

Keep Us

ELIZA HEITZMAN

There is something servile in the habit of seeking after a law which we may obey.

—Henry David Thoreau

I entered the quiet cavern of white pine. Green whisks whispered above me, the sound falling like powder snow to the rich pillows of dead needles below, dusky orange with decay. *Bless me, mother, for I have sinned. I have spent too much time in the world of men.* The far chuckle of the stream drew me on, beyond the cowslip-dotted marsh, into the younger pines and past the flood plain to the very waters. I slid my booted feet into the pool by the little island where my father and I used to sit and sun ourselves when I was still a child, and now I stood with eyes closed, leaning my dazed head back. The sun flickered over my face, filtered through the flipping of the leaves above me. I opened my eyes, seized by impulse, and slowly swung my head down to gaze at the water below and put my hand just to the surface, feeling the tension as if it were a solid somehow, playing my palm on the chill. Then I slid my hand below, seeing its pigments and blemishes clearly, as if for the first time, and marveling at them. Fifteen years of wear: a writing callus on my middle finger, frayed nails, scars from the blackberries.

I had to go on. I eased my hand from the water, wiping the moisture on my pale thigh and watching it, feeling it dissolve into the yellow air. I pulled myself onto the bank again, turning back just a moment to see the shining water bouncing through the crevices of the shattered boughs carried down during the last thaw—then wove my way through the pine's fire-carpet downstream, down the deer-path to the cool grass about the balsams. I heard the roll of the water just beyond—but I paused a moment. The summer calm seeped into my bones as I pulled the boots from my feet.

Warm air grazed my cheek, a perfume of pine pitch and putrid trillium and numberless seasons of dead leaf. For a moment, I thought idly that I

wanted to smell just so myself. I nestled my toes into thick, dark moss, humming with simple pleasure. But this was not enough—I lifted my head and padded through the black grainy soil of the river-beach to the center of the stream. I was quiet at first, eyes closed again, listening to the river break against my ankles and feeling the rolling pebbles between my toes. But my eyes sprang open, and of a moment I flounced into a dance, kicking crisp water through heavy air, hum-singing my wordless heart—*yes*—singing the song that I would later recall as a song of nature, even though it was of me and me alone.

It is simple, I think, to believe in unity and transcendence when one is in the wilderness. Within its groves and meadows lie hints of *all*-ness, intimations of a great whole that individuals seem to lack. I know something of human inferiority, of that keen yet dull pain that comes when we are reminded how far from *all* we are. I do not know if there was a time that I began to see that distance, which could seem at some moments so small, widening into an impassable chasm. It seems right to begin with Jaime.

She was clowning as she always did, hunching her shoulders and chewing on her lips as she yelled absurd Southernisms in an approximation of her grandmother's Georgia drawl. I laughed for her, maybe too long or too loud to be convincing. She shot me a mean, hard look from the corner of her eye, then closed herself, a dead weight on the swing looking into the gray sky. I felt a sudden fear in my stomach—what if she leaves me?—and tried to make her feel better than I felt, looking hopefully yet hesitantly at her tight jaw, running on: "My grandma is boring. All she likes is puppies and stuff—and she doesn't live anywhere near Georgia. You're so lucky." She rolled her hands around in the handmade scarf that her grandmother had just sent her, a thick orange concoction the color of dead pine needles with pockets on the ends. Roiled them. I leaned over to see her face after a breath of silence. Sweet words: "You OK?"

She screamed—*My grandma!*

And she hit me in the back of the head with those tense balled hands inside the scarf, pulled her lips back over her teeth into an animal grimace as I stared and held the swing chains slackly. She took her hands out of the wool, tied the ends together fast—then bashed me in the back three, four times with her grandmother's love. She shoved me. I said nothing as I fell off the swing, stared at that loved face as my body rustled into the woodchips. I lay as she fast-stomped away. I never understood why, and she never volunteered an answer. I simply followed her at a distance as she went back into the class-

room. Wordless, I sat near her, followed her, until she gave me her voice again in a snickering aside about our language arts teacher's socks, and the cold hard pit of my stomach dissolved into a smile on my face. I was back to being her best friend. Until, of course, a year or two later, when one day (or so it seemed) she left me behind for other friends as I had feared she would.

I wonder about our relationship, my attachment to her. My love for her—I thought it was so good, when we were together, when we laughed together for whole bus rides and when we walked all over the neighborhood together, talking about the secret boyfriend hidden in the pages of her older sister's diary. The love that stopped me from speaking a word of harm to her, a love that made me want to make all things good, somehow. A broken love. A love centered in an inability ever to know her mind precisely, and a need to understand that mind—an obsessive love, based on the frantic belief that if I gave enough of my care to her she would show me the same. A dependence on one of my naïve child's daydreams. When I think about her and how I was with her, I see myself lost in her—in my approximations of her moods and desires. And I thought it was pure, because it consumed me. Perhaps I was lying—perhaps there is no pure love. Not from others, perhaps not even from God. The unity of nature that comes in the wild is missing when we are in the company of people. There was no unity, no expansion beyond myself, with Jaime. As I labored, trying to please her, to reach her innermost self, I shrank. She was away from me before her hands pushed me. It seems, as I remember the splinters of wood in my hair and the shame of my inability to rise from the ground, that I carry innate loneliness. When we try to believe that we are not in that jail of aloneness, one crafted for millennia by the violence of woman and man, we find a perverse solace in the ungraspable Other. We believe that we can go outside ourselves and into something beyond physical experience.

Once, when I was fourteen, I stood in my kitchen, looking at the clock on top of the stove. As I looked, I thought about how I was thinking about the clock and looking at the clock in that moment, and I thought about how I had drifted through the hallways at school that day, looking at my classmates and not being seen by them. My thought fell off my tongue because it burned too much: maybe there is nothing in the world outside my head. Maybe I am everything. Maybe I create my experience of everyone else. When I unveiled my grand imagining to my father, he was a little put out. "Am I a figment of your imagination, then?" I told him I couldn't be sure. He was slightly disappointed with me, with my apparent lack of empathy and imagination. He gave an incredulous chuckle when I tried to develop my point and said I was too

much like Descartes. I didn't know what he was talking about. In time, I stopped telling people that I ever thought about things outside myself this way; they had given me strange looks, told me I gave myself too much credit. I put away that thinking, for the most part, but I never forgot it.

I never forgot it—but I cannot say that it is true. I could not actually imagine other people. My father was right. A boy that I had once cared very much for told me that he had been thinking about killing himself because I didn't love him enough. I remember when he told me how complete my inadequacy was.

His piggy eyes burned into me, green-grey holes in a face that I once told him I loved. I had meant it. When we stood next to the auditorium doors after the show, I couldn't meet his eyes, not as before. Instead, I looked into the wall just over his shoulder or at the stubble where a muttonchop was being cultivated. I started with a whopper. "So we're friends now, after everything, right?," traces of sixth-grade hesitancy tugging at my voice. The desire to be loved, to do no harm, to avoid harm, filled me. But we weren't children any more. He frowned with those piggy eyes, slopped his pasty, long-nailed hand onto my shoulder in a pretense and told me, "Of course, hon" in that voice—that high, tight, fast, condescending, disgusting sneer—that he used when he thought I was getting out of line, when he was afraid of my leaving, but when I didn't leave. His voice distracted me for a moment—a reminder of horrific, late-night phone calls and frantic pleading—but I swallowed, talked, told him: "From now on I do not ever want to date you again." I felt freed, even though something blocked me from looking into his eyes as another, stronger person spoke through my lips.

Then he fixed me in his furious gaze, his doughy face blotched red with fury, or embarrassment, and he reached down with infinite deliberation and pulled back the sleeve to show a wrist covered with scars. I saw only the raw, screaming red of the fresh and the deceptively delicate pink of the old marks, and the one where his hand met his wrist, a thick, grotesque, fascinating favorite. "I did it because of you," he said in that soft and silky voice, that chilling killing voice. I did not know what I was going to say next. I was floating above the two of us for a moment, but then I fell down into myself and looked into nothing at all as if he were nothing more than a figment of my mind. I spoke quiet, slow, hard, saying, "You cannot blackmail me. I am done. We are toxic. I'm so sorry. But we are friends." Was I alive? I didn't quite know. He said nothing in response, and I hugged him to me masochistically, or sadistically—I don't know which—and then let him wander off while I sat backstage and didn't think any more.

I was weak, as I was with Jaime. He was weak. As I sat in the darkness of the wings, still in costume, I did not know why I had finally gotten the courage to tell him what I thought. Ten months. Perhaps I lashed out at him because he had crossed the line somewhere, blurred the division between himself and my own grand mind, and I couldn't believe that my mind, the cradle of my self, could contain that sort of cruelty—or perhaps because he was imperfect, because I saw in him a recognizable weakness that I did not want to acknowledge in myself.

I know that I seek individuality, a sort of quiet rebellion, a dance in the woods with nature, which at times seems perfect and at other times troubling, turbulent, chaotic, even violent. I had seen this boy as a part of myself, a part of my universe that gave me love and cruelty in equal measures. Pleasure, pain. But after so long, I became sickened by part of what he was, what I was.

I carry a deep sense that I am not enough, that I am not perfect. I am not a god, but I want godliness and transcendence and perfection within myself. I want to understand my willful cruelty to him, my requited violence. But having a dislike for what is weak and perceiving imperfection as weakness, I think we aspire—I aspire—to a flawless ideal that is unreachable, un-human, un-earthly, but powerful. My desire for it makes me rail against myself.

I often fear that I crave a knowledge that I cannot hope to have, a knowledge of the violence inherent in our natures and an aspiration to that which is sublime. Some search for that in God, as others may seek it in people. I sit in a room full of college students, and a teacher asks us, "What is God?" and hears not a murmur. I never knew faith as a child, so my desire for faith is elastic. I remember being politely forced to sing at the public service for three children, ages eleven and eleven and thirteen, who had drowned one autumn night in the creek running past the high school. The priest intoned the rhythms of the litany, and the entire gymnasium full of townspeople responded, the swaying drone—*You took upon yourself the suffering and death of us all; to you we pray*—fell without a pause into the crowd-rumbled *Bless us and keep us, O Lord*. I was ashamed that I didn't know what to say. I was hypnotized, seduced by the roll of the words and the simple beauty of the prayer and the centeredness coming over each man and woman in the group who spoke back. The perfect blend of the individual and the many—but then I caught myself, recalled the fact that I just don't believe in God. I want to—but I don't. I have a sort of envy for those who place their faith in the grace of gods, as I do for those who place it in other people. But, still, I limit myself to nature and to my own mind.

Even in that limited world, a world shaped largely by my own selfish desires, I am haunted. Even though I recall the exact blonde-red tone of Jaime's hair as it fluttered across her freckled nose, or the way the tiara I wore pressed on my scalp just above my temples as I spoke to Alex that night, or the dark-orange apron with rust flowers that my mother was wearing when she told me how my uncle had killed himself twenty-five years earlier, and even though I recall the dull feeling that I carried through each of them—a panic-pressure weight in my chest that radiated down to my groin—I do not recall precisely what I thought. I fear that I cannot contain multitudes if I cannot find the words. But I want to think now that perhaps I am the universe incarnate, that maybe we all are, but without the words to describe that force that coursed through me. More than all else, I want to know the answer, to locate my desire.

I want what I cannot have. I aspire to that which is beyond my mind. I yearn endlessly for ecstasy, knowing well that it is beyond me—but knowing too that it isn't, not always. That sort of distance, the distance that I perceive between my need and my understanding haunts me as much as my inability to be complete in myself. I have experienced what I take to be wholeness, but I cannot be whole all of the time. I do not always understand why not, and I cannot always accept it.

When I am in the world, I often feel that I am back in freshman-year high school English class, full of the baleful knowledge that in the journey of my life I was the sidekick, not the hero. I am staring at a chandelier in the lobby of the Metropolitan Opera, seeing only the clear crystals and the black accents and denying the whole. I am filling myself with the belief that black and white are what we are, that perfection and weakness are the only alternatives. I sense that I am denying the fullness that I claim to seek.

I remember the "Mason's Apron" from *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

I danced to it once, on stage. I broke the law that I set upon myself, behind the mask of another woman breaking hers. I remember the rosary that I rolled between my dry hands as I heard the slap of the violin in my ear, back and forth, back and forth, as Maggie's shitkicker hit the stage with a clud that I felt in my chest. The reverberation stilled my lips for a moment, but I resumed as the hits came faster and faster on the black stage that was supposed to be our kitchen floor. Irish countryside, probably packed sod, circa 1936. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The music came faster, louder, more insistent, leaping, bounding, weaving with the dream-drone of the violin. The whole ceili pounded in, accompanying the solo violin with a

swirl of drum, and Maggie whooped—hurling her dishtowel across the room—and clomped into the heart of the kitchen, stepping high and proud, just a little off the beat. I spoke louder, spitting fire and brimstone, “For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever,” and they didn’t hear me at all anymore. First our Rosie got up, putting away her knitting with a cherub’s guiltless smile, and then her Aggie followed her, more reserved but breaking into shrieks from the sheer silly joy of it all, bounding like a foal, and then Christina last of all, casting her ironing onto the floor. “Oh, Christina!” I scolded. Her back turned to me. The litany was washed from my mouth as I watched them prance, yell, bounce, all divine, all grins, skirts wrapping around their modest legs like dying daylilies.

Then—the violin died. A bagpipe sounded, more insistent than before. New whoops as the Mundy sisters formed a daisy chain, whipping each other about. I leaned over the table, over my stilled hands, pushed the chair back, stood slow and tall. Took off the apron, folded it carefully, and put it on the table. The rosary curled on top. The chair pushed back in. And I walked off the main stage, slow and measured, down into the little stage below where there was a garden. Lights in my eyes, imagined audience a few steps away, I treaded in the ugly-sensible schoolmarm shoes that Kate wore to the other end of the garden. Stopped.

Kate could not. I could not. I heard the pagan whooping far behind me. A weakness that couldn’t be indulged.

A flutter of drum. My hands wrung themselves; my body bounced, light but tightly pulled in, tense, beyond my control.

Drums slammed down, and I screamed out, a throat-rending *Yab!* Whirled, leaping, pouncing on the stage, breaking the air with my feet, grunting and panting, grimacing and sweating, I stepped in time, perfect time. Face to God, hands out to the world, energy soaring from my feet through to the top of my head and bursting from my crown like light, like the skeins of sound wrapping me and freeing me. A clatter of castanet: face forward, swaying side to side. Another frantic twirl—but then the music cut, and I staggered into silence . . . suddenly shamed.

It was no performance. Kate and I had become free in those moments—more—we had become one. I bridged the divide between my mind and hers. I was brilliantly happy and brilliantly miserable at the same time, in that freedom, that unity. An acceptance of being incomplete. Embracing nature—but not the nature outside myself, my easy respite. It was no pure love, but it was a rare sort of bliss, the closest to completeness, to empathy, to transcendent godhood, that I should ever presume myself capable of achieving. No palpa-

ble guilt, no desire—perhaps no self. I am no god, but I was for a moment, more than ever, even more than in the heart of my forest, in my own heart.

Once consumed by the heady beyond, I know I can no longer ask for perpetual perfection, know that it cannot be, but know too that even in a matter of seconds I can be brought into a relationship with the infinite—or maybe into a changed sort of being—by its power. In such moments of such grandeur, the world outside my mind does not matter, no more than what is inside its cathedral universe. I am not who I was when I was fourteen and thought that my mind was all there was, but I am not so far from that, knowing that I *am* both fragmentary and entire. I am blank, my emotions bleed from me, but I am somehow within and beyond the pleasure and the pain and the faith that I plead for. I want to hold that whole in me—we all hold that wanting at the center of our souls. But fleeting notions of godliness drop from me, go through my grounded feet like bolts of fire, when once again the free universe of my mind holds me in thrall—when I can imagine that I soar to meet desire, to a place that slakes all yearning.

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