms up and out as wide as the hauwa, which is very wide. I walk slowly, and I come to the edge of the half-circle of fie and half-circle of ma stones. I'm the big one of all these mas. I even surprise Zat One. He's backing up. He's not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing, and, even though he saw the hauwa before and knew it was covered with yellow and some red, too, his eyes get as if he never saw such a thing as me in my hauwa coming up out of the sea, walking in this special way. And those People. . . . They don't know what to do either. They back up like Zat One does. Fie didn't make them do it and not the ma stones, but I, with my hauwa, did it. I know what they think, too, with all this yellow and this big round thing on my head. They think I'm the ma that peeks out from behind the sun.

I haven't thought about what to do next, but I already know that water can stop fie and I'm wet and so is the hauwa. This is a big fie, so I'm not sure, but I walk into it and don't think if it hurts or not. I stand on one part and drip there and make that part go away. This is right. This is water over land things and even over the cruel sun.

"I am Big Water Ma," I say. I begin a song and dance which isn't like any song and dance I've ever seen or heard. I pick up some of the

ma stones and I dance on more fie and put that part out, too. I sing, "Big Water Ma. Big Water." I sound so good I slap my thighs, but nobody dances with me. I'm too much for them. I say, "Here is Sweet Sweet Red," and Sweet Red stands up in the bowawa for them to see her and puts on my hauwa which is only a little less yellow than the one I'm wearing. I say how the strange uncle is going to take her off the bowawa so she can dance with them. I really think Zat One will have to do that, but he says no! so loud that everybody looks at him in a funny way.

Then I say, "Those who say no to Water Ma are all worth sand. Do him the sand dance." So they do, everybody laughing and crying together except I know Zat One can't cry because he has no tears.

By now the sand has put out all the fie and I see how all our things can put out that thing of Zat One's. Then I whistle, Shark, thinking the People will come and help me, but they think I mean a real shark and they run up the beach away from us. Zat One is running to the water, to the bowawa. I can get to him when he's in the water. That's where I'm fast and he's slow. I hold his head under. I don't stop to think. I pull out his sharp thing. I should have cut away the zap thing right then, but I'm only thinking to get Sweet Red free, which I do while Zap is sputtering in the water and blind with sand. Then Sweet Red jumps out of the bowawa and we push Zap into it. I tie his hands and tie him to the bowawa just like he did to Sweet Red. She helps me. How she helps is she sits on him. Even though she's not into her full fat, she can keep him down. Then we push away from there, both of us in the water pushing him along. I tell Sweet Red that she should go home, but she doesn't want to. I'm thinking we're becoming stranger and stranger and that I don't even know what I'll do next because here I am, going on to the second corner of the world instead of back home, even though Zap is tied up and can't make me do it. I want to watch the shores change and maybe get to see those wrees.

And I'm thinking the bowawa isn't such a bad thing upside down on the shore or to use to carry things along as you swim or to carry a person.

Sweet Red thinks she should stay with me and that we can help look after each other. She says it isn't good to be alone because there's nobody to laugh with. At first I don't tell her that I have in mind to get rid of Zap before he zaps any more big uncles, but then I do tell her. And I tell her why and I tell her about you coming into being. I also tell her how I'm going on to see wree.

We come into shore late. We just have time to turn the bowawa over on Zap. Then we go and make ourselves a nice sleeping place. We like each other so much we make just one pit.

In the morning we see that our flowers are beginning to wilt. Not just ours but all over. We've missed the best part of the flowering land, and yet we still feel like singing.

❧ ZUESA ❧

"Gods," I shouted, "come leer at me and laugh. The devils are the lucky ones." So spoke Garshin, though he was an unbeliever.

They say there's a shark out there, so we stay where we are. They gave me stones so I could carve. It wasn't so easy with my hands tied together. We stayed where the waves could wash over us, the boat partly in the water, and us in its shade. They lay for a change not even playing. Well, perhaps playing for they twined their fingers together and now and then counted up strange combinations of numbers. I thought, in this quiet mood of theirs, I could persuade them to let me go, so told the truth. I won't scale down my thoughts for them anymore.

"There is a place where everything is known," I say. "This is the

place called Tree of Lightning. All bow down to the thunder of its name and to its men of fire. I want to tell you the truth for the sake of hurrying on. There'll be a new kind of people. I, myself, as you can see, am not one of them. I'm working for the sake of the future. You think this sex and seeding is fun for me. You should be able to tell that it isn't. It's a duty, and more important to me than my own life."

For the first time since I was dropped here, I spoke as if to my own kind and with some of the gestures befitting my station, and, though I'm but a lower prince among the princes, yet a prince and speaking like a prince. And I saw that they heard and stopped their fingerplay in wonder at it.

❧ VENUS ❧

The land makes for strange ways of talking. Zap is saying a lot of odd things, and I don't know why he would think we wouldn't believe him, but says, over and over, that what he says is true. Why would it not be? Sweet Red and I laugh behind our hands.

But I have a different idea of the future than the one Zap talks about. I have the one Old Man Lost Egg tells of when he listens to the biggest of the conch shells. I think I'll look around for a good one and see if it will talk to me. I'm not one that would listen in on anything that belongs to Old Man Lost Egg except I'm so far away and I'm not the same person I used to be and I need to know things.

I find one. The inside is the color of Sweet Red's hair. I go far from them and sit and stare out to sea like I've seen Old Man Lost Egg do, and then, when I feel ready, I put the conch to my ear.

For a long time I hear nothing but waves and wind. I wait and listen and then I seem to hear Old Man Lost Egg's voice, but he's whispering, so I can't make out what he's trying to tell me. Then I

hear that the voice is whispering that he isn't Old Man Lost Egg, but a different old man. His name is Last Verse, for he sang a long time ago, the last verse of the last song of all.

"I've been waiting for you," he says. "I've been whistling out of every conch. I've been on the wind to you. I tell you you must go along a ways to get to the second corner of the world which is full of wrees. You must do the things to be done in wrees and eat strange eggs of wree bird."

"But what about Zap?" I say, because this is the reason I was listening into the shell.

"Never once will he be called uncle. You, however will be ma, and not only ma, but great ma, not of the cruel sun, but ma of the weeds of the sea, so you'll be called Weed. You'll be the egg, for out of you will come the new time, so you'll be called Egg. You'll hear things in conchs, so you'll be called Conch. There's nothing you won't be called, and everyone will be calling you."

His voice is fading, but he's going on and on, though not about anything I need to know. "Zap?" I say, "Zap? How or when should he be ended?"

I look up and see that Sweet Red is playing by the water but Zap is looking at me through the finger eye of the zapper even with his hands tied. I get behind a rock though I don't know if that thing can go around and find me there or not. But he doesn't zap it. Then I think how silly I was not to take that zap thing away. I see I'm not a good thinker about this kind of thing. I name myself Silly Old Do Nothing When It Should Be Done. I laugh at such a funny name and I know Zap hears me. I wonder if he's naming me The One Who Laughs When She Should Be Afraid. Sweet Red comes to me and I tell her about it and we laugh together.

Sweet Red says we should just go off and leave him here. She says, "He can have his zap thing for a friend." That makes us laugh again.

I haven't had a time like this since I left my brothers and sister at my beach. We needed to laugh. It makes us feel like no matter what happens to us we had a good time right now.

I tell Sweet Red we have to get the zap thing. I tell her to keep on laughing and go out to him as though to sit in the shade of the bowawa, except she should sit on him like she did before and I'll come and take the zap thing away. I tell her we'll have to be strong and fast as if to snatch a fish.

But no wonder Last Verse didn't tell me what to do about Zap, because it isn't something I wanted to know about.

Zap on land is different from Zap in the water even with his hands tied. He saw Sweet Red was going to sit on him before she began to do it. We both tussle with him, but he's trying to turn his zap thing towards me. Sweet Red keeps getting in his way on purpose so he can't point it at me. She's moving fast, so it's Sweet Red that gets zapped, that rolls on the beach, and tries to hold herself together but can't.

Zap says, "No," a lot of times and, "Gods, come leet."

Then Sweet Red is really dead and I get angry like I never knew I could be. I get on top of him while he's still holding Sweet Red. I take the biggest of the ma stones and I hit and hit until he stops. Then I take him for the sharks to have. When we get in the water he wakes up and struggles, but then he says, "All right. Go ahead. Drown me." And I say I will and he sees I will. Then he says, "You said you'd not leave my son out for the storms to take," but I'm thinking he's already a dead man, why should I bother answering? There's a lot of blood on his head so the sharks will come in the time it takes to catch a fish.

Five new ma stones sit where The Killer Of Sweet, Sweet Red sat in the shade of the bowawa. They're all me. I wish there was one like Sweet Red so I'd have something to remember her by, but things are

just things and I'll always remember her anyway.

I pick one stone ma up. I like it. Mostly there were bad things about the Killer Of Sweet Red, but there were one or two good things, like some of the things he told me about. Flying around in and under land things is a thought I never had before. And wree, though I'd seen their bones, I don't know what they're really like. I'll go see wree and the second corner of the world. Killer Of Sweet Red is right, I'm going to have a baby. I'm not sure what I'll do about it. I'll see who it turns out to be before I decide.

I pick up the conch shell then, wanting to hear Last Verse again, more for company than for advice. I already know what I'm going to do, but he tells me some things I do want to know. He says my baby is going to be a girl. We both have a good laugh about that. She's going to have red hair just like Sweet Red even though she isn't Sweet Red's child. Last Verse says I'll call her Sweet Red and not just now and then, but all the times I call her, which will be many, many times.

N O S E

Being nowhere but here and nobody but me. Nothing to do but play solitaire or sit and watch the snow. And it isn't even a real snowstorm, just little worthless flakes, melting as they hit the ground. Might as well be rain. Feet will get wet. I'll stay here and look out the window. Other people will go out in it and raise their faces to the wind. I'll be nice and dry.

But that's what I thought two minutes ago. I grab my raincoat and my floppy yellow hat. I'm out in it and I don't even know why. Why would anyone? Especially me? I hate wet feet. Why go? And isn't beauty where you find it? Even in the rust in my bathroom? In the food spots on my blouse? In the cracks of the ceiling?

Even so, I'm out of here. If only to some park bench. I could sit and pet wet stray dogs.

It's because of my nose. I stay in because of it. I go out because of it. My whole life is because of it. It's not only large, but it has a big bump in the middle. I'd be happily married if not for that. I'd have children. They'd find me beautiful just because I was their mother. Of

course, my face is too long and narrow anyway. If there was a witch's part to be played I'd be chosen first, but I haven't even been chosen for that. I haven't been chosen for anything. And my hair's not witch's black. Dishwater blonde, they used to call that, though now it's streaked with gray.

(Even in my baby pictures I have almost that length of nose and that bump. Who ever heard of a baby with a big, bumpy nose?)

So here I am, running. There's the need to escape once and for all. Of course I'm not so stupid . . . not quite *that* stupid . . . to think I can escape myself. Or my nose. Even now, as I trot away from everything I ever knew or thought about or wanted or didn't want, I know I'm still peering out from behind my nose.

But it's now or never. Everything is *always* now or never. I just didn't realize it until I suddenly saw those cracks in my ceiling and I thought: Fix it. Do it now or it will never be done. And I knew I wouldn't get around to it. I knew it would be never.

Running still and I'm not tired. That's because I've been on my Stairmaster, sometimes all afternoon. (What else is there to do?) I may have been preparing for this moment all this time and didn't realize it.

Hop and skip over broken sidewalk and chewing gum. Flap out into traffic. *And* survive it. Jump again. I don't heed nor need the WALK/DON'T WALK signs. I think of mother. There wasn't much more to her than warnings. I don't not do anything she said not to, or do anything she said to. And look, not dead *anyway*. Still hopping and skipping, happy to have survived the street and my nose and everything else . . . up to right now.

Away we go, nose and I. But I'm stopped by smells. I've been too much inside. I forgot all about bus exhaust. I smell *everything*. I smell sour old age and babies. Laundry, clean and dirty. Soap: Eucalyptus, bergamot. . . . I'm back and forth from delighted to repelled so fast I

can't keep track. For now I'll just stay repelled. No, better to stay delighted.

I've not seen a nose like mine in a long time And not because I wasn't looking. I looked at everybody until I finally gave up, though I didn't really give up, I just didn't look quite so hard.

One doesn't see noses like this anymore, just as one doesn't see crooked teeth. Perhaps I should have had my nose fixed a long time ago, but I grew up in the Sixties, when things were supposed to be natural. Besides, I didn't have the money.

I saw the look in people's eyes: Why didn't she ever have it fixed? Now, if they look at me at all, I see them thinking: She's so old, fixed or not, it won't do much for her.

The nose. . . . (Note I don't say *my* nose. Sometimes it hardly seems anything so looming could be mine.) The nose never pointed in the right direction to find another like me, though, more likely, it *did* find those people, but all the others had had their noses fixed, so I never knew they had been like me. I suppose their mothers saw to it before it ruined their lives—made them shy or sly or outcasts like I am.

What is the meaning of love, or, if not love, what is the meaning of hate? Why do people wonder always about love (which eludes them) and never wonder about hate, which doesn't? They know hate more intimately than they ever know love.

But more important (to me), what is the meaning of noses? Or *a* nose? And what do we know of the face hiding behind it? Peeking out—frightened? A face by now a little the worse for wear, though full of yearning still?

It's as if I've been transported to a city where everybody's nose is perfect. *And teeth and jaw line.* Foreheads high and smooth. Everybody wrinkle-free. They've been scraped and sanded and lifted. Where are the *people*? Are these really them?

And then there's my teeth! I never thought that much about my teeth because my nose so overshadowed them. Who would be bothered looking beyond the nose to the teeth? Not even me.

But now I'm thinking of every part of myself. Even my stomach. Even my breasts. Especially my breasts, because I'm running and they're flopping about. I've been dashing about like a crazy person, and come so far so fast I don't know where I am, but here's a park and benches. I sit down to catch my breath.

And here is somebody, all in black, raincoat and umbrella, sitting down beside me. A big fat hulking man, hunched as if ashamed of his size. I can't see much of him, except it's easy to see he has a perfect, slightly upturned nose. He's hunkering down, not to fit under his umbrella, but to try and fit his nose.

What has the world in store for someone trying to hide behind *this* kind of nose? Looking out as if from behind a very small bush or a large flower.

(Coffee is being ground somewhere. Bread baking. There's the general smell of wet.) I look out at him athwart my nose bump. (It cuts my vision into two parts as though I were prey instead of predator, but I feel predator compared to him.)

Something about his hunkering makes me bold. Back in the days when one was stuck with the nose one was born with, there were kings and queens—*emperors*, even—with noses like mine, long and pendulous, though maybe not with *quite* such a big a bump in the middle.

And look, here we are already out of the snowy rain into a coffee-smelling coffee shop. And I'm glad for having been bold. Florian.

Being called Florie or most likely Flowery must have been almost as bad as having the wrong nose. His is fixed, though that was a big mistake. You can tell he was meant to have a big one. Everything about him goes with big. His mother had it changed when he was too little to object and before she realized what his face would be like. He'd object now, and maybe she would, too. It took away his power. Now he prowls around as if he's looking for it. How to add to his face? He holds his lower jaw pushed forward. (His teeth are large and perfect and very white. They look fixed, too.)

Under these circumstances, how could we have found each other? But it was inevitable. I'm the one who has his nose. I see it in his eyes—how he looks at me, so yearning, his long, long (and long-lost) nose in mine. I have enough for both of us. All he sees of me is that. It's love at first sight.

I keep my eyes lowered. I don't want my love for him and his nose—the one he used to have—to show quite so soon, though he must guess it.

He hovers over me. Leans delighted. He's big enough to hover even sitting down. His strong, fat, hairy hands. . . . I keep my eyes on them.

He says, "Smell that coffee."

(I smell mostly you.) He smells good, too, of wet raincoat, of umbrella. . . . And I smell croissant, strawberries, the plastic rose in the center of the table, the plastic table cloth. And through it all, the damp . . . the sweet, sweet, damp smell of male in general.

I know, with his little ordinary nose, he can't smell much of this, nor of me as a woman.

"Florian," I say, just to say his name. It's almost as if I've named him myself, exactly my favorite name though I didn't know it was until now. Why didn't I run away a long time ago? But would someone by the name of Florian have come along back then?

We sit by the window. It's the best seat in the place. The storm is getting more so. Now it's not just little damp flakes, but big lumpy ones. It's like a scrim, and the city's getting beautiful behind it. I'm thinking: Of course, everything is matching my happiness.

I'm at a loss for words—at a loss for feelings, actually. I'm empty of all need. Not even any hopes. What's to hope? This is all I've ever wanted. From now on, in my whole life, I'll not forget the smell of jasmine tea and wet wool.

I say, "When? I mean your nose, and who did it?"

"My mother. I was twelve. Then I was thin and willowy around a nose that was as if for another person."

I'd have found him a long time ago, if not for her. As it was, he had to find me. Had to search by sight alone. Couldn't sniff me out with what he has left of his nose.

Nosing things out, sorting smells. . . . It's not as easy as you'd think. I can smell accidents about to happen. Does he expect me to keep him safe? A big, fat man like he is . . . (his hands are twice as big as mine and look so strong) and little me, looking out for him, not letting anything bad happen? I'll do it.

I used to have lots of good reasons to live alone, but now I can't think of a single one.

I say, "Yes." It pops out by itself.

He says, "I know."

So it's settled just like that.

The nose knows how to get from here to there, so I'll be the one to lead us where we have to go.

I say, "Follow me."

He says, "Lead on."

And the nose does know. We're at the river. We sit under a bridge. We put our arms around each other. Why wait? It's what we've always wanted.

Kiss? It's not as easy as I thought. Noses in the way. His not so much, but mine especially. At first we can't figure out how to do it. You'd think we'd know by now, but neither of us does. We almost give up. We do.

Should I kiss his cheeks? I'll bet his are soft as pillows. I put my hand to my own to see how mine will feel to him. Bony, that's for sure. Long. Too much chin.

But then we try lips again. And, necks cricking sideways more than is comfortable, we manage.

There's no turning back now, so we don't. We go ahead, risking. That's all right. It's what I knew I'd have to do in order to succeed in finding whatever I would find, though I didn't know it would be Florian. What I know now! I'll never be the same again. I've found who I am, here behind my nose. And who Florian is behind his. If you can call that being behind *anything*.

His big, flat face. . . . Without his real nose, it looks babyish, while I look like a vulture. I suppose that's what he likes in me.

Off we go again. (Ours will be the love story of the century, even though the century has only just begun.)

Off we go, skip and splash, raise our noses. Or I do. I smell the weather changing for the better. I smell blue sky. I smell need. I smell—it's all over both of us—sex.

Do you know they chopped the noses off ancient statues and ground them up just as they did penises, to use as aphrodisiacs? And do you know? The ground-up noses worked just as well.

AFTER ALL

It's one of those days, rainy and dull, when you remember all the times you said or did the wrong thing, or somebody else said the wrong thing to you, or insulted you, or you insulted them, or they forgot you altogether, or you forgot them when you should have remembered. One of those days when everything you say is misunderstood. Everything you pick up you drop. You knock things over. You slip and fall. And your nose is running, your throat is sore. *And* it's your birthday. You're a whole 'nother year older. At your age, one more year makes a big difference.

At least I'm alone. No need to bother anyone else with myself, and my temper, my moods, my dithering and doubts, my yackety-yacking when others want to keep quiet.

And my voice is too loud. I laugh when nothing's funny.

Having had a night of nightmares about what might have happened if this or if that bad thing had come about. (Good no one's here, because I would be telling them the whole dream detail by detail.) Stop me if I go nattering on. I talk and talk even when I mean to keep quiet. *Especially* when I mean to be quiet.

There ought to be something else to talk about that wouldn't be my long, long dream or the weather, where the sunshine, gruesome and garish, causes spots before my eyes.

It's time to go somewhere. Anyplace else is better than here. It will be a makeshift journey. No purpose except to get away. I didn't pack. I didn't plan. I won't bring a map. I can't depend on strangers because of my beady eyes. I have a mean smile.

You see, this evening I was sitting in the window of my cottage looking out at my piece of desert with squawking quail in it. (Tobacco! Tobacco!) I was thinking to write a story about somebody who needs to change (the best sort of character to write about), and all of a sudden I knew it was *me* who had to change. Always had been, and I didn't realize it until that very minute. So I have to be the one to go on a journey, either of discovery or in order to avoid myself.

I won't pack a lunch. I won't bring a bottle of water. I know I don't look my best but I don't even want to. My hair. . . . I don't want to think about it.

If you crawl out the hole in the back fence, right away you're on the road to town.

"A pointless coming and going," they'll say, and I'll say, "That's exactly what I'm after."

I've lived all this time a different kind of pointless coming and going: Concerts and plays and then reading all the books one *should* read—that everybody else was reading, so how could you not read them? But this will be a different kind of pointless. I don't care what they think.

They!

Why can't they just take me for granted like most children do? Being chased by your own children. How could that happen? Being followed and watched.

I suppose to catch me out, *non compos mentis*. *Mentos*? If that's what it's called. *Mentis sanos*? If I can remember the words for it, how can it be true? Except I don't remember.

They'll see me if I leave in the daytime.

It's one of those nights with a fingernail moon. It's one of those nights with a cold wind. Who'd expect Grandma to be out in this weather and at this hour? Who'd expect Grandma to be walking down the road to town, leaning against the wind. (It's been a long time since I was allowed to drive.)

That's my son behind the arborvitae. My middle daughter by the carport. (Carport without a car.) I see her shadow. My oldest? I don't know where she is.

"Mama, you're not as young as you think you are." (I *am*. I *am*. Exactly as young as I think I am. I'm maybe even a little more so.)

I'll be set upon by this and that. Snarling dogs let free to roam at night. Maybe there's other snarling people like myself out here. Hard rain or hail. Smells that sting the nose. Sky, a preposterous overdose of stars. If I fall asleep behind a creosote bush, what will come get me?

I suppose I ought to trust in some sort of god or other. There's one under every bush. At least I hope so. Feats of faith. I can do that.

Here I am, gone. Forever. So far, forever. I regret my books. The children will keep all the wrong ones. The good ones will get thrown in the garbage. My best scarf—they'll think it's just any old scarf. They don't know I got it from my own grandma. I told them, but they forget.

What I've done for them! It was endless! Of course that was a long time ago.

But after that, what I've done for my art! If that is art. I don't

know what to call it. I could call it leisure time. My hard-working leisure time. Most of it spent looking out the window.

But art is . . . *was* my life. I mean looking out the window so as to think about it was.

I always had plenty of ideas. I didn't exactly *have* them. They grew—little by little, a half an idea at a time. First, part of a phrase and then a person to go with it. After a person, then a little corner of a place for the person to be in.

Can I make it through town before morning? It's six miles to the other end of it. If I do, I might be able to get my usual nap. I could rest in the ditch by the side of the road.

I've disguised myself. Big floppy hat, sand-colored bathrobe. . . . (I forgot not to wear my slippers.) I had a hard time deciding how I could be unobtrusive and yet not be like myself, because I've always tried to look unobtrusive. There's those earth colors which I always wear anyway.

I already stay in the corners and the shadows. I already never look people in the eye. I already hunch over. Now I'm shuffling because my slippers keep falling off.

I hear footsteps. When I stop to listen, they stop, too. I knew one of them would follow. I wonder which it is? You can't get rid of your children.

"I'm laughing at you . . . whoever you are. Ha, ha, ha. Hear that?"

Well, I can't keep stopping and listening and laughing all the time. I'd never get anywhere. I have to keep going if I want to get somewhere or other in time for anything at all. It's bad enough when your slippers won't stay on.

If I had a diary, I'd write: Next Day, or, Day Two. (I'd have to write the days that way because I don't know the date, I hardly even know if spring or summer, but that's not a sign of *non compose* . . . whatever . . .

because I never did pay attention to things like that.)

I'd write: Had a nice nap by the side of the road, and that I don't know if long or short, but a nice one. (With my sand-colored bathrobe I'll bet I looked like a pinkish/tan rock.) I'd write how I *must* begin working on myself. They say writing things down is a good way to begin, so I'll do that. Or will when I get the diary.

If I'd brought money I could have bought one in town. Except I went through town at about dawn and the stores were closed. (If I'd brought a watch I'd know when.)

Whoever is following me has not made themselves known except in rustlings and snappings and scuffling sounds. I have to admit I'm a little bit scared.

Living in a clearing in a forest might be nice. A mountain pass would be nice, too. I'd like a view. A view can make you happy. And with a view you'd be able to see who's creeping up on you.

I've decided. I turn, sharp left, leave the road, and start straight up. It's hard going in these slippers but I have a purpose. I'm taking charge of my own life. I know exactly what I'm doing, and when, and how much and why, and the time, which is right now.

It's a cute . . . you could call it a cute pass, up there where I'm heading. The cliff walls on each side hug a marshy spot. There's an overhang to sleep under. Old icy snow to chew on. Though it's high, it's sheltered enough for there to be fairly large trees. The ground glitters all over as if with tiny chunks of gold. (If it was gold, it would be gone.) There's things to eat. I'll nibble lambs quarters and purslane. Do they grow up there? I'm probably thinking of the olden days back East. Anyway, there's wild rose hips, so small I wonder that I've ever bothered eating them but I always do.

Even from here, well below that pass, you can see fairly far. I study the landscape. The orange lichen that dots the boulders looks like something left in the refrigerator too long. The sky looks as if it's got the measles.

I see movement on the hillside below me. For sure there's something down there. I catch glimpses from the corner of my eye.

It's inevitable, your children will track you down. There they are. I didn't actually see them, but something is out there, I'm sure of it, creeping up on me. What do they want? What do they have in store for me? *If* they can catch me. Of course it *is* my birthday—or was, a couple of days ago. Perhaps they want to have a surprise party. Perhaps their arms are full of presents, paper hats, tape recorders for the music for dancing. . . . What if they're bringing champagne? What a lot to carry! No wonder they haven't been able to catch me.

If they bring me sweets, they'll have forgotten I can't eat chocolate. If blouses, they'll be too big. (A mother is supposed to be bigger than the children, but they forget I'm the smallest now.) If paper hats, I suppose I'll have to put one on. If horns, I suppose I'll have to blow one.

Maybe, if I can get far enough ahead, they'll give up. I try to hurry but it's getting steeper. At least, if they're carrying all those things, they're having a hard time, too. The champagne will be the heaviest. I suppose they'll have those plastic champagne glasses you have to put together, and I suppose they think that'll be a good job for Grandma. I won't do it. They can't make me.

If I *did* have a diary, and if I *did* write anything in it, it would be misunderstood anyway, just like everything I say is, so the first thing I'd write (page one, January first) should be: *That isn't what I mean at all.*

But I'd rather write about how my feet hurt and how it looks like rain.

Once I get up there, I may have to stay forever. I might not be able to climb down. A long time ago when I was still spry, I came up to that very spot to die, but I didn't die after all. I waited and waited but nothing happened except I had my usual dizzy spell. I had to climb back down, though I had to wait until the spell passed. Good I hadn't told anybody.

This time I haven't thought (even at my age!) about what would be the best way to die. I know I should, but, after I didn't die back then at the top of my favorite pass, thinking about it began to seem a waste of valuable time. I was contemplating art. That seemed the important thing to do.

But, from now on, what to hope for out of life (and art)? Or is it the art part that's done with? I'm still full of longing . . . so much longing . . . for. . . I don't know what, but I'm breathless with it.

I lie down with a rock for a pillow. I rest a long time. When I wake up, I think: Day two or day three or day four? Even if I had a diary I'd be all mixed up already.

But now I'm thinking perhaps my own attic is the best place to disappear into. I could go down to the kitchen any time I wanted. I could get clean underwear. They say, "East or West, home is best."

I start back. It'll be easier going down because I won't keep stepping out of my slippers all the time.

Something streaks by. Lights up the whole sky. Dizzying, dazzling even in the daytime. (Talk about spots in front of your eyes!) Well now, *there's* something beautiful. One nice thing is happening on my birthday. (If it still is my birthday.)

The ground shakes. Boulders come bounding down—whole sides of mountains. . . .

Who would have thought it, the end of the world as if just for me. Right on time, too, before my slippers give out entirely. We're all going together, the whole world and me. Isn't that nice! Best of all, I'm in at the end. I won't have to miss all the funny things that might have happened later had the world lasted beyond me. So, not such a bad birthday after all.

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