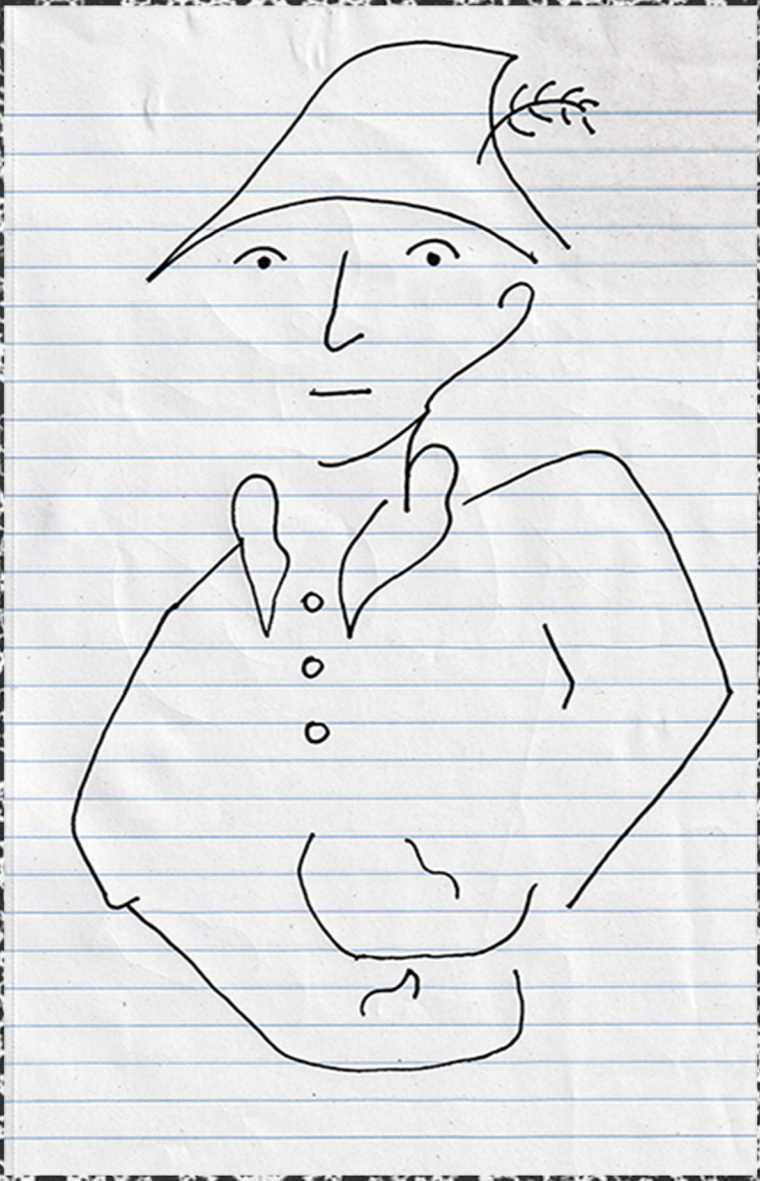
MOUNTAIN MUSIC



A PROSE COMPOSITION BY

LOIS LEARDI

GRACE COMES TO THE MOUNTAIN

—Edison said standing in the general store that she was a famous poetry writer down off and out there in the world where he had gone to find a wife and that we damn well all show some respect or he'd.

—You could see some of the people riled up about a threat like that but nobody said nothing mostly out of respect and embarrassment for Edison making a fool of himself to come up here with a stranger a woman with soft useless hands that never gutted nor chopped nor hauled a damn thing except maybe a fountain pen.

—She stood behind him in the store with her face down and she was not native to us nor born here and we don't trust anybody not and she was with her face down knowing that and nobody caring she was some famous poetry writer for all she looked like a poor dumb idiot of a woman.

—I never knew Edison to look so stupid with that golden band on his finger it might as well have been through his nose and all the store gone quiet until one of our own women blew her snot into an old bandanna.

HER NAME IS GRACE

—And Edison said her name ain't in English but here she's called Grace just plain Grace and don't get no funny notions that she don't speak regular nor know every word you say because the God's truth is she's a

crackerjack famous writer in English and now she's my wife to boot so no monkey business.

—And Edison swept her round from behind him and we saw her so little boned like a sparrow.

—And then if Mary didn't step on up forward from the corner where she'd been studying fishhooks and put out her rough hand and take the woman's and say welcome Grace and one of the men coughed maybe Mary's husband and the people started to come over and wish Edison joy and shake his woman's hand too.

—But it was underneath someplace under the floorboards that we knew our mountain was being shook and we knew it in that way of knowing our land and of knowing a violation to us to our ancestors to the dirt that was recoiling under the tiny feet of a stranger woman from the outside of us.

OLD MAN

—We are not stupid people here though we may be lawless and shifty eyed yet we are skillful and bright and we have our ways and superstitions yes but we are intuitive and natural and respectful of the land our land our mountain.

—We don't have much truck with the world but we handle money when we have to and do odd jobs and fashion craftwork and make our music for folks that have little use to us.

—Take young Tom the singer of home-songs playing the roadhouses and bars down there or Eliza's whittling of figures and such or the many men who work in stone and roofing and all that or our women who go down to clean or work at cashiering oh we know about down there only they don't know about us.

—I never seen such a thing as this Grace come up here on Edison's arm and I tell you it's a lousy thing to do to the land but I'm an old man and who would listen?

TOM AND SYLVIE

—I seen young Tom eyeing Sylvie and that's just the way it ought to be two proper teenagers from right square here and to go courting is a sacred thing even though he hardly can live what with that father praying all day like a shaman and Tom with nothing but a guitar and a tip jar singing home-songs that everyone knows are made up by Sylvie who is so smart much smarter than Tom.

—And Sylvie going to the high school yet smart as a whip maybe too smart.

—I'd peg Sylvie the one to leave this mountain and bring us as much bad luck as that foreigner of Edison's.

—But Tom would have her and I know she don't love him and she I bet would drag him with her causing great clumps of earth to crumble down the mountainside and bend and tilt like the start of an exodus mark my words.

ELIZA

—And here's Eliza on her doorstep whittling and I stop to light my pipe saying how's your boy Tom this morning I got a step needs nailing on my porch.

—He's off to Sylvie's and Lizzie's God knows where roaming the woods after squirrels and Jack's in praying but I'll be happy to send Tom if he ever gets home.

—And Eliza comes from the greater mountains many year ago from up the north country where it is very rugged and backwoods much more than here and I see it in the way she handles herself so shut and stoic but she don't fool me.

—l say to her Eliza don't you fret about Lizzie for every mountain needs a roaming child and Lizzie is ours and though the whole mountain should tilt Lizzie would hold it together.

—And Eliza crosses herself and goes right back to her whittling and says we had a roaming child where I come from I just never thought I'd grow up to bear one of 'em.

—l seen a little quiver at her mouth but I wouldn't shame her to mention it.

—Did Jack meet that Grace yet I said she could stand some praying over.

—l was a stranger once Eliza said and it ain't comfortable so we all ought to help her and it was then my turn to feel a twitch of shame and I know to try not to say it again old busy-body that I am so I said Eliza if Lizzie's

brought up any fish lately I'd like to buy a couple trout or so and she said she had some in newspaper in the freezer and I said that would be fine.

GRACE

—The light pops like a stun-gun up here; all at once morning takes shape. Black branches, orange horizon surreal in its momentous silence, then birdsong comes in like a Greek chorus in this vast ridge of mountaintop. It is fearsome, lonesome, to rise from a warm marriage bed and tumble into the out-of-doors blindly, blinded, by the spookiness of nature, by the hanging spider-like nature of intertwined branches rubbing, creaking, screaming, in a backdrop of fiery orange.

—I chose it. I chose Edison, and I chose this.

—Goosebumps appear on my bare forearms; I am not dressed for fetching logs. Yes, I have chores already, harmless and tender chores, but expectations placed squarely before me. I have told him yes. Now it is my job to light the woodstove in this streaky and ragged dawn. Gloves. I see them hooked to a nail on the woodshed door. Thick leather, some sort of hide, stitched with some sort of gut, homemade, I put them on as if they were still creatures, and they are warm.

—Edison kisses me passionately. Then he is off in the truck, down the mountain, I know where he works; only a week ago he was running the snowplow at what used to be my house, down there, down off the mountain.

A MOUNTAIN INTERVIEW

Author: You are Tom the folksinger's mother:?

Mother: Yes.

—What are the names of your husband and daughter?

—My husband is Jack, and my little girl is Elizabeth, or Lizzie, as we call her. And I'm called Eliza.

—Are you a mountain woman?

—That's so, though I come from the great mountains of the north country. This mountain is more like a little hill, as to where I come from. Here we have all the comforts, as well.

—So you are used to a rugged life.

—l don't know what my life is called. I don't know much different. I guess some folks have it fancy, but I don't know anything about it. I surely don't look with lust on them.

—Tell me about Lizzie.

—Talk around here is making it out that Lizzie's got trouble. I don't guess I see that. She's a girl, same as I was. She does her life, same as I did, same as I do now. She's got the mountains in her eyes, that one. She'll do well in her time.

—And you have no concern for her schooling, or her social skills?

—Schooling don't matter a row of pins, where I'm from. I don't know what the other is, social something, but my girl is a fine girl. She knows her living, and she minds to it.

—Does the law give you trouble about her?

—Nah. Lizzie ain't in no trouble.

—Tell me how you and Jack live together, Eliza. I don't much know about him, either, though I've seen him meditating. That's about all.

—Jack, he's a holy man. I respect that. I stick to the old religion, to the Mass, and to my beads. That's mystery enough for me. But Jack, he goes deep into the well. Sometimes he don't come back for hours on end. We live together well enough, though I wish I had a whole passel of children. I don't mean that we ain't no good, that way, but Jack takes safety. He doesn't want a mess of children swarming round him, on account of his prayers. He's got to keep the place quiet for that. Me, I've gotten used to it. Jack only knows this hill, he doesn't know the silence of the great mountains. But he knows how quiet I can make it here and keep it that way, just like keeping a house, that silence, all nice and tidy. I guess that's how we stay in love so good. There's this silence.

—What do you do with your time, Eliza?

—I whittle, same as my mother and grandmother. I whittle these things, oh, toys and bird callers, little animals and humans, and Christmas people, you know, for the mangers, and all sorts of things. There's quite a call for my whittling in the craft shops round here, down

in the towns off the mountain. I make all manner of things, and it fetches in money. A man comes and picks up my stuff.

—What does Tom think of your work?

—My son Tom's so sassy lately. He doesn't want to own up to his own mother and father. Kids down here get that way. They want to disown their own parents. Makes them look like a bunch of orphans, not one saying they got a mother and father, like they all just dropped out of the sky somehow. I don't understand it. Tom seems ashamed of my whittling, of his Dad's praying, of all manner of thing. l see.

—Have you heard his music?

—Once in a while I hear him tinker about with his guitar. We're mostly quiet here. But sometimes I get to hear him when his Dad's not at home. He can make a nice home-song, but not like I know from my own people. Sometimes I wish I could get that boy to go up to the real mountains and learn some music, if that's what he wants to do with his life. But if he's going to stay down here, he best learn to survive. He can be so lazy. Two whole years out of that high school, and he ain't employed yet.

At thirty-nine years, Eliza was a firmly thin woman, with large bones, strong, wide shoulders and big hands. She had black hair, unlike the rest of the family, and blue eyes. Her nose and cheekbones were thick and defined, hinting at Indian blood, though her mouth and chin were disappointingly small in that strong face. Otherwise she would have been one of those beauties known as

'striking'. Yet not being beautiful or rather, stopping short of just being beautiful, was a good thing for her, in the place and situation she found herself. A gorgeous wife was not what one would want on the mountain. Plain women, who spoke and lived plainly, were almost a necessity there.

What made Eliza so different from a wife, like, say, Grace, was that Eliza went off the mountain regularly. Several times a week, she went down to the town, driving the pickup truck that Jack seemed to have little use for.

Once there, she would stroll through the shops and department stores, bearing in mind that she had a small sum of pocket money, carefully separated from the household expenses, derived from her whittling commission. A piece of chocolate or licorice was always high on her list, along with whatever she could find for herself, and some little treat for Lizzie. Eliza loved to eat candy, riding back in the truck, listening to the radio on full blast, knowing that she had a sack on the seat beside her with some small toy, like crayons or a paper doll set for her girl, and perhaps a cheap box of handkerchiefs or a bottle of imitation perfume for herself. These things would be gleaned from the aisles of the dollar store, along with provisions for the house and kitchen in the plastic bags on the floor. And the radio would bring her all kinds of fresh, sassy music to sing brokenly along with, bopping the palms of her hands on the big steering wheel, her smile wide on her small mouth.

To the world around her, downtown, she was only a homely, skinny woman with a faded red bandana tied around her head, and a pair of impossible black rubber

galoshes, and raw, bony hands poking out of the ends of a tattered flannel shirt, something laughable, while to Eliza's mind, the folks around her were soft ne'er-do-wells, people who would buy a perfectly good duck caller and not have a clue what to do with the thing except to give it to the baby. She saw the lot of them as incompetents with too much education; they saw her, simply, as a joke.

What can be said about Eliza was that she had a very rich inner life. With no one to talk to, she had a habit of holding dialogues with herself, sparring off one set of ideas with another, as if there were two of her, sometimes playing devil's advocate, at other times nailing down gains, problem solving, giving pep talks, cutting through confusions when a decision had to be made, or, at the best of times, inventing and re- inventing a philosophy of life. These dialogues could take place anywhere, at any time, as a sort of ongoing thing, her soap opera, as she was fond of calling it to herself. Often she was seen with her lips parted and moving slightly, deeply engaged in one of these dialogues, and looking like some sort of madwoman. This was of no concern to her; Eliza was a woman who had little use for the world outside her own body and the bodies of the people in her family.

Objects, however, were prime. In fact, touch was her most preferred of the senses, and Eliza's sense of touch was developed almost to the level of an artform.

—So you go off the mountain often.

—Uh-huh.

—Tell me, Eliza, do you see the mountain and the town as two opposed places?

—Perhaps some up here do, but not me. It's like I said, this mountain ain't no more than a little hill, to my mind, and the town ain't no more than a little town. How could they be different? Same folks, everywhere you go. People feeling the same things-that's what it is mostly. Things in their heads. Folks ought to use their hands more, and their heads less. There'd be a lot less trouble for them.

—So deep thinking is not high on your list of important things.

—That's not it. A body can't avoid thinking deep thoughts. It's in the nature of man and of creaturehood to be thinking deep all the time. But it can be a nuisance, all right. It's the hands that got to keep busy—the old hands and feet. I can make a living out of my whittling. You can't make much of a living out of deep things, unless you're some sort of writer or doctor or such. Plain folks got to make do with laboring, and that suits most fine. It's when they think they're something they're not, and put on airs, that I get rattled. People thinking their thoughts are worth money and such. It's a bad mistake they make. They learn it when the pot's empty at the end of the day.

—Do you consider yourself a simple person then?

—There are no simple people. That's the mistake them intellectuals make. There ain't a simple person alive.

—Tell me about Jack, Eliza.

—Like I said, Jack's a holy man. He's got the mystic in him. My boy thinks that don't count for nothing, but he's wrong. People like Jack, I think sometimes they hold the entire planet on its axle, if you know what I mean.

—No, I don't know what that means.

—It's the ones who are deeply holy, deep in touch with the Maker, that keep us from spinning out into space and breaking up into particles. I believe that.

—I see. Now, you said that you and Jack have a great deal of silence. When you communicate, how is that?

—Well, we don't make all this language about it. I don't guess I have anything to answer on that account.

A SECOND INTERVIEW WITH ELIZA, ON TOM'S GIRLFRIEND SYLVIE

—I have heard some gossip on this mountain that Sylvie expressed an interest in the great mountains to the north. Why did you discourage her, Eliza?

—The great mountains ain't no place for a young girl who's a foreigner to go to alone. They call this place down here 'insular', but that ain't nothing compared to the way the folks up in them mountains are bound together. Here we don't take kindly to strangers, but up there, well, a stranger isn't just not welcome, why, up there, a stranger could come to genuine harm. That girl could find herself the victim of something. I ain't stereotyping, but things do happen to people who try to get into that region I

come from. You got to be born to those hills, and have some generations on you when you're born, else you could come to, well, harm, real harm.

—Is that true, Eliza? I find it hard to believe that no one can go there. Why, tourists go there.

—Yes. Tourists go there and get tolerated, because they feed the people. And every once in a while, some oddball type, like a writer, or a holy person so some such can make their way up there and live quietly and be put up with. But not a pretty young girl, no, I don't see that. If Sylvie were 'off,' or crazy or some such, she might be able to get away with it, she is none of the above. She may have romantic dreams about being rugged up there and all that, but that's just teenager dreams and fantasies talking. Sylvie's too much flesh and blood, and any fool can see it.

—Why did you leave there?

—l was hungry. Literally. Not many starve up there, with all the animals to hunt and trap and fish for, but my first man died, and I was hungry, and not a good shot at getting game, being a whittler, in a place where there were so many that I couldn't make a living out of it, what with so many selling to the tourist shops. I tried for a long time to bring down my own game, and fish, but I'm poorly at it, not like my young one, Lizzie, now she's a crackerjack at it, but I got hands for sticks and such, and not much else. So I was hungry.

—So you were married before you married Jack.

—l had a man. Yes. Had two children by him. Two boys, I

did. Boys that are up there still. Boys that I figure are men now.

—Do you know them, your sons?

—Not anymore. I reckon I would know whereabouts to find them, and that I'd know them if I laid eyes on them, but no, I don't know them.

—So this man died? This man you were married to?

—That's correct.

—What did he die of?

—Hunting accident. It happens. He got between a mama and her cubs. Once in awhile it happens.

—Was he alone?

—No. Edison was hunting with him.

—Edison! Grace's Edison?

—The same. I don't know Grace, though I've heard of her. Never met the woman. I just know she writes poems and that she's a stranger to this mountain, same as me. Just like Edison was a stranger to our mountains, only he'd been up there on the winter hunt since he was no more than a 5-year-old grasshopper with his Daddy, so he had some clout with us by the time of the accident. He's the one who mercy-shot my man after he was mangled beyond description or saving.

—Edison? 'Mercy-shot'? What?

—Yes. That's the plain truth. Don't go making it to be a

crime. It was a mercy. I'm forever indebted to that. Besides, it was Edison who brought me down here, and I met Jack. And so I married Jack. I can't claim I loved Jack, so soon and all, but I came to love him. Don't poke around much more in this, Mr. Author.

—But—

—I said don't poke around in it anymore.

GRACE ADJUSTING

Lines are different up here. Lines on paper. Light and shadow play out differently, and my pen cannot get its bearings.

I'm glad for that. Nothing will ever be the same, not ever that. I am delivered from the public eye, the minefield eye, the minefield that the spotlight sweeps, I no longer dazzle, glitter does not follow in my wake, nor sad drunken benefactors, nor the yo-yo world of reviewing, or critique, of stormy editors, primadonnas, cocktails and power luncheons, no longer stilettos clapping in lobbies, not one more podium, fresh off an airplane. I, Edison's wife, have fallen off the grid into a land of timeless mystery. And yes, I feel the undertones. This is no innocent spot. Fairy-dust does not hang over this mountain, no, only blood, blood, blood. Sometimes I can taste it in my very teeth. Not afraid. Sorry mountain, I am not afraid of you.

I know humans all too well to be cowed by a human soul. But the page, now that is something to fear indeed. The

page could so easily turn crazy here, in this line and light. The page could become very ill. I know the sickness of a stalled pen, but never have I encountered a deranged pen. I make a prayer for protection. I finger my amulets.

He gives me a workroom in the house. A small closet and a tiny circular window. Your office, he says proudly. He unhooks a board on the wall and it drops down neatly to a desk.

Ah, my Edison.

ELIZA'S RED COAT

The little girl Lizzie caught sight of a flash of cardinal red through the black and gray of the winter woods. She lowered her slingshot and inserted a dirty finger into the gummy left nostril of her nose. It was a genuine curiosity, to see such red and know exactly well that it was the red of her mother's red coat, up here on the mountain where that coat did not belong. Lizzie squatted down low in order to watch what would unfold. It was indeed strange, for her mother, Eliza, was switching a stick back and forth and appeared to be lollygagging along, as if taking a simple mountain walk, something Lizzie had never witnessed in her seven years, causing the girl to fall back on her bottom in the snow, almost crushing the brace of rabbits and birds she had strapped to her hip.

And what Lizzie saw then was that her mother Eliza, walking on the mountain for the pure pleasure of winter air, was not her mother at all, but a bright spirit, more than a mother, more than a housewife and whittler of

wooden birds and animals and folks, more than the supper on the table and the great steaming vat of wet soapy clothes, more than a player of jaw-harp burring away on an evening doorstep, more indeed than a human, but instead a spirit just like Lizzie was her own self, a roaming spirit of the mountain, making her akin to air and clouds and snow, just vapor, this mother, just as quiet and soft and elusive as vapor, and as fragile, and as quick of feeling, as flitting and quick as the beating heart, and it made Lizzie not want to kill anymore. It made Lizzie want to just stand there hiding in the winter woods and turn into fire.

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM

Author: I've been talking to your mother.

Tom: Uh-huh.

—Does she know that you're planning to go off the mountain?

—Beats me. I didn't tell her nothing about it.

—Do you think she doesn't care about you?

—Oh, God, here comes that tone of yours. I wish you'd stop analyzing us, like we're some kind of specimens in a lab.

—We seem to be starting this interview with you angry.

—You just put me so much in mind of a shrink. I don't guess I like that, not any more than anyone would.

—Some people would be flattered to have interest shown in them.

—Well I ain't 'some people'. I'm just old Tom, and I don't guess I like my business being spied on.

—Are you and Sylvie leaving in secret? Do you mean to go and not tell anyone?

—Well, what if we fail at it and can't make a go of it? We'd be mighty ashamed to come crawling back all hang dog. Me, I figure if nobody knows, then there ain't no damned big story to tell if we don't make it.

—So you would be saving face.

—There's better ways of putting it than that. But yeah. I don't want nobody up here laughing at my girl. Course, if they did, I'd bust their head open, but that ain't the point.

—There aren't many folksingers who would go around busting people's heads open. They are usually people of peaceable manners.

—Who said I was a folksinger? People change, you know. A person can't hang out in the same identity, all hung up with being defined as something, forever. Just because I tried the thing out, don't mean I got to stick with it. If I'm going to take care of Sylvie, I got to have a real job. Singing's fine and all, but it don't get me nothing. Best to just sing at home, to sing home-songs in a new home, me and Sylvie, singing our home-songs together. That's good enough for me. Nobody ever wanted to hear my damned songs anyway. Fuck 'em.

—Your mother seems to make a decent living with her whittling. I don't like to see you give up.

—Well, that's the way of the world. Maybe my mother's got more talent than me. Maybe even my sister's a better hunter than me. don't mean that every single person in this family has some big talent. Look at my old man. He's good for nothing. Maybe I take after him.

—Now—

—Oh sure! Analyze the hell out of that! I reckon now you'll decide I got an inferiority complex! You make me laugh! Look, reality is just reality. My reality is Sylvie, and what's real about Sylvie is that she'll be needing my looking after down there. It ain't real pretty off this mountain. It's hard-core down there I reckon. There's a lot of money flowing around down there, and I aim to have a piece of that pie. Sitting around singing, and being ignored for my trouble, ain't going to get me a pot to piss in, let alone the piss. You, you got your head in the clouds, writing your damn book and all. And my mother, oh yeah, big folk-art talent. Well, I'll tell you, I don't want to be pitied as some damn hillbilly, and made fun of down there in the bargain. I don't want to be some curiosity come down off the mountain. I don't want to be like her one bit!

—What's your dream, Tom?

—We can't afford dreams up here. We're lucky if we can scratch out food and clothes for ourselves. I got no fancy dream beyond that.

—l think that's a lie.

—Well, maybe a person's got to lie to their own self. You want to peel back another layer, big shot?

—Yes. That's exactly what I want to do. I want to find your genuine truth. I think you're all bluff and bluster at this point.

—Maybe so. Why should I tell you, or anybody, my 'truth', as you call it?

—Why not? Me, I think it's because if you say your truth, then you will have to live with it. Not me, not anyone else. You just might have to give up your reputation.

—No way. A reputation's all a man's got on this mountain, and far more important, I reckon I'll need it bad once I get off this damned mountain. A man's got to put something out there of himself, in order to survive. You think you know something about survival, but I'll tell you, you don't know a rat's ass. You got some fancy-assed notions, all right, buddy. Mister big author, doing his slick interviews, like you was turning the pages of Rolling Stone. Hell, man, you can't hold a candle to those interviewers, and you know it. You're getting nowhere fast, mister. What're you doing, poking around this mountain, anyway? You think you've gone and stumbled upon something exotic, like some fancy fish in a fish bowl? Huh? You think you're going to write about us in some fancy-assed book and get famous or some shit? I'll tell you one thing. You wrote about it your own self. I'll say it back at you. Here's exactly what you wrote down, I quote: "Beware, curious outsider. The depths here are murky. You know nothing on this mountain. You are nothing, and counted as nothing." And that, mister, is

the God's honest truth. If I was you, I'd watch my back up here.

—What are you trying to say, Tom?

—I'm just speaking a warning. Don't push us too far. Don't push me far, if you know what's good for you. That's fair warning.

—In other words, you want me to back off.

—l guess I just made that plain. You don't belong up here, man, and, to boot, you've been nosing around in people's lives, and folks don't take kindly to that here. Look, mister, this is a private place. Not many come in that we take to and not many go out once born to this mountain. All I'm saying is, don't muck around here. Me, I don't reckon I'd do much but rough you up a bit if you did me mad and angry, but there's others here would do much worse than a little rough-up. Folks get hurt around here. Can I make that anymore plain to you?

—That's very clear, Tom. And I thank you for the warning. I guess I'll have to take my chances. I've got a book to write. I mean to see it through. Are you implying that I could die in the process?

—l ain't saying nothing. Ask away, buddy. I'll tell you as best I can whatever the hell you want to know.

—Then let's get back to you and Sylvie, shall we? You're aware, Tom, that Sylvie is not in love with you. And yet you're planning to leave this mountain with her, and to set up a living situation. How do you reconcile that in your mind?

—I say it's just like I told her. She'll need me when we get there. We'll need each other. We don't know jackshit down there. Maybe she don't love me now, but once she gets all scared and discouraged down there, she'll be glad to have me, and I reckon she'll be in love with me then, right convenient and all, and sure, I'll take her back. That Sylvie is welcome in my old heart anytime. I love her that much. When she's cold and hungry enough, she'll love me quick. I can wait.

—How do you feel about leaving your sister Lizzie?

—Lizzie? Little miss Lizzie ain't got no use for a soul in this world. I don't think she even knows anybody around her exists. Hell, she feeds herself, she don't say a word, that one, she's a survivor. I don't even know if she'll notice I'm gone.

—Come on, Tom. You love her.

—Well, that's the truth. But I don't get nowhere with her. She don't so much as acknowledge I'm in the room, much less respond to a thing I say to her. I've tried. Lord, I've tried to get through to that child. But she ain't all there.

—Does she break your heart, Tom?

—l don't know. Yeah. Sometimes.

—Don't you think, if you stayed here, you could help her? Don't you think, of all the people around her, you're the one who cares, who loves her, who really would like to see her, well, you know, get well, or something?

—Lizzie ain't sick. Don't you even suspect that, buddy.

But I know what you mean. And the answer is no. I don't think it matters if I stay or go, because Lizzie just ain't there. I've tried, I tell you. Don't you think I've tried?

—I'm sure you have. I'm sure you've tried hard. But I think she will notice if you go. I think she notices a great deal. Far more than you give her credit for. And, Tom, despite what everyone sees, Lizzie is only a seven-year-old girl.

—Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? What can I do? She's got a mother and a father. What do you see them doing?

—Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Sometimes responsibility falls unfairly, Tom. It may not be right, but, you just happen to be the one who cares.

—Shit. Only, what about my life? What about my life with Sylvie? What about me?

—I'd say you've got a dilemma on your hands. A dilemma in the form of a little girl, and a girlfriend. Neither one of which seems to be showing you much affection. I'd call that a pickle, Tom.

—Well, at least you're talking straight with something useful to me. You're the big author. What am I supposed to do?

—l didn't come to advise, Tom. I just came to write it all down.

—That's one hell of a cop-out. That's nothing but passing the buck. You know you got an opinion. You already implied it. You think I ought to stay here and take care of

Lizzie.

—l can't say either way. You have to make your own destiny, Tom.

—You're one chickenshit author, man. How come you don't never assert your own self? You and your cool, professional attitude. You make me sick. You are one pansy-assed joker, a sorry sight for a man, buster. I guess I'm out of here. You ain't done nothing today but waste my time. And by the way, what I said about watching your back—that holds.

OLD MAN

—There's been some kind of writer fellow snooping round our mountain I heard tell and I said things would tilt once Edison brought that damn woman here and I bet this guy's some whore-monger from her world down there where all people who truck with words for a living are whores and lowlifes.

—Followed her here to stalk is what I say not knowing Edison will blow his brains to bits because when a man's killed another man once who's to tell.

—This writer tried to take a picture from shore of Mary out in her johnboat fishing and I seen young Tom on the footbridge grab his camera and smash it before he threw it in the water and that pussy writer just stood there seen it in my binoculars the whole thing.

—Ain't nobody taking my picture I got eyes in the back of

my head and I don't sleep no sir.

ELIZA'S WALK

Yes, Eliza was walking the mountain, just as Lizzie was seeing, and she was headed for Edison's place, slowly meandering, yet all the while intending to meet the new bride, the woman known as Grace.

Eliza was not normally friendly, it was not a feature of her nature, so she felt strangely flustered and nervous in her organs, as if swimming against a cold current, but she had set her mind as to rightness, and, as if to bolster her thoughts, she had in her pocket a small whittled carving of an old-style quill pen with a nib and shaved feathers that she had labored over, a sort of present to wish wedding joy to the woman they all said was some sort of poet. In her other pocket was Eliza's jaw-harp, just in case the conversation ran out or never got off the ground to begin with.

Mary had said the woman was like a fine greyhound, all bones and alert, silently sniffing and on guard, and of this Eliza approved, for that meant the woman was no fool.

Still, Eliza was very shy, and so she walked slowly, gathering her wits for a greeting of some sort, hoping the woman was talkative, and could bear the weight of awkwardness.

It was Grace who saw the strange bit of red in the wooded landscape. She strained to see what it could be.

Turning away, to adjust her eyes, she saw another flash in the forest, a quick movement, a rustle of some brown sort, and thought for a moment she might be going mad. She quickly bore her bundle of sticks back into the house and closed the door.

It seemed a very long while before the timid rap of knuckles on bare wood planking. Grace took a deep breath. She could not decide whether to open the door or ask through it who was there. She bit her lip, and, afraid, pulled back the latch.

A woman. In a cardinal red coat. Long lashes cast down.

“I’m called Eliza. I’m neighbor to you. I’ve come calling.”

Here the woman abruptly stopped and put a hand over her mouth. Grace let her breath out. “Welcome,” she whispered. “Please, come in. I—I’m so glad. No one has visited me here at all.” Eliza stepped over the threshold. Before Grace shut the door, again, a flurry of something in the scrub about the trees. Perhaps a deer, or fox, she thought. She turned her attention back to Eliza, her visitor.

“And I’ve just only now made coffee,” she said carefully. “Would you—?” Eliza nodded mutely.

“Did you walk very far?”

“We’re only about halfway down.”

“Oh.”

Grace clasped her nervous hands together in front of her. Eliza produced the whittled quill.

“I brung you this. I made it for your wedding-joy present.”

“Oh,” Grace said again. Then, studying the piece, “Oh!”

Eliza drew herself up.

“Coffee would be good,” she said, spreading her hands to the woodstove.

The coffee cups went flying out of Grace’s hands when she jumped at the sound of gunshot, two rapid retorts, the glass and hot liquid all in a mess about her feet, and then yet one more quick sting of a blast.

“Dammit!” she heard Eliza swear, and the woman ran out the door, shouting,

“Lizzie! Dammit, Lizzie, you stop pitching rocks at that woodshed and get over here this minute or I’ll thrash you inside your life!”

Grace closed her arms over her chest and gripped her elbows. Her heart was knocking about like a wound in her.

Soon Eliza reappeared, her fist tangled into the yellow mass of curls at a small girl’s nape.

“God bless us, I’m so sorry, ma’am. This sprout is my girl Lizzie, and she is a rascal and a scoundrel to frighten you so.”

Grace gazed down. The child was scrawny, filthy, feral, with animals hung about her hips, limp and dead, and little blue veined hands, a runny nose, and clearly not a rascal nor scoundrel as she squirmed and then stood

stock still under her mother's hand.

"She doesn't talk," Eliza said, "but she's got wits enough. And right now she's going to get down on the floor and pick up the mess she made on account of giving you fright."

And she shoved the girl gently.

"Go on, fetch a rag and a broom as best you can find. I am having a visit here with this lady."

THE AUTHOR

I will leave Grace and Eliza to their visit for a moment, for it is time I introduced my purposes on this mountain, and interjected some of my thoughts on what I have observed.

Several things bear noting. First of all, I have been threatened a few times for even being here, in this territory, on this mountain, by various of its inhabitants, and this is nothing more than a pure affront to me. No one can seriously make noise at me without fluffing up my dander, so the reader must know that I am in a fine temper over these persons. It is one thing to be physically assaulted, which carries no weight with me, and quite another to be intellectually challenged by a pack of dolts. To me these people can seem like pack mules, mute, brute, barely in touch with the realm of thought, and less so with emotional insight. The business of acceptance is so deeply ingrained that reflection seems as foreign to them as I do. I feel like a dentist pulling the proverbial teeth to get even the ghost of a feeling from them. Their thoughts are primitive, their lives are primitive, and I am

no field recorder nor am I fascinated and charmed by their culture.

No, I am here after one thing, and one thing only. The poems. The poems of Grace.

The poems of Grazia di Paolo.

And what the hell is she doing? She is visiting some 'whittler' and her mute offspring. If that isn't utterly ridiculous enough, she is waiting for some murderer of a husband from the dinosaur era to arrive home from work at the end of each day.

I mean, I am talking about an internationally acclaimed poet. Yes, I am angry.

Waste makes me extremely angry.

So, let's get this straight: I am not a folklorist. I have not come for the mountain laurel. I have come for a manuscript, and I intend to get one.

She knows me. Dammit, she knows me. Wasn't I her publisher? Wasn't l, if briefly, her lover?

And she doesn't know I am here.

But she will, oh she will, if I have to drag her kicking and screaming out of this nightmare world.

GRACE ALONE

I fell out of tree once, like a little baby bird, fluttering forever between heaven and earth, and it feels like that

now, again, in my life, and what contentment there is, knowing that the splat is yet a long time coming from now.

I love my life. I love it here, at this small plank dropped down from the wall in this small closet with this small round window. The silence roars like a great beast, or perhaps like a great bell. The hours are luscious and extravagant with looped lines of handwriting uninterrupted, flowing, flowing as they never did before, with honesty, with an honest elegance such as I did not think possible. Hardly a thing bears crossing out, not on the page, not in life.

I have made the right choices.

How monastic of me! For there is no turning back from this now, the solemn vows of mountain life have been made and sealed on the altar of seclusion, and every day is mine sequestered, until he returns in his truck, and it is then that I rise to meet a husband who is convenient, compact in his every thought and move, quiet and a stranger. We give nothing to each other, lend no secrets, offer only the animal stripped of its ability to articulate, and in this we are wise and crafty and healthy in lovemaking. How little he knows. How little I know of him.

“Be careful of that kid,” He said this morning on leaving. “She ain’t normal, and she’ll bite the very hand that feeds her.”

I was arranging dried apple and a bit of peppermint candy on the stump by the woodshed.

“Edison, she’s just a little girl.”

“She’s a roaming child, and there are powers there in that that you ought not toy with, woman.”

The way he said it. A shiver went up the bones of my spine, across the flesh of my back. It didn’t have anything to do with Lizzie. It was the tone of Edison. I was being told something. I was being told I had best know my place under his thumb, caveman-style, and it hollowed something out in my back, surely as a welt from a belt buckle, the very first sting, with the ominous knowledge that more were to follow. Woman. Not Grace. Not darling.

And I watched how quickly I buried that. How I stuffed it into numbness like an excused afterthought at my table. No, I thought, I didn’t hear that right.

And later, at the little desk in the little closet, I wrote: I love my life.

What was I saying? I love and value my life enough to not be—or was I saying, hastily, all is so very well here.

The bits of treat I had laid out were gone from the stump by midday.

OLD MAN

You know she’s going to see what sort she’s gone and married that Edison is one crazy thing one of the roughest men on this mountain and I don’t know how in hell’s name he sweet talked some woman when he ain’t

never had a kind word nor time of day for any human no he's the quiet silent bastard of this place that would cut you as soon as look you in the eye and that woman's going to find that out right quick once she crosses him in even the slightest way. He's vigilant and oh so patient while he's all the while scoping out how to come in for the kill.

And I don't lose no sleep over her because she don't belong here to begin with.

Now Sylvie she's just as much a fool save for the fact that she got involved with a kid from here but mark my word she is going to find out on the day young Tom finally snaps with all that is in him and beats the daylights out of her be it on or off this mountain.

Always picking the wrong people these damn lovers just wanting sex and more sex and not using their wits one little bit to look down the road at what's going to be what I call the future and me I see the future right clear now I'm old and I see it hard and bright and the future spells disaster when two couple up for no reason other than hormones so I say let them die in each other's arms and sometime literally that is so.

SYLVIE

Tom has this great little sister. Lizzie. She's terrific. I admire that little girl. She's so self-sustaining, so very independent. I'd like to be half as strong as Lizzie is. She just goes her own way in this world. It's quite remarkable to see her in action, bringing home all this food and stuff,

and she doesn't care a damn for society, or for school, or for even being sociable, even talking to people. I would like to be like Lizzie. Then I wouldn't have to worry what others think of me, and I could just go on and be as creative as I chose to be, zero consequences to deal with. I wouldn't feel an ounce of responsibility for anyone but myself. I wouldn't have to take care of Tom's feelings, his need to be hanging on me all the time. I wouldn't have to worry about my mother, and what she might be thinking of me, nor of my brothers and sisters, and how I could make their lives better, once I got off the mountain. I could go on and write my novel, and I wouldn't have to think once of getting published, nor of worrying about fame and fortune. I could just really be myself. I could live in my own world, like Lizzie does, and completely let go of all expectations put on me. I could do my own thing. What freedom! God, what freedom Lizzie has!

There's a great freedom for potential once a person has been left utterly alone.

When you leave a person alone, they can develop in a million different directions, drawing out the very best of their creativity, sort of in a perfect vacuum, and I think that's a marvelous thing.

Sometimes I feel like I have to shoulder so much, so much stuff and people that don't really belong to me, responsibilities that shouldn't be weighing on me at all. It's just not fair. I'd like to shrug the entire world off of me, and just go somewhere and live alone, alone and free.

I don't see how I can really write about the world, when I

haven't ever seen it. I've got this need to collect experiences, almost like a research project. I'd like to go down into the world and just see it, and live it, for a year or so, just aimlessly making the connections between me and all that I see there. I'd like to just catalogue all that happens to me, and then sit down and write a fine book about it. Tom's always talking about fame, but that's not what I'm after. Fame doesn't come cheap. I keep telling him that. You have to live a great deal before fame, and all in between. You have to acquire wisdom, and street smarts, and somehow blend them together, long before you're ready to handle fame. Tom seems to think you just go sit on a corner somewhere and sing songs, and before you know it, you've got a reputation as the guy who sings on the corner, and that's fame to him! God, he's so naive that way, it's very hard not to laugh, very difficult not to poke fun at Tom. He really is an ignorant mountain boy.

I would go about leaving the mountain more cautiously. I would go down there slowly; I would make little forays into the world, like dipping a toe in the lake in early spring. You don't just dive in there, or you could get the bends. You could get in real trouble, even lose your life. I think Tom's got that hillbilly mentality that just shirks off danger, doesn't count the cost, just rushes headlong and headstrong into whatever he wants to do. It's impulsive. I have more control than that. I have more patience. I can see the dangers and the opportunities, and I can weigh them out and not take any chances. I think that's the way to proceed. I think that's the way to guarantee success for myself. People like Tom crash and burn, and never see the sun they set out for.

I know that Tom's mother goes off the mountain a lot. But she doesn't say much.

I'd really like to engage her in a conversation about it, about the world down there. I mean, I caught glimpses of it when I was in high school, from the other kids, the way they dressed, the way they spoke, their mannerisms, but I never hung out with them. I always felt that I was different, maybe superior, maybe inferior, but just not part of them. I wonder how Tom's mother feels when she goes down there, if she feels like that, just not quite fitting in somehow. I wonder if it's because I'm still a teenager, or if it's a mountain thing for sure. It seems like we're branded up here before we even get a chance. It's like we've got 'mountain person' stamped on our foreheads or something. It puts a distance between us and them. They stereotype us. I feel like I never stood a chance in school with something like that over my head. It was hard. It was real hard, you know?

I wonder if Tom's mother feels the same. I'd really like to talk to her.

But that lady just doesn't seem available somehow.

According to Tom, she's just and old hillbilly woman anyway. I mean, even worse off than us, since she comes from the big mountains. I guess it's kind of sad for her, and yet maybe easier, in a way, since she has so little left to lose. I mean, she was a fish out of water coming down here to this mountain, so she probably doesn't much give a rat's ass what people think of her in the first place. That would make it easier for her to go off the mountain, whether people laughed at her down there or not, she

wouldn't mind.

I cared a lot about being laughed at in high school. They would laugh at my clothes, or the way I spoke. l worked hard at my speaking, and I fixed my clothes as best I could. But mostly I just showed them how smart I am. I read books those kids couldn't hope to understand in a million years. I studied so hard on my own that I just got bored to death with all the junk they were teaching there. I made a world of my own. I made an intellectual world that I felt fine in. If they could walk away from me in the hallways, well, I could walk away from them in the big hallway of life. Maybe I could have learned something from those kids if I'd been more patient. Maybe they would have eventually let me into their world. But I turned my back just the same. Heck, they'll all be sorry when my first novel comes out. They'll be sorry when the papers write about me, or even when I'm on a TV talk show. It's me who's going places, not them.

Tom's mother, now she went someplace. She made a whole living out of her whittling. She's awfully good at it. Tom says her whittling's been handed down, from generation to generation up in the big mountains, both the men and the women learning it from the time they can hold a knife, which comes real early on up there.

I'd like to see the big mountains, the real mountains. There's a part of me that would rather go there than down to the stupid town below here. Something in me that would rather go up, up, to someplace really grounded and real. Not this pseudo- mountain I was born on. I don't think we know here what real mountain people are. We just have always play-acted at it here,

compared to people like Tom's mother. She's the real article, you bet.

I'd like to be strong like that. Strong and self-reliant. I'd like to not let anything get to me, not have to prove myself to anybody, ever, just answer to my own self. And I'd like to live alone and free, like a hermit, up in the real mountains, writing my book, and hunting and gathering to feed myself, and chopping wood to heat my little cabin; oh, I can just picture how fine that would be for me! I'd be so strong and sturdy and healthy. I wouldn't have to deal with anyone, nor be responsible or accountable to a soul and no one could laugh at me, because there wouldn't be anybody there! I would fill my cabin with books, just a little hut in the mountainside loaded up with books, and maybe people would come from miles around to talk to me, to interview me, like that author, and I'd be famous in all the territory round about. Folks would be in awe of me.

That's a far better vision of the future than sitting on a street corner singing songs with Tom to get change and stuff. It makes us look pitiful. I find it absurd, to tell the truth. It's no future at all, as far as I'm concerned. Tom is so stupid. He just doesn't think big enough. It's like he's a mule with blinders on. He only focusses on one small gray area in front of him, and never bothers to dream out the rest.

I wish I could get Tom's mother to tell me about the big mountains. I'm scared, though, that she'd discourage me. I know on this mountain we don't take to outsiders. It must be even worse to be a stranger up there. What would they think of me? What would they do to me up

there?

ELIZA'S PLAIN TRUTH (ELIZA AND SYLVIE)

—Tom ain't here just now, girl.

—l didn't come to see Tom, ma'am. I've come to see you. I been meaning to ask you all about the world down there off this mountain.

—l reckon you went to high school some. Didn't that teach you nothing about the folks down there?

—It taught me that they're in and we're out.

—Ain't so, girl. Folks is folks. Folks got hearts and minds, same all over this world.

—l never thought of it that way, ma'am. Do you mean to say—but surely there's a difference between us and them. If there wasn't, we wouldn't be up here, and they wouldn't be down there. But, if you're right, and if you please, ma'am, could you tell me all about the town, and what can be had there, you know, for a girl like me—how a living could be made and such. And what's to be had down there, you know, goods and all.

—Well, well. Have you got avarice disease, young one? Are you lusting after glitter and gold and all manner of things? Sure, I see it in your eyes—you'd be wanting fancy clothes and fancy eating, and buying your way straight to hell and back, and I'll tell you where it would

all land you. Plain right back here, is all.

—No, ma'am, it's not after such that I want. I want a living off this mountain, one direction or another, north or south. North to the great mountains, or south to the town. Just somewhere off this mountain. I'm set on going off the mountain.

—Why so? What's anywhere that ain't here? You got a heart beating in you that feels and a mind ticking in you that thinks, along with a body to move you about, and a pretty one at that, so what difference does it make if you do your feeling here, and your thinking here, and your moving about here?

—I just think the feelings and the thoughts and all would be different somewhere else. I mean, ma'am, if a person exposes themselves to a new surrounding, why, that person's bound to find feelings and thoughts inside that they didn't know they had. Things unfamiliar can bring something out of a body, so I think.

—Well, that's perceptive, child. I reckon you got a point at that. There's some truth in what you say. When I go off the mountain, I see some things different. Not people, they're just as ignorant or smart wherever you go, but yes, Lord, town makes a soul touch on things that can't be seen up here, and, as for the great mountains, well, child, I'd have to discourage you there. Not many attempt to go up there. More come down, but hardly none goes up. There ain't no living up there, less you been born to it.

—How is that, ma'am? Surely a generation's got to start

new with someone.

—Not many. No, not many. Well, if a girl married on up there, into it, I reckon she'd grow up quick. She'd have one hard time of it. Her children wouldn't be looked much on. And she'd be well-nigh invisible to the folks there. It'd be a hard lot. She'd have to bear it best she could.

—Well, what of town, then? Would it be easier, say, for a person from this mountain, to go there, and someday hope to be acceptable to them?

—It's more likely, though I can't say I'd encourage it. You got to have a mighty tough skin down there. Can't go sniveling around getting your feelings hurt. Got to stand tall, walk proud, and almost have the power to part The Red Sea, when you walk through that town. No, they don't take kindly, but that's just fool ignorance, I reckon. You got to know yourself. Know yourself in a way that nobody can subtract from.

—Do they stare, and all? Do they poke fun?

—Of course, just like babies in the marketplace. It's been the story from the beginning of time, girl.

—I don't think I'd like that much.

—Then I don't suppose you should go down there. You're young yet. Young ones aren't sturdy on their feet yet. They get all hurt and red in the face. No, I don't suppose a young pretty girl like you ought to go down there. You could get yourself in a mess, young lady.

—But ma'am? If I went with Tom?

—Tom! You expect Tom's going to shield you from the world there? Oh, bless me, child, excuse me, I don't mean to laugh so. It's a funny thought, though. Bless me! I don't mean to be so wicked to you! There now, don't go all red, girl. See, this is just what I mean. You young ones are so sensitive. Come, surely you don't think you can hide behind Tom? Better to hide behind an old woman's skirts than my son.

—Your skirts, then, ma'am? I mean, what I'm saying is, that a thought just came to me. Why, ma'am, would you take me down there, on one of your trips? Oh, ma'am, would you?

—What? What's that? Why, I don't mind. I'd take you on one of my trips, sure, girl.

—Oh, ma'am, it would mean the world to me.

—Well, then, consider it done. I guess there ain't no time like the present. I'm planning on going this very afternoon, and you're welcome, if you think you can stand it.

—Oh, yes! Only, what will I wear?

—Just what you got on. Child, don't never be nothing other than what you are in this world. Remember old Eliza told you that.

—Yes, ma'am.

—Now look, here's Tom coming home. Hello, boy.

—Hello, Mama. Hello, Sylvie. Well, if you two don't look like cats that ate the canary. What's going on here behind

my back?

—He's perceptive, that one, ain't he, girl? It ain't nothing, only I'm going to take this girlfriend of yours down off the mountain for the afternoon, so she can view that big wide world you two been hankering after. Don't you worry, boy, I'll bring her back safe and sound, and wiser for it, is what I hope.

—Sylvie? You're going down there with my mother?

—Uh-huh.

—Well, damn.

—It's just to look and see, Tom. I ain't never set foot in that town in my whole life, and I want to see.

—Well, hell, I want to see it for my own self, too. I'll come along. What do you say, Mama?

—I say the more the more the merrier. Soon as you two get it on out of your system the better. Then I reckon as you'll be able to settle on down right here on this mountain, with your own folks and kin, right as you please. You'll see by the end of this day that there ain't a damn thing worth having or being down there, not a damn thing you can't have right here, and more comfortable at that. I figure you'll be glad to get on home by the end of this day, right quick, too.

—Well, then let's get going, Mama. I guess Sylvie and I'll prove you wrong. She aims to live on down there, and I aim to take care of her, best I can.

—Well, go on and get in that truck, and we'll see about you two going off the mountain. Come on along then.

IN FEAR AND TREMBLING

In fear and trembling, Sylvie peered over the dashboard of the truck from her place between Eliza and Tom. Eliza drove, bopping her palms against the steering wheel, singing in broken snatches in her customary way, the radio blaring hard rock. The music alone was trauma enough for the girl, and the rickety speed of the truck merely added to the chapter.

Town. Town was out there somewhere, just down the road, and it was as if town was coming to get her, rather than Sylvie, moving toward the town.

In an extremely small space of time, town was going to become reality. And so Sylvie trembled and was afraid.

Tom was smoking out the window, sending blasts of cold air into the cab, which alternated with the roaring heater. That old Tom was trying to look nonchalant, as if he did this every day of the week, but a small tic in his jawline gave him away. That tic kept going, thrush, thrush, junk, junk, there in his jaw, and Sylvie would have smirked if she had not been so on edge herself, palms sweaty, jugular pulsing, cheeks tingling with red heat.

Only Eliza seemed happy. Only Eliza seemed ready to fling her arms wide in triumph, fingers splayed outward, some theme loaded with horns and strings to accompany her arrival at the gates of candy-land, where dollar store

bargains tinkled like ornaments on a Christmas tree. The gold tooth at the side of her smile seemed to Sylvie to be a beacon, flashing out announcements of their immanent landing, thrush, junk. Sylvie wanted to hold Eliza's hand. Instead she looked back to Tom, to the white-knuckles of his hand raking their way through his long hair, the biggest knuckles she had ever seen, the whitest knuckles she had ever seen. They were like a line of a horse's big white teeth, or like a row of skulls, hungry ghosts, those big knuckles, spooks of sorts, pulling at his hair, God, trembling, how had she ever believed that he could protect her, with knuckles like that?

And Tom was supposed to have experience at this! After all, he came down to these places at night, guitar case in hand, he was not a stranger to this town, he knew, surely, how to get to the coffeehouses, if only to go in, play a few home-songs, and get out and get himself back to the mountain.

Perhaps it was the element of being sober, and the element of it being the middle of the afternoon, and the element of actually going to walk the streets, not just drive to a door, enter it, sing (thrush, junk!), and then walk out the door and come home… thunk, thunk…

"What was that!?" she squeaked.

"Squirrel," Eliza muttered.

"Calm down, girl," Eliza said. "You'll give yourself a stroke before you ever see town.

"I'm sorry ma'am."

“Sylvie, when did my Mama become ma’am?”

“Hush,” Eliza said. “She’s got proper respect is all. Reckon you could use a dose of that.”

“Wouldn’t recognize myself,” Tom joked.

“Mr. Funny Pants,” Eliza said sternly. She jacked the volume, fiddled with the dial. Eliza sang. Sylvie and Tom slumped a bit lower in the seat.

A LOOK AT THE AUTHOR

If you listen closely enough, good stranger, you will hear the sound of a bamboo flute being played, here in the no-man’s-land outside the town, yet below the mountain. It is quite a haunting sound, a simple hollow reed playing a deeply moving and mournful lament, in a minor key, not unlike a mourning dove, bereft on a rooftop with no mate. Indeed, the sound of the flute is coming from a rooftop. There he is, behold the author, sitting on the flat tarred roof of his house, playing the flute of wood in a way that might cause a person to weep. He is composing this dirge as he plays, and doing a fine job of it, very masterful and controlled, yet so marvelous in its emotion. We did not know this side of him until now. We did not know he was capable of such large tenderness.

No, stranger, he has not been murdered. The Author is alive and well, only resting, only sitting on the roof of the place he calls home and playing a wooden flute.

What has brought him down from the heights? Why does

he play a sad tune? Has he seen something up there that we have not? Is his heart as broken as the tune he plays? What is he grieving?

Some months have passed since he has been up on that mountain, but our Author has not been idle. You may ask where he has been. He has been in the town. He has been roaming around the town, poking his head into the shops and coffeehouses, the bookstores and dollar stores. He has been searching for them there. He has been searching for Eliza, Tom, Sylvie. Now he is playing a lament because he seen them. He has seen each one of them in the town, and he does lament what he has gazed on.

These people are such a damn sorry sight to his eyes down here, these wretched hillbillies fumbling around town. Even Eliza, perhaps most of all, looks disjointed and greenish to him, and he is sickened by the sight of the lot of them. They make him sweat with anxiety and anger as if he is fevered.

GRACE'S TURN

I thought I would be more than glad to leave the world behind. I thought I would be wildly happy to never have another single serious interaction. I certainly did not expect anything of that sort from these people, nor from Edison. The winter came like a soft and silent snowdream. I wrote. I made love to a mute and surly husband. I watched animals stitching through the yard, and the girl Lizzie snatch offerings from the stump and

disappear back into the forests of the mountaintop. I saw no more of Eliza. Gradually a film of dust settled over my consciousness like ice-scrim and I was cold inside and out. I dimly came to realize. In some remote place I began to know I had made a thick mistake.

The poems, the lines of them, stopped.

I was gaunt. Hollowed out. My hands felt as if they were falling off.

In my mind I went over, back. I made imaginary play-outs of the workshops, the salons, the writer's colonies and retreats, the floodlit podiums, the cocktails, the flirt of the game, the wit, the shadows of cleverness, the language beneath the language, all of it unravelling, I was losing the smooth ability to turn a phrase, to say anything wry or droll or intimate or fascinating, insightful, insincerely self-deprecating, even delicate. My throat felt rusty. I was under-stimulated and word-deprived. I felt myself an amputee, struggling, struggling with a phantom tingling, a jangling, an air pocket in my mouth, throbbing. Language, words, no release. Building up, not expressed. Evaporating. Me.

The girl crossed the yard like a gazelle, a wild-legged thing in her furs, with her drapery of dead animals and birds. The wordless girl. The girl more free than I felt I would ever be again. My plumage had been of a different sort, little black dresses and tinkling champagne in fluted crystal, small diamond posts at the ears.

I kept baiting Lizzie—candy, mittens, knick-knacks from my old house, crackers. Everything disappeared, but the

girl did not linger. What conversation could there possibly have been anyway?

Was I becoming full-mute as well? Edison called me "woman".

Even my name was trailing away from me.

"Grace," I croaked out loud one morning to the cold air. Nothing responded. My eyes burned.

I had lived for word-adulation. I had thought I was done with that. I knew better when a teardrop landed on my wrist.

OLD MAN

—He's been asking for it long time that author trying to come on my land trying to come clear on my porch step and I met him with my shotgun I did and said what you want mister before I fired once in the air right above his head and when he said he only wanted to know which place was Edison's I spat down on his shoe and knew then that damned woman was a whore.

—She's whored the whole mountain is what I knew in myself the minute he asked.

—Let's get this over with is what I thought to myself let's let the mountain tilt down and rumble so I told him flat out where Edison lived and I said you have a nice life in the hereafter mister and then I slammed my door to him.

—Now I'm just waiting to hear tell of how Edison murders

him and all on account of the whore-bitch wife he brought up here to defile us all and imagine even Eliza taking Tom and Sylvie down off the mountain and if you ask me we all can't die fast enough now and our land hollowed out to nothing and no one.

PRUE

SOMETHING THAT YOU MIGHT WANT TO SAVE is the teeth you got pulled, in all their twisted bloody and rotten glory. Like souvenirs from some lost land. Like the bird's nest, the old rings that no longer fit, keys to places long gone, stuff of that sort, in an old Dutch Masters cigar tin, where buttons swim at the bottom and bits of twine and the glint of his earring, him long dead.

IF YOU'RE GOING TO GO ON A JOURNEY you will need past things. You will need an anchor, for instance, or a tether, leading you out from home, or maybe a cannister of bread crumbs. Because you are going to come back. You might even be back by early twilight. You don't know.

YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY YOU ARE GOING. Something is pent up. Something wants expansion. That's about the size of the motive.

AND TILLIE SAID: "You're crazy."

SHE is right. You've become crazed in this house, this house-encrusted environment; so much is swept beneath the rug that you are about to—

IT'S FOOLISHNESS IS WHAT IT IS, shouts Tillie from her place at the sink, enraged because she's at the sink, and you are at the door. Leaving me to all this responsibility! Tillie shouts.

AND YEAH, YOU ARE. You are one crazy fool, and you are leaving Tillie to tend the store of life, and it's all because you can't stand it no more, Tillie and her so-called husband, and the half-baked children, all floppy and flippy, and the shadow-brother who plays a guitar all day in the attic, and the dogs and the cats and the dishes and the oppression that inserts itself all over you like acupuncture needles that don't work anymore than flea bites work. You're flapping at living in annoyance and even a dim sadness and when you close the door behind you you hear the thud of Tillie's dishrag hit it. Oh well.

Oh well, Tillie.

AND YOU'RE WALKING down the dirt road of the mountain, slanting downhill, pinching your toes with the drift of it, in haste, yeah, you're moving fast as you can go.

I guess I habitually and deliberately do all the things I don't want to do, because it's the only way I learn what I want and don't want in life, what I need, and what I can't use. They say it about me. They say, "That Prue, she'll never learn." But I will learn, and I have learned. One time I kissed a boy with an earring, and I didn't want to, but I learned how to kiss, and I learned that I didn't want to spend my life tied down by the addiction of kissing, and that's how I learned that Tillie was in it to have a mess of fumbling kids, and I was in it to not. You come at

life from different angles, and that's learning, in my book. I know exactly that I don't want what Tillie has, nor that brother in the attic, nor Tillie's smart-ass husband, nor all the people who sleep on the couch, rotating like spinning tops, finding work, moving on, only to find another planted there. I know I hate television and like pure mountain music, because I watched a lot of television and didn't hear half the mountain music I intend to hear in my life.

I learned I like cigarettes by not wanting to smoke one, and now I smoke a lot, and have a tin with a load of my teeth laying in it on account of that.

So I've got a cigar tin tucked under my arm, and a rucksack, and I'm going down the road. I don't have anywhere to go, I'm just going off a little ways into the woods. I figure I can spend the day, or a week, whatever I please, anywhere away from that house and all those crowd of people. It gets long-suffering after a while. That plunking on the guitar, those pots and pans slamming round, that TV, it all grates on the nerves.

The way I look at it sometimes is that the three of us are like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, if you leave out the husband. Tillie is all Martha, frenetically busy all the time, yapping and complaining about it, hassled and tensed up and mouthy. Joshua is like Lazarus, holed up in the tomb attic, tink, tink, tinking on that guitar, waiting for deliverance from his slow death sentence of wanting to be famous, but he's all bound up in burial cloths, stuttering his way through stage fright. And I'm Mary, the dreamer who sits down listening, awestruck with the overwhelm of a woman who hears too much.

Siblings, us three, left out in the cold too long as little kids to do anything constructive except build a life together as adults in this claptrap house on this claptrap mountain. We ain't never been anywhere else. We all go nowhere, together. Forever.

We're locked into each other, and year after year I feel it in the house, and we're not getting any younger, so here I am, rebelling, if only for the space of a day, walking through echoes of close quarters still ringing in my ears, but walking just the same. It's a fine late spring day. A perfect day to veer off the road into the woods that occupy most all of the mountain, little tin roofed houses only sitting like random Swiss dots on a great mound of forest.

And how I love the woods.

I step into them reverently.

They contour beautifully into the soles of my moccasins.

Before long I am deep, and I take my seat, just like Mary at the feet of Jesus, my face lolling up to a billion buds and first greens of the forest rooftop. For once I'm doing exactly what I want to do, which is nothing. I am doing nothing, and it is delicious. So I do it for a great while, before I set down the tin, and open the rucksack, rummaging around for the pencils and notebook, hunching over, to scratch out the date on the top of the page, and to write my name: Prue. Then I write the place: "Someplace in upstate New York." , and leave it at that for my bearings, should anyone find this, this thing that I may or may not write, that I may or may not leave here,

whatever it is that could form if I give it time and energy and pure plain quiet.

One time I made a promise to myself. I was but a snip of a girl, maybe eleven, maybe twelve. A middle child, at the tail end of childhood. I promised myself I would be a hermit monk of God, a nun in a cloistered hermitage, a forest-sitter, a mystic. I had that in me. I felt that vocation that comes to solitary friendless girls not yet formed, mute girls failing at school, girls with no guidance, girls up a creek, clueless, no paddle, no way out, learning disorders blossoming like mold spots on a rug, lost girls with passionate hearts and "kick me" signs plastered to their backs, head-lice and tangles full of spitballs, defense-less girls, girls who wrote "help me" on bathroom stall doors, girls who always had one shoelace untied and wore an undershirt, not a training bra, for lack of proper supervision in the rules of hygiene and puberty.

But to wear a long robe with a cinch-waist and clacking brown beads at my hip, now that was a garment I could bear, wanted to bear.

I was already in higher realms. Why not make a life of it?

(l didn't write any of that down in the woods. I just thought it, remembering myself.)

I know women on this mountain who fascinate me deeply. One is Eliza, whose husband is a man of prayer; one is Grace, the poet who came here with Edison, one is Mary, the fisher- woman, and the last one, if you can call her a woman, is a mute roaming child we all call Lizzie.

And of course there is Sylvie, who was only a couple years behind me at school; she used to follow me around, all hang-dog just like I was; I see her sometimes at Eliza's place, since she is making the mistake of courting with Tom.

But it's mainly Eliza, Grace, and Mary who all draw me. I guess it's that I want for women-friends in my life, and, sitting here in the woods, I might be coming to that realization. I think women can have powerful thoughts when they talk things out straight and plain.

Sometimes you have to make a resolution to reach out. To knock on doors you hadn't counted on, even though you're scared to do it. I mean, these are my people, all my life, and I don't even know them. Tillie always did keep me on such a tight rein.

PRUE IN THE GENERAL STORE

A few days later, Tillie was whining and moaning about a lack of bread, bologna, and a pound of fresh coffee, and didn't I just seize the opportunity to volunteer to walk down the mountain to our general store, which sits somewhat close to the bottom, Tillie's husband being gone in the truck to his job at the lumberyard away in the town. I knew Tillie couldn't lug all those claptrap children down there on foot, and she was happy to hand over the money for her provisions, so off I went, scared and excited if I would run into any of the women there that I was so longing to befriend. And that was how things all got started.

When I set out to do something, it most likely gets done. And that's how I came to be sitting on Eliza's doorstep one morning, with her whittling and me all nervous yet calmed by the very pretty movements of her well-worn hands. She never looked up from her work as she talked to me, but she spoke plain and truthful from the outset. She said, "You're not a girl I know, but I seen you plenty. I seen your sister many a time in the store with her young ones, and she has no easy life with all them. Some kids are just high strung. It ain't the fault of discipline. It tends to be in their nature, they tumble on out that way. But you must keep to yourself, and I don't know I've met you nor know about you. I figure you could have been at the high school with Sylvie, but I see you're older."

"She was some years behind me, but I did know her there, yes."

"Un hm. And so you are Prue, as you say, and what do you do?"

"Nothing as yet."

"Then you're like my Tom. But there ain't shiftlessness in you, that I can see."

"No ma'am. I have an intention to write things down in my life." At this I saw Eliza hesitate, for just the flash of a second. She kept steady at her knife, but something went through her.

"l went to her house one time," she whispered, low but clear.

"Whose, ma'am?"

“Edison’s. I went by to wish her the wedding joy. Just the one time. But she’s a writer, they say. Perhaps you could learn from her how to make the nice words for your own thinking.”

I flushed up red as anything.

“Was she nice, Eliza? Was she mean, and foreign, and off-putting?”

Eliza made a little shushing sound.

“A tad nervous, as was I, only she was nice and eager for a visitor, and a bit of sadness about the eyes, and a wakefulness, and a keenness such as made me think she might write of me once I’d gone, and so I didn’t go back no more after that.”

“They say she writes poetry.”

“Well, I hope she don’t write no poems of us,” said Eliza.

It was a lot of talk, for both of us. Nothing we were used to. It seemed like it was wearing us out, yet exciting us on some level as well. Eliza was not terribly hard to be with. You could tell she had hold of herself, a steady and strong woman, one who went to town, one who had confidence, one who wasn’t bowed down, yet didn’t need conversation to make herself contented. But she was curious about me, and I was ashamed to have nothing to say that was my living. When she compared me to Tom, I was so embarrassed. I didn’t want to defend myself to death, but felt I’d gotten off on the wrong foot there. How could I have said I do nothing to a total stranger? Still, didn’t she know all along that there I was, day and night,

living with Tillie the way I was, not out on my own, the way I was supposed to be? And, surely she knew Joshua was up in that attic all the day, because nothing is hidden on the mountain, not even him. She probably thought he was some invalid or idiot or such. But then, didn't she have the roaming child of her own—if anybody would point a finger. So, much as I was inclined to bristle up, it died in the flash, and I found myself not wanting to leave, not wanting to push off the step and tell her it'd been nice meeting her. I wanted to stay right there and make a friend, and, if the truth told, find out more about Grace.

We were silent for what seemed like a long time. Eliza kept to her work, and did not press me for a thing, just worked with her knife, until she presently laid it aside and, to my surprise, began to hum out an old mountain tune, a sort of fiddle tune, just humming it gently, like laying down a feather on the doorstep. It was pure and right and true, like the music of my dreams, and it was dreamy like that, all right. I could have listened forever. But that tune put a flame in my heart, and I had to shift about where I was sitting on the step, as if it was too much to bear, and so I broke the whole thing to bits by saying something. I cleared my throat and this is what I said:

'I l need to know the music."

I watched Eliza slowly nod, letting her humming drift elegantly to a drone and then a stop.

"Everyone does," she said.

“Where does it come from?”

“It’s born of the great mountains to the north, and the source is a bottomless well of hardship from way back, too far back and deep to trace,” Eliza said.

“l believe that,” I said.

She nodded. “Yes, it comes from the cradle of time, and it comes from my very own cradle as well. Tom don’t know it, but here you are, and you recognize it right off. Yes, I feel you landed on my step to hear it.”

“l hear it in my sleep. I hear it when I walk the woods of this mountain. I hear it down by the lake. It’s like it comes out of the very earth.”

I watched Eliza smile without parting her lips.

“Then you’re a friend to me,” she whispered.

And it was holy, that moment. To be welcomed into a heart was the holiest moment I’d known in so long I could not recall. I sat astonished, and a warm affection spread all through my breast and warmed up my face. I had a friend. I had a woman friend on this terribly lonesome mountain. I hadn’t known the depth of all that had been missing. Eliza had the music, the music of my life, all stored up in her, and she was giving it to me. I felt the passion, of a sort I’d not felt in life, and I knew the name of it: kindness. A person in this world had done a kindness to me.

It was as if I could feel her husband, Jack, somewhere in the depths of that old house, praying, and as if out here in the sunlight, the angels had hummed me a sorrowful

and lovely song. It was way too much.

And then I sensed a shifting, and I spun my head around, just as Lizzie, the roaming child, came out from the corner of the house by the waterspout, and she was bright as a penny and feral as a wildcat. The scent of her was musky and dank, like moss and dried blood and acorns and crunched leaves, and she came right up and laid a brace of rabbits at her mother's feet. I studied them, mother and child, and watched to see.

"Why, I thank you, child," Eliza said.

Then she did what to me was a very strange thing to do. She drew her knife and ticked of the smallest lock of the girl's matted hair. Lizzie nodded and immediately stole off, back the way she'd come, as if an important ritual was over and finished. Eliza tucked the hair into her pocket and picked up her whittling once more.

"Ma'am?" I questioned.

Once more she made a quick shushing sound.

"Well," she said, "l guess maybe Grace can teach you things of how to put words on the paper." I lowered my eyes.

"As for me," Eliza said, "l can teach you the old songs. That way, you'll be in business with all the things you are wanting to do."

"Thank you, Eliza. I'd like that so."

And I knew she was meaning me to take my leave, so I stood and dusted off, without a word of parting, and left

in the opposite way that Lizzie had. Eliza did not call a farewell, either, for that is the way of us up here, it's the way we know we are welcome.

AND THEN I REMEMBERED THE GENERAL STORE. Tillie was surely going to kill me, if I didn't get back with the groceries.

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!?

I GOT HUNG UP TALKING AT ELIZA'S.

ELIZA! What in tarnation were you doing with the likes of Eliza? I never! These children hungry and all, and you fussing about that damn townie. She might's well go live down there, she goes plenty enough. What are you doing cozying up to such a one? Telling our business, I bet. Telling her all kinds of privacy, and me here worried to death, and our brother making all that racket upstairs, and no one to help, and you out sharing the family stuff with townie strange lots. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and to set the record straight, I'm mad as a hornet right now, so hand over my change and get out of my sight till I get set round again. Yeah, you, big grown up woman, acting like you was a damn kid again. Dammit, Prue.

OLD MAN

Now Prue. Who would have thought this mountain would see the likes of such grown up abandoned children making their way on nothing in this world going down Eliza's way and all this after she took Tom and Sylvie to

the town the other day didn't I see it in my binoculars and now I know she'll be set to take Prue down there as well and all the mountain is tipping and reeling with this that Prue was wasting half the bright morning on Eliza's step and if it wasn't for Eliza being the mother of our roaming child I'd like to send her spinning back to the north country where she belongs to learn her lesson that there is no outside life and she knew that before she landed here and now she's turned a traitor.

And Prue always such a nice girl save for that touched brother only she don't help her sister near enough she's always in a corner when I stop to inquire of Tillie reading a book or licking a pencil to write with just as useless as the halfwit in the attic if you ask me now.

What's she writing down anyway she reminds me of that author that damned author and how I know what he's up to he wants to go chasing the skirt of Edison's freak of a bride and he's going to get himself dead.

Now Prue. What is this writing fever when it's got no place on our mountain and even Sylvie writing those home-songs for Tom.

Hands ain't made for pencils.

Somebody ought to put all these women to work and that includes that pansy of an author who might as well be a woman for all his soft hands and wet rosy lips that are going to be cold as death before long.

The mountain the mountain the mountain all sick with pain and crying I know it.

PRUE

The intimacy of real mountain music like Eliza's humming.

GRACE

Slowly I am deciding to leave. This was an experiment that did not work out.

ELIZA

Eliza sat alone, whittling, in the afternoon, making the best of the daylight and the solitude. She was amused by Prue's earlier visit, and she pondered with some astonishment the welling up of passion in the young lady for the tunes of the mountains. She pondered the very tunes themselves, some just old snatches, some wordless tunes, some with pretty turns of phrases, some with words full all the way through. There were scores and scores of them stored up in Eliza's memory, yet she did not often hum them out, as she had done this day, surprising herself, as if the impulse had been born solely by Prue's presence on the step. It was a mystery, how a stranger had been the prompt for that deep well of sustenance that had somehow been lonesome in her. She hadn't known until this morning the longing in her to express the music of her soul. She had simply, without thinking, begun to hum. This was surely a visitation of

mystical proportions, unlike what Jack would have called it, no, it was not like Jack's mysticism, it was something wholly in her Eliza-ness, and this was quite a discovery.

Once again, she turned to her inner soap opera of philosophical dialogue, and carefully tucked away a mental box called: mountain music. She tucked it as deeply as she had tucked Lizzie's lock of hair into her pocket. Some things were just mysterious, almost miraculous.

Mountain music was religion.

"Mountain music is religion," she whispered, as if Jack were standing right there before her, and not in the house behind her. "Jack," she said, "The mountain music is religious, It cleanses the spirit of a person sure as baptism. It tells off the beads of a person sure as any rosary. It gleams like gold, like the city of God. It's pure as a mountain stream. It gurgles and soothes every cell and fiber of a body. I know it now, as I always did, because I saw it happen to that girl this very day. Mountain music did that. It's prayer, old Jack. It's prayer."

There was something behind the force of her words to make Eliza stop her hands for a moment and come to the conclusion that she was angry. Angry and resentful and regretful. Golly. Damn.

Her whole life down here. Her dead lover. Her two boys. Her childhood. Way on back. The generations. And now this Jack, and this Tom, and the only one lovable was Lizzie, from whom a word had never been heard. The

ancient blinded grandmother, half crazed Indian, tapping time in the homemade rocker, rolling out the fiddle tunes on her tongue into the sweet mountain air, playing the bones with her arthritic hands to keep time. The rush of the wind through the treetops. The hard granite cliffs. The caves. The offerings left in caves.

Eliza went to stroke with her knife, but oh, her hands were trembling.

Her very jaw was tightened and her teeth clenched. Damn it. Damn.

THE AUTHOR COMES CALLING

No, not to Grace. I have been watching this whole mountain, and what I have seen is that soon it will not be necessary to go and take Grace by force. The entire mountain is building its case against her, and it will not be long before she caves into the pressure and removes herself of her own accord. I will be waiting. I have studied her from places she does not know I am planted, but, above all, I have listened to more talk from these people than I care to. And I know Grace. This sort of primitive isolation is not tolerable for the Grace I know so well. She's toast. She knows that by now. The mountain has preached against her without uttering a word to her face. Shame doesn't become her. Being dissed doesn't set well with a winner. Grace has praise (deserved) in the very marrow of her bones.

I no longer worry. I know she will pull out any day now. Of course, I worry for her safety in extricating herself

from that devil of a husband, that murderer who still wears blood on his hands. But Grace has a sneaky streak. She's been on stage all her adult life, yet she's always known how to disappear. She'll do it here with finesse, of that I am confident.

Meantime, it is not her door that I will disturb myself with, but, rather, here I am, once more, at Eliza's step, merely to distract attention from my darling Grace, and I intend to stir all these people up, like a matador with a red cape, and thus give Grace the cover she needs to steal away. It's quite chivalrous of me, I must say.

Let me take the danger. Let me be despised. I could care less.

So here is Eliza, at last, while I have been musing in my notebook. I pick up the tape recorder.

Hello, Eliza.

(She lowers her eyes, her mouth a grim line.)

—What are you wanting?

—Only to catch up with you. It's been some time since we've spoke.

(She picks up her whittling. There are shavings all about the step and dooryard.)

—Not speaking. You ought to shove off now.

—Ma'am?

—You heard me. I ain't giving out no more talk to you.

—But we were getting along so well. Please, Eliza, tell me more of your life and times.

(And then she rears up like a cobra, her nostrils flaring, and suddenly her knife is out and poised in the air.)

—You get the hell out of here now. You git, or I swear I'll cut you. Get outta my yard, and my life. I swear—

(She waves the knife most violently. I stand and walk away, glancing over my shoulder. She's on her feet. She stamps one big shoe, a man's shoe, and I carry myself off.)

And I wonder what that was all about. This lawless territory is unnerving.

Grace had best keep her wits about her when she leaves, as she surely will. I am quickly losing the courage for this project. These people are outlaws, each one, and they are crazy. Ignorant, backwards, dangerous, and crazed to the core. I may be bowing out at this point, and I'm sorry, Grace, I'm so sorry. I guess I'll see you down below. I'm losing stomach.

HUMMING

And that was the day Eliza took up humming. She sheathed her knife and hummed the whole afternoon away, old, ancient tunes, tunes straight running up in her spine, tunes she knew before words, and didn't Lizzie presently come home and squat down in the dirt in front of her mother, and, after all her seven years of silence,

didn't Lizzie begin to hum along, her little foot tapping time, and didn't Eliza, as they hummed, have a vision of her and Lizzie in the high pure mountains, making the mountain music, just then, the vision of it coming to her. And it was a most wondrous thing.

The anger went out of her. It left like a cat.

It was holy hour at her doorstep.

Eliza let her eyes well up, she let them spill on over. She went right on humming, dirty rivulets winding down like mountain streams, droplets at her jaw.