

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1982

Pleasures of eating fish

Jodi Varon

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Varon, Jodi, "Pleasures of eating fish" (1982). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 5880.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/5880>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

THIS IS AN UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT IN WHICH COPYRIGHT SUBSISTS. ANY FURTHER REPRINTING OF ITS CONTENTS MUST BE APPROVED BY THE AUTHOR.

MANSFIELD LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
DATE: 1982

THE PLEASURES OF EATING FISH

BY

JODI VARON

B.A., University of Colorado, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree

Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1982

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

6-17-82
Date

UMI Number: EP36681

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP36681

Published by ProQuest LLC (2013). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE PLEASURES OF EATING FISH

THE MARIPOSA DINER	1
SHORTY-BIG-BEAK	13
HOW WE USED TO HUNT	25
THE PLEASURES OF EATING FISH	43

SEDGE AND OLD ARROWHEADS: THE POETRY OF LI HO

INTRODUCTION	56
SONG OF AN ARROWHEAD FROM THE CH'ANG-P'ING BATTLEFIELD	57
AUTUMN DAWN: I ENTER THE TAI-HANG MOUNTAINS	59
IN THE THIRD MONTH I PASS THE IMPERIAL LODGE	60
TO MY PATRON, HUANG-FU SHIH, FROM THE JEN-HO QUARTER	61
SONG OF THE OLD JADE HUNTER	63
PLANT NO TREES	65
FOUR POEMS ABOUT NEW BAMBOO SHOOTS IN MY NORTH GARDEN AT CH'ANG-KU	66

THE MARIPOSA DINER

THE MARIPOSA DINER

All the gardens are up and its hot. Steven is nervous about meeting Dad, changes his shirt. It's useless, five minutes and he's soaked. We're going to Alaska for the summer and he wants to make a good impression on my Dad before we leave. I can't figure this notion of propriety; we've been together six months without anyone's blessings. I'm not sure a good impression is necessary with Dad, he's no star. Besides, with Steven's long brown hair, he'd never go over. I don't tell him this. I tell him to keep the Quaker stuff quiet, promise him he looks fine, but it doesn't register. "Just remember to wipe the hair out of the sink," I say, and go into the living room to clean out the bird cage.

I haven't seen Dad since my folk's divorce. I talked to my mother on the phone this morning, and her vocal chords were still trembling, trilling like songbirds. I don't think she was aware of it. She can't understand why I'd want to go to Alaska, and reminded me of the way my face puffs up when I get mosquito bites. "They have medicine for that now," I tell her, and hang up the phone. If she could have seen her face the day she read the divorce notices in the Rocky Mountain News, maybe she'd understand. My mother is lovely, a rare sunless flower, but that day she looked like shards of glass.

From the first time he took the family here ten years ago, Dad's liked the Mariposa Diner. Steven might not feel right, among old truck and cab drivers, meat cutters and killfloor men from the Globeville packing plants. But he can always take off his glasses and nod at pastels if things get really bad.

The neighborhood has gone to hell over the years, more houses are for sale, yards need mowed and spreading juniper is everywhere. A new developer is tearing down the produce warehouse to make room for condominiums, and the old apartment building next to it has iron bars on all the windows. Two blocks east, they still haven't salvaged the Thrifty Mart that burned last summer.

From the outside, the Mariposa Diner looks bland, white stucco, the front window cracked by beebes. Every head in the place turns as we walk in, and I say to Steven, "Honey, he's not here yet. Go ahead and take off your glasses."

We choose a table in the corner, and Steven lays his glasses on the table. Even these new ones with the plastic lenses are heavy, and he has two red spots that look like beans on the bridge of his nose. I say, "How you doing?" and he goes, "Are my eyes still bloodshot?"

"Just try to relax," I say, patting him on the hand. It wasn't my idea to bring Steven here to meet Dad, so I don't pity him at all. He puts the menu to his face and mumbles, "Fettuccine," but I ignore him.

At least nothing has changed inside the diner. The prices have gone up, but the old red counter with the stools in front are still filled by spreading out backsides in grey baggy pants. Above the heat lamp, a grease stained Blessed Virgin is thumb-tacked to the wall. The diner is always noisy with old Italian men who smell like newsprint and cheep cigars.

Steven says, "I'm hungry, let's order antipasto while we wait."

"I bet you are," I say. We get into a fight about him being stoned and how much he smokes all the time, but I cut it short when I think about what he'd be like straight. As it is, he has our phone hooked up to the computer at school twelve hours a day, banging away on that ancient IBM keyboard someone loaned him. The racket's made the birds molt prematurely, but when I complain, he goes, "I could be just an hour or two away from figuring out the program for CO₂."

The waiter brings us the plate. I've gotten so good at eating fava beans, I can shell them without using my hands and pile my fava skins in the ashtray like cocoons. Steven eats all the salami and cheese, then slumps down in his chair.

Dad's not usually late like this, but I figure he's nervous too. I conjure up image after image of him in white shirt, work pants, and brown loafers. He has black wavy hair and a big mustache he seldom trims, cauliflower ears and a nose I've called platano blanco since I can remember. He drives

a Yellow Cab. I have a picture of him that I carry in my wallet, a cocky young sergeant standing on the banks of the Mississippi before his tour of duty; a husky, thin-smiling man with polished black shoes.

When he walks in the door, he looks like the heat in his cab is killing him, the left arm he rests on his rolled down window full of heat bumps. I introduce him to Steven and they shake hands. Dad says, "Steven," and kisses me on the head. He calls me "honey" and orders a sausage sandwich.

I am suddenly five, showing my daddy a smeared crayola drawing of corn and rhubarb and our swing-set near the garden. He kisses me on the forehead, tells me, "That's pretty, honey," and we're driving through Denver, late summer afternoons, watching thunderheads build on the prairie east of town. Sometimes we park in shade underneath the Speer viaduct to watch a free baseball game, sometimes we go to the zoo. He takes me out on the first cloverleaf our town built, gliding in the Yellow Cab down 6th Avenue and across I-25, sharing a pizza with anchovies an hour before supper.

Denver then was big as the gas left in his tank at the end of his last run. He'd pick me up from day camp and we'd sail out 6th into the foothills, past the Federal Building, Redrocks, and Morrison where my grandpa had a farm. After Buffalo Bill's Grave, we'd double back and shoot through Golden, his squat, yellow, Checker body cab winding along Clear Creek, boxed in by hillsides of pine and talus. We'd hit Lookout

Mountain just before sunset, the shadow of the front range stretching 15 miles east to Lakewood, downtown Denver a toy erector set with three or four tall buildings.

Steven says, "Isn't this weather something?"

My dad wipes his forehead with a new hanky and says, "That damn airport's just like a sweatbath. One minute they've got us lined up underneath the walkover, and that's nice and cool. Then somebody gets the bright idea to have the cab zone in the sun across the street from passenger pickup. I don't even like to go out there anymore. The rides aren't worth it."

I say, "Business been ok?" and that's wrong too. Ever since he lost his meat business, he's been touchy on the subject. It was great though, the years his business lasted between his Yellow Cab jobs. He took us all to New York to meet his family, who have names like Diamond, Allegra, and Bahora. One of the few times I remember him happy was running through the cemetery across the freeway from the World's Fair, touching his family's gravestones. The only time I've ever seen him pull a weed was by his mother's grave, a plot covered with phlox and wild violets. When we drove down 145th Street, he jumped out of the car into mid-day traffic to point out the five-and-dime, once tenement, where he was born.

He still carries a pen inscribed, "Neal Samorel Meats"

in his breast pocket. He says, "You have jobs lined up when you get to Alaska? I wouldn't want you to get stranded up there, honey."

Steven says, "I have friends working at a salmon cannery in Petersburg, and they say there's work for us and a place to stay." Steven is at a disadvantage now, the spaghetti he ordered for lunch is right in front of him, and he can't see to eat without his glasses. On the other hand, once he puts them on he will be able to see my father staring at his braid and his beard and his pale blue eyes that look like clear, shooting marbles behind his glasses. He'll be able to see the football field of pores on my dad's big nose and the beads of coffee stuck to his mustache. The world through his glasses must terrify him.

My dad says, "They never cook the sausage enough at this joint." He takes a bite and tomato sauce squirts out onto his white shirt. "Ah hell," he says, ignoring the sauce. "What a day. Listen, honey, I'm all tied up in knots right now. Your mother got a real unpleasant call at work this morning."

"An obscene phone call?" I say.

"I told her not to call. It wouldn't do anybody any good, I said, but she wouldn't listen to me. We had a fight and too much to drink. She got mad and dialed your mom at work.

"You must know how it is. My life with your mother was never any great shakes. Not that she's not a wonderful woman.

She is. She worked hard those years. She's not to blame."

"What are you talking about?" I say.

"Fifteen years," he says. He wets the corner of his napkin in his water glass and dabs at the stain on his shirt. "Off and on.

"We met at the dog track. Your mother was on a losing streak and swore off betting. She was home that night. One of you kids had the measles or chickenpox, it's hard to remember. Maggie couldn't even read a race form."

"Maggie," I say, rolling the name around on my tongue.

"She just stood there while the dogs chased 'Rusty' around the track, race after race, tearing up all her bum tickets. There was something about her that I liked; her blonde hair frizzed out like a clown's."

"You've had a woman 15 years?" I say.

"Jesus, Helen," Steven says. "Don't put it like that."

"Shut up, Steven, you just shut up. How else should I put it?"

"Honey," Dad says, "listen, I was counting on you to understand. Your mother, she's shook up about this whole thing. Maggie called her at work, and I was hoping you'd be able to calm her down. She's sick about it. She didn't know."

"Me," I say.

The waiter comes and clears all our plates away. I follow him back to the kitchen with my eyes. Maybe there's a little window back there I could crawl through. The waiter

comes back out, drags a chair into the center of the dining room floor, stands on it to pull the cord on the ceiling fan. The thin metal blades don't move right away, but the motor whines like hornets. He stands on the chair a few minutes, looking over everybody's heads. His white nylon socks clench his skinny ankles, and his black shoes seem that much blacker. The blades whirl slowly around, then gather speed.

"At first it wasn't any big deal. We had a few drinks in the bar that night, 7 and 7's, nothing fancy. I gave her a few pointers on the form, told her about favorites and longshots. I hit a quinella in the loth race, and you know how it is to win, honey; I felt good. We went for pie after that; the place is gone now." He takes out his wallet and tosses a 3x5 glossy on the table. A young woman is standing with her hand on a boy's shoulder. The hand has incredibly thin fingers--the tips look filed. The boy looks like her, skin papery as insect wings. She has a head full of curls and eyes that must be squinting from the sun. My mother never looked this happy.

"I saw her at the track a few times. Once she was there when I was with your mother, and boy, did I feel funny. Not that I had anything to hide at the time, but it was on my mind.

"One night it just happened, and I couldn't stop it after that. You two know what I'm talking about. After we walked

the babysitter home. She heated up some leftover chicken and we sat around and talked. She got the hiccoughs, and damn if that didn't seem funny. I smacked her between the shoulder blades a few times, and one thing led to another."

"Dad," I say, "please don't."

"Naw, listen, honey, we're all adults. It was one of those things. Maggie is a good woman. She just needed to blow off a little steam I guess. She thought I'd marry her after the divorce.

"If you want dessert, go ahead and order it," he says. "I'll foot the bill today."

I say, "Spumoni," and Steven says, "I have to use the restroom." He takes off his glasses, and I know he'll be gone for a long time, thinking about all this in the john.

I know a lot myself about husbands who complain of their married life to sad young women who listen. I know about the dreams that never happen, and the new start, that never happens either. I also know from my own ex-husband how sexy someone else can seem, vivacious and exciting as no wife. I don't know who to pity more.

I stare at the pistachios in my spumoni, hoping I might read some magic answer as with tea leaves, but see only ice cream melting in the bottom of the dish. If I never see my Dad again would it be any better? As it is, I'm afraid when he dies I will never have known him.

Dad leans over close to my ear and says, "Hey, honey,

where'd you get that one. Those eyes of his don't look like they'll last much longer. He doesn't eat much, does he? You sure you want to go all the way up there with him?"

"You've got some right to talk," I say. "From now on, I don't want to hear that stuff." People are looking around because I'm raising my voice. I don't care. They've heard the whole story anyway. I'm red down to the roots of my hair, but I don't care, it's genetic. For all I know, he takes her here to eat. "You may have messed up your life, but don't say a word about mine, ok, I don't want to hear it."

"You touchy little snot," he says, and we're off and running.

"No more," I think. I'm shaking like an epileptic and I can feel each strand of spaghetti curl in my intestine. I wish I didn't know this story. I wish Steven hadn't heard it, I wish I were going to Greenland or Tierra del Fuego or anywhere more distant than Alaska.

"Helen, honey," he says, "I'm sorry."

"Piss on you," is what I say.

He scoots his chair out from the table, stands up, and swings his hand against my face. The slap sounds loud as a beaver tail on water, hits so hard I jerk my neck. My eyes glob up with tears, his moving form three shades of grey. I want to jump on him and make him tell me why he is hiding my father from me.

"Don't you ever forget I'm your father," he says as he walks out the door.

I wonder if he ever cries. I think about him alone in his motel room; maybe there have been a dozen Maggies. He walks over to the portable refrigerator and pours himself a glass of milk. He sits down on the bed and leans over, as if to hold his ulcerous gut, like I do. The echo of rubber, wet pavement, and wind muffle his sobs. I'm not sure why he's crying. If he really is, he's crying for himself, for the young man on the Mississippi who fought the war in the jungles of British Honduras, where he and his buddies would pour gasoline on huge soldier and hills and ignite them.

I sometimes see him riding by in his Yellow Cab. When he sees me, he waves, his big hands flapping out the window. Sometimes he keeps going, and I'm just another no-ride pedestrian on the sidewalk.

In the cab zone in front of the Brown Palace Hotel, he sits reading the raceform, lined up with the other cabs waiting for a passenger. He's given up on the airport. He doesn't see me. A lady comes out of the hotel and summons my father. She has two big suitcases, so he gets out of his cab and hauls them into the trunk. It looks like hard work for him. She stands there tapping her red fingernails against the door waiting for him to finish. He gives her a nasty look, that funny way he curls his lip. He opens the door for the lady. I notice she is wearing black patent spiked heels, and so does he. He gets into his cab, yanks the red

meter flag down, and pulls out.

That night, Steven climbs on top of me, which is a big mistake. I'm on Holly Street, all the palamino horses Daddy bought me from the National Western Stockshows lined up on my dresser. We're on Lookout Mountain, below us mesas, indian paintbrush, and summer thunderheads forming in the east. Afterwards, Steven says, "It was like pissing in a lake."

I go to Alaska with him anyway. When we get to Petersburg, he signs on with a logging crew. He writes one letter to me at the salmon cannery, where he says he got a hair cut, and the first day out he lost his glasses. He says it doesn't matter too much, all the trees are so big.

SHORTY-BIG-BEAK

SHORTY-BIG-BEAK

When it didn't rain, Irving and Benny sat out on the cannery dock in the evening and fished. They pulled up sculpin and cod, swollen from garbage and algae floating underneath the salmon cannery's foundation. They stretched in rusted lawn chairs and smoked cigars that Benny rolled himself, passing time so that they wouldn't hit the bar until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m.

Irving prayed that the fish wouldn't strike at his bait. When he felt a tug at his line, he waited until the last minute to jerk up and set the hook. He hated their bodies, gills fanned out thick with air as he unhooked the barb from their lips and threw them back.

They spent April and May together, waiting for the rest of the crew to trickle up the southeast Alaskan coast, Irving in Benny's spare cookhouse bedroom. He'd found the crew bunkhouse filled with rats, and for a while he was touchy, disappointed that his plans to live alone in the men's bunkhouse had been foiled. At home in Seattle last winter, he'd taken up woodcarving while healing his back after a snowmobile accident, and he was counting on solitude to practice.

He had to settle for waiting until he heard Benny clink

his false teeth into a glass, then Irving would take his tools out from underneath the bed. Most of them were new, purchased from West Seattle Hardware, but the adze was his Tlingit grandfather's. The handle was a replica of the family totem his grandfather carved. It was the one tool Irving treasured, and he thought it brought him luck. He'd curl his thick fingers around the point of the totem eagle's beak and scrape at cedar or alder, preparing the wood, imagining he was whittling slices almost thin as apple peel, grotesque knots and a fine layer of sawdust scattered on his lap.

Irving worked hard to get the cannery in shape for the summer season, fixing the leak in the bunkhouse roof and setting out rat poison. Inside the cannery, his steps echoed off the concrete floors, metal boilers, and the Chink, the salmon cutting machine, all motionless, coated with a fine grit of rust from winter rain. He tore the boiler apart and put it back together, sitting on a wobbly stool while he looked out the window at the spine of the northern Rockies zigzagging far to the east above the Narrows channel. He liked to imagine the women standing there packing, their backsides curved out behind their yellow aprons as they slammed the packed four-pound salmon tins onto the conveyor belt. He could hear it, the whistle of his boilers building pressure, the steady bang of the Chink as its upper blades cut the salmon into seven parts, the whirr of the blade underneath that slit and gutted fish.

At low tide, he walked along the beach by the Petersburg dock. Mud was coated viscous and black from boat oil and sewage flushed raw into the Narrows. His boots sank deep in the muck, and popped each time he raised them to stomp on clam shells, trying to shatter them with one blow. He watched a man loading his boat across the water in West Petersburg and waved. There were more cabins this year than before, and the old mink trapper's shack was almost covered by new patches of devil's thumb and skunk cabbage uncurling by the door. Irving could remember looking across the water and seeing nothing but the shack and the base of Petersburg Mountain on a clear day, rowing across and seeing the cannery, two grocery stores, a laundromat and bar. Last year, the first Japanese super-tanker butted and squeezed through the Narrows channel, adding more than its share of dirty bilge water. The boat displaced water high along the bank, and trapped seaweed that still curled out in the tide like hair.

Irving moved back to the men's bunkhouse a week before the Matanuska Ferry brought all the college kids crewing up for a summer in Alaska. He took the bunk farthest away from the radio, by the north window. There was a small plywood nightstand next to the bed, and he arranged his tools in the middle drawer. He'd started picking at one of the chunks of alder he carried with him from Seattle, trying to duplicate from memory the old whistle his grandfather let him toot on holidays. When it was finished, he planned to give it to

Benny for putting him up in the cookhouse.

His grandfather had always made carving look so simple, holding the wood a long time, pressing it as if he were feeling the beat of an eagle chick inside its egg. Irving would work on the whistle all the nights that Benny fished, and each time he put his knife to it, big sections peeled off like strings of overcooked roastbeef. He was fascinated by the way it shrank so quickly.

Irving avoided the Tlingit women who worked on the sliming crew, though sometimes he tried to listen to see if he could understand a little of what they said. They called him Shorty-Big-Beak and his ears burned every time he heard their name for him.

At coffee break, he had tried to say a few words to them in Tlingit, but they continued chattering as if they hadn't heard him. He felt foolish, twisting his tongue and clicking his palate in a way that had always been awkward for him. He often stood on the loading dock and watched them pocket donuts when Benny made extra for everyone. He didn't like to be around them. They smelled funny to him, like fish and old fat.

Rita always lagged behind the others after break. She shuffled to the rack to unhook her yellow apron, throwing her shoulders back and bending her elbows to tie the thin

white apron string around her waist, her stocky figure moving slowly to her station. She took a long time selecting a sliming knife from the tool drawer, brushing her thumb across each edge.

Irving overheard her complaining to the other women that cold water running in the gutter along the sliming troughs made her hands so stiff she couldn't hold her sandwich at lunchtime, and wanted to do something for her, maybe put her on the packing line or at the Chink. He figured she'd counted on money from this summer job to get her through next winter like everyone else, and she'd earn more at one of the machines.

When he approached her, she said, "Those packers move too fast," and shook her head. "I'd rather work with my friends."

"What about your hands?" Irving said.

She tried to bend her twisted brown fingers on cue, but couldn't. Constant dunking in water as she scraped the salmon's mucosal skin left her knuckles bluish and swollen.

"Want to try the Chink?" Irving asked.

She hesitated, then said, "Might as well. I can't hold a knife any more with these damn clubs."

He showed her what to do, where to stand, how to lay the fish out lengthwise, so the machine's grippers would latch onto it and move it underneath the blades. He warned her to pay attention and not let the noise of the machine lull her to sleep. The blades of the Chink came down fast and even. The underblade didn't always cut straight along the

fish, and he made a note in his head to fix it.

At lunchtime he grinned at Rita and she pretended not to see him as she sipped slowly from her plastic thermos cup. He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked past her to the cookhouse for his meal, fingering the spare bolts and screws he carried in his pockets.

Benny was trimming pie edges when Irving walked in. "Why don't you fix yourself a plate and eat in here," Benny said, motioning from the buffet set up in the dining room and back.

Irving scooted a forkfull of meatloaf around the pool of gravy in his mashed potatoes. He watched Benny fluting edges on the pie crusts, pressing neat waves with his forefinger.

"You like doing that, don't you?" he asked Benny.

"Sure," he said, "keeps me busy."

The afternoon dragged on. The crew unloaded the Dora Lee at lunchtime, which meant they'd be working until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. During the afternoon break, Irving asked Rita how she was doing. She waved her hand at him and went on conversing with her friends. He felt too nice, always looking out for everybody else.

At 5:30 the cannery was warm and the machines were still churning to get the entire catch canned. Irving saw Rita slump foreward at the Chink as if she'd fallen asleep. He grabbed her and threw her back from the blades, but not before the gripper snapped the first two fingers of her left hand.

She screamed, and it seemed as if at that moment everything stopped.

He picked her up, pain shooting through his healing spine. Her lips were pursed and her smooth forehead scrambled with wrinkles. She reminded Irving of a spirit mask his grandfather had carved, an ugly cedar face of ridges and stiff black human hair made to cure his cousin's palsy. Rita's mangled hand hung limply, banged against his chinos, leaving thick streams of blood.

He put her on the cot in the office and covered her with an old grey blanket. Another Tlingit woman grabbed antiseptic and gauze from the medicine cabinet and doused the hand, while a third rummaged through her purse for an old perscription bottle of penicillin, to ward off fish poison. Ron Woods, the cannery owner, radioed for a medical helicopter from Wrangell.

Being pressed into the tiny office with Ron and the three women made him squirm. He left, walked back past the stacks of tin cans, and climbed down the ladder that led to the unloading dock to get some air.

The dock was littered with scales, torn fins, and bits of ice that had fallen out of the basket that hoisted salmon from the boat hold to the fish-sorting bins. When he was younger, Irving dove from this dock with the fishermen, lashing out at the cold water. Now, the thought of it made him stiffen.

He stared out at the white capped waves and thought he could see the eyes of sculpin as they scavenged around the pilings. He remembered fishing with his grandfather off the Queen Charlottes when halibut hooks spanned larger than his hand. The herring they used to bait the hooks stank on his fingers, and a long time afterwards, he would feel the boat reeling as his grandfather worked the lines or stood in the hull to spray a wide arc of piss over the side, while Irving held on to the splintered boat rim, wishing he were home skipping rocks along the beach.

The women looked over their shoulders as Irving walked back inside the cannery. Their small black eyes seemed to blame him--Rita would have been much better off with a stiff, un-mangled hand. He put his earplugs in and went back to his machines, checked the bins to see how much fish was left to can.

Ron Woods tapped him on the shoulder and motioned towards the hallway away from the boiler. Irving watched the splotches of blood on his shoes as he moved into the hall, dried a greenish brown on his rubber workboots.

"She gonna be alright?" Irving, asked.

"Eventually. Everything's still there, in one form or another. But Jesus, Irving, why'd you put her on the Chink?"

"I thought she could handle it," he said.

"You know I don't like those women working near the machines,

especially the Chink."

"I'm sorry, boss," Irving said.

"It isn't your fault. I don't mean to make it sound like an Indian thing, Irving, you understand, because it isn't. These accidents cost me a fortune. Next time you put someone on the Chink, check with me first."

After the helicopter took the woman away, Irving stayed late at the cannery to shut things down. His machines hissed to a standstill as he hosed off the sorting and sliming bins, wet concrete heightening the raw scent of salmon. Pressure felt good as he tightened his arms against the spray, cold through the rubber of his hip boots.

The more he thought about what Ron had said to him, the more it burned him up. Was it his fault the woman got rummy from the machine? She'd said she wanted to give the Chink a try; he didn't force her.

The bunkhouse was empty when he finished working. Someone had left the tap running in the bathroom and Irving turned it off. He lay down on his bunk and stared up at the ceiling, tracing with a finger the water stain he'd whitewashed. It was too early to doze off, so he rolled over and picked up the whistle he'd left on his nightstand. He turned the wood around in his hands, so fast that splinters flaked off and fell on his shirt. He sat up and brushed them off, reaching into the middle drawer for his carving tools. The drawer

was empty. He ran his fingers along the rough insides as if the tools would suddenly appear, turned the other two drawers upside down, kicking his electric shaver and checkerboard across the room. "Some son-of-a-bitch on the crew," he said to himself, rocking back and forth on the bed. Even that felt like someone else had lain down on it.

A low bank of swelling clouds socked in the channel, cutting Betersburg Mountain off in the middle. "What good would it do to search the bunkhouse," he thought. The tools are hidden. Or gone. They could have been pawned in Sitka for all I know."

An old three-speed bike was leaning against the side of the bunkhouse outside. He picked it up and got on, veering as the bike wheels reeled from pothole to pothole on the dirt road that followed the island's shoreline.

A mile from Boulder Flats it began to rain. Water spun off the back wheel and sprayed a streak of mud up from Irving's butt to the middle of his back. The rain made him ache as he turned onto the road that cut through the center of the island to the dump. Half way out, the gravel was washed away; fern, moss, and salmonberry brambles crept across the cut-out road. He got off his bike and sank ankle deep in the muskeg. Salal brushed against his pants, its wet leaves saturating cloth to the knee.

It was still light when he got to the dump. Five or six

cars were parked along the road, while families watched the black bears rummaging through garbage. Irving stayed a safe distance on his wet bicycle, remembering the first time he'd come to the dump when it opened officially ten years ago.

The bear population had been larger then, and rifles were advised with evening viewing of the bears. He'd borrowed the company car, one that belonged to Ron's father, took an old rifle Benny kept in the cookhouse, and drove with Benny out to the dump. They had stopped to have a few in town, and it was almost dark when they got there. A big cinnamon black bear lumbered right up to the window and nudged the car with its snout. Benny's hand was shaking so badly he couldn't get the rifle loaded, and cartridges slipped out of his fingers and rolled underneath the seat. Irving started the car and the bear took off. It was the last time they went to the dump together.

He watched the families watching bears. Children in the back seats bounced up and down and pointed to the waddling brown haunches clawing through rusted washing machines and burned out chevies looking for food. Watching bears was a big town attraction, advertised on the Ferry, from the looks of out-of-state license plates. The dump was also one of the few places to drive to on the island.

He thought seeing the bears would make him feel better. Often, when he didn't have anything to do on Sunday afternoons,

he'd go to the Seattle Zoo. But these bears didn't help. He felt lonely and cold, stupid sitting on a bicycle in the middle of the muskeg, surrounded by tourists.

He pedaled back through town on the good road, avoiding Main Street. It was almost dark and he was tired from trying to keep the bike erect. Near the summer cabins, Irving thought he saw a whale spout in the middle of the Narrows. He got off the bike in time to see what he thought was the smooth black surface of a whale's back. He ran as close to the water as he could, wanting to call to it, to let it know somehow that he had seen it. He wanted to press his palms flat on the whale's back, so the whale would always carry the squat imprint of his hands.

Lights were on all over the bunkhouse as he rode past, onto the pier. He stood there a long time, listening to the loud crackles in the radio and the tide going out. The metal bicycle frame banged against the wooden railing, cold and gritty as he struggled to lift it over. As it sank, he felt elated at the kind of simple justice he worked. A piece of fender flashed silver in the cannery yard light, popped up on its back wheel, then went down.

HOW WE USED TO HUNT

HOW WE USED TO HUNT

Rita leaned over the ferry guardrail and let the wind trap itself inside her headscarf. Cold air lapped the soft skin around her ears. She watched the whirlpools that spun out from the engine and the bubbles that shone white and yellow in early sun. She remembered how she and her brother used to sit doubled over on rocks watching tide pools. They would watch each other's faces and hair framed against the rutted stones covered with sea moss, toss their bread crumbs into the smooth water. The surface would churn and buckle as hermit crabs hoisted their bodies and clutched at the bread. Mollusks suctioned to the rocks bubbled the water like her brother did while drinking Coca Cola at the drugstore, forcing air through his straw. They spent whole afternoons staring at those tide pools, anemones glistening in summer light, surrounding each crumb with their translucent bodies, sucking in the food while sea plants twirled their green petals.

She remembered her brother's sounds of even breathing. And the smell of slack water, the rotting seaweed and kelp they would drag along the beach while blowing into the breath holes they cut with their pocketknives.

One of them would always spoil it. They'd stick their fingers

in the pool, try to hide the hermit's home or pry him from its safe dark walls. They'd grab the other crabs not fast enough to hide behind a rock and stuff them into pockets already filled with sand dollars and clam shells. Sometimes the crabs would live for three days in a glass of tap water, but they never looked the same. In the glass they struggled and their movements were awkward and ugly. The bright orange of their bodies in the tide pool faded to a flat grey which Rita came to recognize as the color of death.

One of them would churn the sand up and the clear water became a sludge pool. The jellyfish would hide. Once her brother tried to take a starfish sunning on a rock. He tore one of its legs as he picked it up, and, unhappy with his imperfect prize, threw the body as far out into the water as he could throw.

Rita watched a brown spotted seal swim toward Wrangell. She could see the island now, Sitka spruce waiting to be cut, floating on a piece of rock out in Frederick Sound. It all looked so young, the jagged rock, the eagles and hawks, black bear, seals, dolphins and white whales. She could see the raw cut mouth of the Stikine River spilling into the Sound, its body cutting a big swatch through timber as it surged north. Her ranger friend pulled two men out of that river

at the beginning of the summer, kayaks tipped over; bodies trapped inside until the waves ripped them from the hulls.. "Messy work," he'd said.

No one slept during the boatripe. Mary lay on her coat behind the orange swivel seats and dozed next to her baby. She woke when he started to gag, her heart beating fast. She patted him on the back; he burped and fell asleep.

The ferry had been stuck in the Narrows for three hours waiting for the tide to come in so that its broad girth, built for cars, could squeeze through. Looking out the window when the boat began to move, Rita could almost touch the shoreline, which seemed to pull the metal towards it.

A storm came up when the boat reached Frederick Sound, great grey clouds that emptied their sheets of rain low like geese covering the sky. Whitecaps sent everyone to the bathroom or the bar. It was the tourist season, and the captain felt badly about the turbulence, so he sent his steward around with walrus tie pins which read, 'Thank you for riding on the Alaska Marine Highway!'. The tusks weren't ivory, but the plastic was cracked and stained like old scrimshaw for sale in Ketchikan pawnshops. Rita took hers and decided she would send it to her brother.

Mary talked about Ed and tried to figure out what it was that she wanted from him. She said she just wanted to show him the baby, but she knew that wasn't it. Maybe she wanted

to feel some kind of connection between the three of them. She could remember times in Juneau when her girlfriends were off somewhere she would walk down among the boats and listen to the wind and the ropes pulling against the mooring, wood pilings thudding the hulls of old boats, tinney pings as the pulleys hit against the masts. She felt as if everything were about to be set in motion, the wind, the fishing boats, the baby. She sat down with her legs swinging out over the water and thought about the small fish curled round in her belly. Inside of her he was perfect, she imagined him the most perfect human being, there forming the hammer, anvil, and stirrup which brought him old sounds, rushing water. In that oval he was a great hunter, he was the president of a corporation. But as he stretched toward light, he became the boy she conceived with her first lover. He became the man's eyes and hands, her tongue. He became a third body with every faculty to undo perfection. Mary knew that if she would figure out why she had come to Wrangell, she could pass that knowledge on to her son.

As the boat pulled into the dock, the old creosote pilings moaned against the weight of the Matanuska Ferry. Children selling fistfulls of garnets approached Mary, Rita and the baby as the ferry unloaded. Every morning the older boys went down to the beach and looked in between the rocks for the transparent red stones that some islanders believed could

turn the head of a pretty woman your way, if you carried just the right amount in your pocket. No one knew what the right amount was, but they kept experimenting. Rita thought about buying some for her brother back in California, figuring he'd be the kind to try every charm and magic concoction there is.

Mary made this trip to show the boy to his father; Eddy'd never seen the baby. He left Nome to get work on the Pipeline, and then she left to kick around southeastern Alaska with her girlfriends. She wrote Eddy three letters while he was out working near Valdez. In the first letter she told him about all the new places she was visiting: Juneau, Sitka, Petersburg, and how she had met Rita, who convinced her to stay in Petersburg and work at her uncle's cannery all summer. She said Rita was a nice woman and she told him she knew he would think she was pretty, with her white skin and blonde hair. He thought Mary didn't need to work at the cannery with other indians, him making so much money on the pipeline project. He didn't know why she said he'd think Rita was pretty; he didn't know why she had gone away.

In the second letter she mentioned that she was pregnant and that the baby was his and it was due any day. She made

some jokes about how she looked like a beached whale when she lay down at night, how her bellybutton had gotten so big she could fit a quarter in it. She also told him she wouldn't be coming back north. It didn't surprise him, though when he read the words he took the small soapstone bear he was carving for her and put it away. She asked him to understand and told him that if the baby were a boy she would name him David after his grandfather who had been killed in a hunting party the summer before. Eddy knew that he was a fool to have let himself care so much about such a young girl. He knew from the way she talked about her funny old Eskimo grandmother that she wanted to go south. She was tired of Nome, tired of the city it had become, tired of her winter job running cars for fifteen minutes at every half hour to keep the engines from freezing in the parking lot she attended.

He told himself, "Ok, we'll go south together. I can find a job, she'll go with me, we'll be happy." He thought about all the hundred dollar bills he saved from the job and how he'd only spent one on the women from Anchorage who came in groups of five from bunkhouse to bunkhouse.

In the third letter she told him she had named him as the father on the birth certificate.

When they met in April, one month after David was born, all he could think about were the strange things he'd seen

while hunting. He tried to concentrate on what Mary was saying, but picture after picture came into his head of blind loons and foxes without tails, a stretched skin with a yellow flower growing through its center, a caribou with five legs. When he saw she was telling him that she had gone away for good, he wandered farther back to the first time he had seen her in the parking lot huddled in her small booth against the wind.

Mary told him he was only thinking of the checks that he'd have to send them every month, that he was worried how he was going to pay off the snowmobile and the two new rifles he had written about. He wondered what happened to her and where she got such strange ideas. Her bitterness shocked him. All along he thought he would take care of her, from that first time he sat next to her at the Co-op meeting, when he talked to her and told her the story of how his uncle was out hunting last winter and he had to take a leak, and it was so cold, the wind was blowing up pillows of snow, and it was so cold that he froze the tip of his pecker. She laughed and he said, from then on whenever it was real cold out someone would say, "How cold is it?" and everyone would answer, "Go ask Roy." When she laughed she showed all of her teeth and they were white like snow where no one walked. He laughed too, and as he looked at her face he saw a small black fish in the brown of her iris.

They met at another Co-op meeting, then another, and after the third, they snuck out behind the Co-op shed. The July sky was pink, orange, and green, and clouds spun above Mary's head as she lay on the ground.

He had come down from Valdez to Juneau, hoping to straighten things out. Mary had come up from Petersburg. She cut her black hair short and her face looked smooth and full.

"How's work?" she said while folding and unfolding her hands.

"Ok," he said. "The boy with your sister?"

"Yes," Mary said, "in Ketchikan."

The whole time they were talking he wanted to grab her shoulders and press her to him, as if the warmth of his hands on her shirt, on her skin, in her bones would make her love him.

"Do you like the cannery?" he forced himself to ask.

"It's ok. They gave me a job sorting the salmon. They say I'm good at it."

She scratched her nose and he reached for her free hand. She wanted to tell him about the salmon, the silver sockeye skin, the ugly chumpys.

The motel room sheets were stiff and scratched like dry grass. Mary thought their lovemaking was worse than two strangers'. When Eddy was inside her he felt like salmon running against the emptiness that filled her guts and made her think of the way her cousins in Anchorage talked about the ground opening during the big earthquake. It wasn't good like the first time two years ago when he had coaxed her and took off his jacket to lay underneath her because there was still cold in the air. In the constant summer twilight he had pressed into her so that she could feel the slow tearing of her body. All of her girlfriends talked about how it would feel like this. When he came, his semen smelled like muskeg just before summer. His black hair was wet from the ground, shimmered pink from the lights.

When he fell asleep in the motel room, she felt his legs quiver and mistook the spasm for dreams of flight. She wished he were dreaming of Seattle, and how much easier life would be there, no snow or food to worry about, as long as he could figure out a way to tolerate a steady job indoors. Her body filled with the same blackness she felt while David was being born, as she held a blanket in her teeth, lying on a bed in the back bedroom of her girlfriend Molly's house. She remembered David's head and the last quick cramp of the afterbirth, his gasping wail. The kicks and turns that sometimes made her crawl a whole day as the baby found a place

to stretch along her spine were gone, his heart pushing on her belly as she lay on her back dreaming of his father. Now they were two bodies, and soon he would be weaned.

Mary never thought about asking Ed to come down from his job, to make the trip from Valdez. And she hadn't wanted to go back to Nome, even though it would be summer and light all the time. When she came to Petersburg, Rita and Rita's friends assumed that she had been abandoned by the baby's father, and evenings in the women's bunkhouse, Rita and the other women would sit drinking coffee and talking about men they had known and how they had been in and out of love, until they figured out just exactly what it was that men wanted. It reminded Mary of the fishing stories her brother told, how the hole was cut wrong or the day too warm, how the sun was too high and made funny spots on the snow.

Mary looked toward the petroglyphs that lay cold and silent along the northern shore of Wrangell. Drawings neither Tlingit nor Haida, pictures that made her feel lost as they lay half covered by the tide that first time she saw them with her girlfriends. Sad, as she watched the water washing over the circles, half circles, white rainbows and large opened eyes that were trapped and soundless in that spot

forever. She wondered who had come and chisled these pictures, if they came in great boats from somewhere in Frederick Sound, or paddled in kayaks down the Stikine. Mary bent down and traced the curving rainbows with her fingers, rainbows whose deep edges were smoothed by gritty water. She let the slack water lap on top of her hands, and then lifted them to her nose to smell the salt.

She knew Rita was eager to see the carvings, hauled her new camera equipment and special paper for the rubbings. Mary knew the rubbings wouldn't work because the rocks were usually submerged and when they weren't they were covered with sea slime. Mary felt sorry for Rita in a way; she was chasing all over Alaska after a photographer for National Geographic. Mary wondered whether Rita made this trip just to impress him.

Mary's heart was beating faster than it had when David gagged. As the three of them walked out onto the shrimp cannery dock, she wanted to turn and run. She wanted to bolt like a dog too young for the sled. Maybe she didn't have any feeling left for him. Suddenly, she didn't want to find out. She didn't want to go back to Nome.

Rita chattered about the thick cloud cover and the rain.

Mary wanted her to go away.

"Can I meet you at the bar?" Mary finally said to her.

Rita looked as if Mary had dragged cold bait across her face. She was anxious to get a glimpse of Eddy, to be more involved in Mary's life. She was hoping she might go to Nome to do photographs some day.

Mary stood in the cannery doorway and listened to the boiler and compressors. Women with broad hips in blue stretch pants sat on benches along one wall lined with tables and forced shrimp out of their translucent shells, tearing off the feelered heads and squeezing the shrimp's body down by the bottom, forcing the meat out through the torn neck. The shrimp were par boiled right from the nets and then dipped in iodine so the shells would be soft for the picking. The women dropped shells onto the cement floor, where they drifted like pale butterflies.

A man wearing rubber boots shoveled bucketsfull of shrimp into a long metal trough where the packers stood, tin cans on scales, placing the shrimp into cans until the scales balanced. A long conveyor belt on top of the trough carried the packed full tins to the boiler, where they were sealed, cooked and stamped for shipment to Seattle. There was so much metal in this room the shrimp meat looked too pink.

Eddy was there, not like Mary imagined at all. He took

long strokes with his shovel, hoisting shrimp into the boiler. She had imagined him standing off in a corner looking her square in the face as she came through the door, grabbing David and throwing him high up into the air with a wide smile on his lips. She had imagined that he would continue staring at her as she walked across the endless room toward him and that he would not speak to her or look at the baby. As he stooped there working, she saw the brittle hairs that always stood straight up at the top of his head, no matter how much grease or water he used to slick them down. The collar on his shirt looked stiff and new. She felt the sweat running down the small of her back as she tapped him on the shoulder.

The foreman watched Mary and came over, but when Eddy stood up and saw who it was, he waved the foreman away. All the noise in the cannery made David cry. Eddy put the shovel down and stretched out his arms to take the baby.

"I'll hold him," Mary said.

He motioned her to move toward the door, took out his ear plugs and told her that he'd be right back and went to wash up. He could feel his heart beating fast, pushing at those sunless winter days outside of Valdez where he lay face down on his bunk with an ache in his chest that filled his nights with dreams of strange animals and limbless women. He found the soap on the shelf and washed his face too.

He took this job at the cannery knowing that Wrangell was just a nine hour ferry ride from Petersburg. He imagined Mary sitting in the foreman's office drinking coffee every evening as he came to punch out. He would see the back of her head first, see how she had begun to let her hair grow long again. Then he would see the roundness of her shoulders and her calico shirt. One of her perfect hands would be holding the coffee mug off to one side. She would be wearing the silver bracelet he gave her right before he went away to work on the pipeline.

Every night for a month and a half he stared at the empty chair in the foreman's office as if her body were there and he couldn't see it.

"Because you left to go work on the pipeline," Mary said before Eddy had a chance to speak. "Because I was left in Nome and this boy was growing and I didn't want to listen to any more stories about caribou hunts. I wanted to see something besides snow."

"But I went to make money for us. I told you I'd come back. Did you think it was fun, welding under artificial lights? I only slept a few hours a day."

Mary looked past him to the plastic, gold colored clock that hung by the cash register in the cafe. She remembered

talking with her girlfriends one night and them telling her about how they had saved up some money from clerking in the Co-op and Molly's brother Jim had sent her some money that he saved from the pipeline job too. They talked about how they would go down to Skagway and get on one of the ferries, maybe the new Columbia, the one they had to fix after it buckled in the middle on its maiden voyage. Maybe they'd ride all the way down to Seattle. Mary would go to Seattle with her girlfriends and see five different movies in one day, try on dresses, eat peaches and apples, not wear a parka in winter. She laughed at the thought.

"Is that funny?" Eddy said.

"No. I was thinking about something funny that never happened," Mary said, as she watched one of Eddy's hands covering the boy's back, the other cupping his skull.

"We could get a place here," Eddy said, moving David to the plastic booth seat so that he could reach for Mary's hands across the table.

The set of his shoulders reminded her of the woodprints one of her brothers did of men with big seal skin parkas hunting in the old way. She felt the cracked skin on his hands like her grandfather's who carved figures out of stone. Once he had a dream about a small white bird that circled and circled his house and then flew away. He carved that bird out of stone the next day, and gave it to Mary. She

wondered where she had put it.

"I don't know, Eddy. I have to think about it."

"How long do you have to think? What do you have to think about?" Eddy said.

"I have to think about things. My boat leaves at seven," she said. She thought he would never stop looking at her or rocking the baby in his arms. Would a life with him be better? She watched the way David grabbed at the white buttons on Eddy's shirt.

It all happened so fast. Like all of the other conversations, her girlfriends telling her how the first time would feel, Eddy's sweet talk, Rita convincing her to work at the cannery. Maybe if she just sat by herself she could make things happen slower. Maybe she could talk to her boy and get answers in her own voice.

Eddy got up and handed the boy to her. "I'll be at the ferry at seven," he said.

Mary sat in the Marina Bar lounge away from the old men. She could see Rita walking along the small boardwalk toward the petroglyphs. Mary was glad she decided not to go with her. She just wanted to sit with her son and listen to the water washing out from the beach underneath the stilted

foundation of the bar.

David was hungry. Mary unbuttoned her blouse, her back toward the men. As David sucked, the tug of his gums and his jaw made her breast hurt. She listened to ice cubes cracking in her soda as Rita found the petroglyphs. She watched Rita setting up the small tripod, fiddling with something in her black camera bag. She kept clicking the shutter, advancing more film, clicking the shutter, taking as many duplicate pictures as she had film, in case she had to throw some away.

Mary picked up the baby and left the bar. Up the road, some people were building a boat in the slip next to the shrimp cannery. She wondered where it would sail.

THE PLEASURES OF EATING FISH

THE PLEASURES OF EATING FISH

When a boat comes in you've never seen those women work so fast. They can have a ton of fish sorted and cleaned in less time than it takes me to put on my apron and find a pair of hip boots. And that's no lie. There was one gal last summer that moved so fast you could hardly see her hands, except when she scratched that nice behind of hers, every now and then. Don't get me wrong, poor sweet thing'd get this itch or twitch or something back there and scratch. I'd have offered to scratch it for her, you know, my hands didn't get near as dirty hosing off the dock as those packers'. I don't think she'd have minded, either, even though she was a college girl from down south. So long as Stan wasn't around. Especially after that night in the Harbor Bar.

You don't see too many women in the bars up here, I mean single women. Sure, there's old Margaret and Sarah, but they're so old they don't even bother to put in their teeth before they come to the bar. And Alice, the Doc told Alice to lay off the sauce, so she switched from Southern Comfort to Jack Daniels. I tried to tell her, Alice, I said, I don't think the doctor meant you're to switch labels, whiskey's whiskey, and it's eating clear through that old liver of yours. Pretty soon you're going to be ventilated in back. Old Alice looked

at me, gave me a big smile with those sticky red lips of hers, and said, Bill, you just mind your own goddamn sonofabitchin' business. Says right here on the label Jack Daniels is aged seven years; it's the smoothest thing around. Smooth as milk, makes my tummy feel real good. That Alice, she just patted her stomach and drank two fingers straight, just like that. There's no reasoning with that woman. Five years ago she was drinking Tequila straight. It made her wild, dancing around bumping her big hips against the tables, singing those Mexican songs. Alice was great back then. She'd have her pants down and that big red grin on her face even before you could say, hey, honey.

I don't think the Harbor Bar's a dive, don't get me wrong. No sir. It's as nice as any bar, I guess. Not too new. Nicer than that place they just built down the street. Minnie's was the oldest bar, but it burned down five years ago. They say some trapper came home after a bad winter in Canada and found out his lady'd been working in the rooms upstairs. Don't know what the hell he expected, my first winter up here I nearly jumped into the Narrows. Damn rainy dark. Loneliest I ever been; I chewed my nails for god's sake. I hear he strangled her, poor thing, set fire to Minnie's and went back up north. It was the oldest House in southeastern too.

Every now and then the girls from the cannery'll get

together and come on into town for a drink. Sometimes you can see'em walking down the road together arm-in-arm, a big chain of them, pants tucked into their rubber boots so they don't get muddy, their hair combed nice, not all tucked back into scarves like they have to be at the cannery. Those are wild nights at the bar. I've seen more fights when those women let their hair down and come into town, than in winter. Man'll sit down next to them, they always sit in a pack, offer to buy them all drinks, and everything'll go just swell. Then another guy'll sit down and offer to refill their glasses and they'll grin and giggle and say sure, why not. Then a group of loggers with twenty dollar bills spilling out every pocket'll pull up five or six chairs and those first two suckers are out all that cash for the whole lot of them. By then Mary Ellen and Sue and Georgina and all the rest are smiling real nice and laughing at everything and they've all undone one more button on their blouses cause it's getting rather warm in the Harbor Bar, don't you think, and every man in the place is standing up to fiddle with the change in his pocket. A stranger'll try to break in, maybe a drifter who worked on the pipeline, one of the loggers'll call him a fairy, and before the guy knows wha't going on they're trying to put his head through the glass on the cigarette machine. The thing that beats all is those little virgins just pack up and head back to the cannery dorms at eleven o'clock every time. It's enough to fry you. Oh sure, one of them

usually stays and dances 'til she can't stand up. Who'd want to take her home, take care of her, clean up vomit-- feel so bad about it all, you hate yourself for thinking about having fun with her. But somebody will, just about the time they finish wiping all the blood off the floor by the cigarette machine.

Of course, this is about a woman I have to get off my chest. You read Chinese? One night she came into the bar alone. The one with the sweet ass. She was only in town three weeks and everyone knew who she was. Never came in except to do the grocery shopping; she cooked for the bunkhouse crew down at Processors.

Her hair was so black it shone blue when the sun came out, sat on it when she took her braids out. I saw her combing it once. Her smooth skin was whiter than winter, and she looked like one of those icons I saw once when I was up in Sitka at the dentist's. I let the guy talk me into bridge work when he should have pulled them all, but hell, I'd be a sight with my lips all curled up at 35.

I don't have to tell you that every head in the place turned when she came through that door. I even remember what she was wearing. Of course, that's not too hard, she always wore them damned baggy army pants. It was a real shame to hide that ass. The night of the first volleyball game she was wearing that blouse. Her team won. I was standing on the other side

of the net, and could see through it a little. She went for those spike shots just like she was 6'2". Big sleeves, she told me it was from Rumania, behind the Iron Curtain. She never called Russia Russia, Soviet Union this, Soviet Union that. The little snit.

Anyway, everyone was waiting for the other girls to walk through the door. Come to think of it, she never did hang out much with them. Lived in the cookhouse by herself. She had a cookie jar in the shape of a pig wearing shorts, maybe it was there to put us off, but it was always full of chocolate chips.

Once she got pissed off when we came in with mud on our boots because she'd just washed the floor. She didn't say a word about it. Who the hell looks at the floor when he's hungry and there's food on the table? We had cold cuts for dinner that night, and everybody wiped his feet after that. Once in a while she'd take a pie over to the girl's dorm, sneak'em cheese and beer and stuff like that. I think she had coffee with Georgina about every night. That woman drank more coffee than a truck driver. Everyone did in the summer, all lunatics working in constant light and nice weather, trying to put winter out of their heads.

The night Nixon resigned she put cloves or cinnamon or something in the coffee. Nobody could drink it, but I didn't say anything--she was so excited about Nixon's resigning that she ran around calling it an Historical event. It was the

only time I snuck in a hug and a kiss; I guess I was pretty excited too.

The whole crew went on down to the Harbor and I asked her to go with me. She just laughed and said she wanted to think about Gerald Ford. Good old President Gerald Ford. That's what she said. Larry told her the coffee was lousy with cloves or whatever she put in it, and not to do it again. Some people are just plain horses asses. Larry complained about everything except pot roast and pie. She had a reputation all over the island for that, put so many apples in it she'd have to make the top crust real big just to fit it on. I asked her why she filled them so full and she told me she liked it to look a little like the front range of the Rockies when she's through.

Well like you'd figure a whole group of them loggers stampeded over to her and asked her to sit down, care to join us, mam? I knew they weren't going to get anywhere, she came up here with a logger, then split with him three weeks after she got here. She told me she never wanted to look at another one of them, made the guy sleep on the couch outside the bedroom in the cookhouse. I know because I went in one morning at 4:30 to get some coffee; she always kept a pot going for the clean-up crew. The night she finally threw him out you could hear them all the way over at the men's bunkhouse. That was really

something. We all came out onto the porch to listen. I know it isn't polite to eavesdrop and all, but shit, everybody likes a good fight.

Take a look at this gut. Disgusting. That's what it is, disgusting.

She thought it was disgusting, that's for sure. One day she rode the hell out of me about it. Bill, she said, you look like you're five months pregnant, you really do. That's what she kept saying all day long. I finally asked her to quit at supper time. Waited 'til she was alone in the kitchen and everybody else was eating dinner, and I said, hey listen, I wish you'd quit making so much fun of my beer belly. She just smiled and asked me who was the lucky woman. That got me real sore. I lost my temper, raised my voice and said, it sure as hell ain't you, that's for goddamn sure. You must be some kind of nun or something. Some little tight-assed nun, that's what you are. This ain't no convent, you must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Goddamn nun! I don't know why I said that. I wish I hadn't. She was so goddamn beautiful all the time I guess she made me mad.

You could tell everybody was listening in the dining room, nousey bastards. She turned her back on me and just went on punching dough down. Get out of my kitchen you pathetic fatso is what she said.

She said no thanks to those loggers, just like I told you she would. She looked around the bar, waved to me and my boys and went over and sat down by herself. Can you beat that? Here's this bar bursting with rich old farts, it's not raining, old Joe just sighted a school of dolphins coming through the Narrows, the sun doesn't set 'til 11:30, and this woman walks into the best bar in town and sits down at a table by herself. Shit.

She buys herself a beer. Everybody's watching her, trying to look discreet, itching their backs, dropping things out in her direction to get a better look. Then she buys herself another one. The woman was buying her own liquor! There's no reason in the world she had to do it. There must have been fifty guys in there that've spent every penny they earned that day on her. Must have been that liberated woman horseshit. She wasted good money is what she did. To top it all off she ordered a straight shot and walked over to my table. I stood up, old fashioned, I guess, she put her hand on my shoulder and said, whiskey on beer, brings good cheer. Then she drank it down in one swallow, pinched me on the ass, and walked out of the bar.

What is a man supposed to make of that? The whole place is staring at me and my face is redder than a split open sockeye. Goddamn weirdo is what I'm thinking. It's not like she was the only one who went to college around here. I

spent a year at the state university in Pullman. Did me a world of good, kept me from going to VietNam. Then I came up here and got in an accident out in my boat and screwed up my hand so I wouldn't go to Nam for sure.

I don't have to tell you I was surprised when she walked back in. She came up to the table and said, hey Bill, I'm sorry I pinched your ass like that, want to dance? Now, I remember distinctly having a fight with her at lunchtime one day about how I thought it was fine if somebody needed a few drinks to loosen'em up and get those feet sliding on the dance-floor. She said, I think it's a crutch. If you ask me I think she was just pissed off that day because nobody'd eat that vegetarian slop she fixed for lunch.

I was confused. I still am, if you want to know the truth. She and I were good enough friends so she didn't need to get sloshed to ask me to dance. It made me feel like a weirwolf or something. But I said sure, got a real kick out of watching the skin bristle on those loggers. Then Stan walked into the place and spoiled everything. Suddenly she didn't want to dance, she wanted to sit down. So we sat down, I know there's something going on between them, but I don't know what it is. The bar's getting real warm, and I want to go outside for some fresh air, but it isn't polite to leave a lady sitting by herself, so I said, hey Stan, why don't you come over here and join us? Jesus, she gave me a wicked look. What the hell

was I supposed to do? Loggers are skum, but fishermen, well, they're another breed. I don't mean to brag too much, but I was the best purse seiner in southeastern Alaska 'til I hurt my hand. A cut above the palm left the whole hand dead. Besides, Stan had a good three inches on me, with this gut I probably had about 40 pounds on him and ten, well let's say five or seven years.

Stan sat down and she said hello, a regular icicle. He's the nicest smelling halibut fisherman I've ever known. She just looked at him. I would have hit him if I'd have known why. I never did find out. Stan picked up and walked out. Funny things can go on between two people that the rest of the world never knows about, that's for sure. She picked up and walked right after him. She was madder than the day we all came in with mud on our boots, madder than the day we all rowed across the Narrows to climb Petersburg Mountain and didn't ask her if she wanted to come. Who was supposed to know she liked to climb mountains?

What in the hell was I supposed to do? Maybe I could have changed things, if I'd have hit him, hit her, done something. I figured I'd just keep my seat but I had this itch to go outside and see what was happening out there. I've never been a peeping Tom, let's just say I had a special interest in this event.

They were standing around outside, he was kicking the dirt

with his boot and stopped to give her a nasty stare. She didn't say anything, just hauled off and hit him one right on the old kisser. Jesus, that man must of had a glass jaw. He was on the ground a second after her fist hit his chin. The only other woman I know who could do something like that was my Aunt Ellie--Ellie could wrestle a ram down with one arm tied behind her back.

She stood there for a minute and said, hey Bill, would you walk me home? I figured she could take care of herself, but I'm a sucker for a pretty face so I said sure.

Walking her home she didn't say anything. She sniffed every now and then wiped her nose with the back of her hand for god's sake. When we got to the cookhouse she said, you want to come in for a minute? She went right to the cupboard and pulled out a half empty bottle of Old Grandad. Old Grandad for god's sake! She finished the whole bottle. Poor thing looked like she was gonna barf. She went and sat down on her bed. I wouldn't have minded sitting on her bed with her, holding her, stroking her hair, kissing those soft, sweet lips. Shit. I just stood in the doorway and stared at this picture she had of a young girl standing around at a well with a broken water jug. Some French guy with a name like Bologna or something painted it. She held out her hand and I came over and she kissed me on the forehead and said, hey thanks, good old Bill. You hurry on home to that sweet bunkhouse now and don't forget to brush your teeth. Those weren't her exact words

but you know what she meant. A kiss on the forehead for Christ-sake. I should have grabbed her then, maybe lifted her up and spun her around and kissed her 'til she couldn't breathe. I would have taken care of her all winter. Even the winter after that. Hell, I dont even know if she knew that.

Stan asked her to stay for the winter. She said she'd think about it. I watched her for three days, sitting out on the dock, staring at the mountain across the water, mucking around on the beach at low tide. Burned supper one night. I heard she told him no, said she only had a year more of school, said she was studying Chinese. Chinese! I said to her one day, what the hell you want to study that for? What you got to say to all them slopeheads? You know what she said? Some day you'll be speaking Chinese. That's what she said.

And don't think anything ever came of that thing she had going with Stan. Don't think she even wrote to him. She wrote me a letter though, in Chinese. I guess she did care about me. My name was the only English in the letter. I had to ask one of the Japanese fellows that buy up all the salmon eggs if he could make it out. He kind of told me what it said.

SEDGE AND OLD ARROWHEADS: THE POETRY OF LI HO

The poet Li Ho ushered out the poetic genius of the T'ang Dynasty. The T'ang fostered some of China's greatest poets: Li Po, Tu Fu, Po Chu-I. Yet to the Chinese mind of that time, Li Ho certainly would not have found himself a colleague in such a great list. His poetry was considered wily and weird, his style unbridled, his images shamanistic, and his politics irreverent.

Barred from completing the literary examinations which would have provided him a place in the bureaucracy and a steady income, he was awarded instead a three year temporary position and then wandered slowly home to die.

In the twenty-six years Li Ho lived (A.D. 791-817), he produced roughly 250 poems. His mother once remarked to him that he was "writing his heart out," and literally, Li Ho seemed to have infused his earthly spirit into his poetry.

Song of an Arrowhead from the Ch'ang-p'ing Battlefield

Lacquer ash, bone dust,
cinnebar's fluid grains,
out of this fertile ancient blood
copper flowers bloom.

White quills, metal shafts
weather-worn by rain,
three-edged scrap
of a wolf's tooth.

I roamed the plain
on horses,
this eastern outpost, field of stones,
sagebrush low on hills.

Strong wind, brief light,
desolate stars,
dark banner clouds
hung in the hollow night.

Spirits clamored on all sides
hungry in their earth-bound skin,
I poured them curds,
offered up my pagan lamb.

But insects perched, wild geese sickened,
bamboo reddened on its stem.
A whirlwind took me,
breathing foxfire.

In tears I searched this ancient plain,
harvested the broken barb,
snapped point, red cracks
that gutted flesh.

On the path outside the city gate
a boy on horseback
warned me to trade the metal
for the spirits' temple dish.

Autumn Dawn: I Enter the Tai-Hang Mountains

In one evening, autumn wound around the hills:
scented dew covered silver grass,
new bridges leaned on clouded slopes,
insects buzzed in wet elms.

Today I'm far from the Lo's south bank--
could it be, everyone is snug in Yueh quilts?
The rock's breath stops, chilled to the bone.
Old sedge looks like short arrowheads.

In the Third Month I Pass the Imperial Lodge

Red moat water guards the palace walls.
A gentle wind lifts small leaves,
mimicking the court's powdered women.
Their bamboo shades closed,
how long will spring grow old?
They're made to tolerate the chains--
a thousand years of long white days.

To My Patron, Huang-fu Shih, from the Jen-ho Quarter

I borrowed a great man's
lean and wasted horse.
A kinsman lent his house,
grounds wild inside the walls.
Rats ran straight across
the courtyard's unplowed dirt.
Above the bamboo fence, a big date tree
hung, its red fruit spoiled.

Handsome An-Ting man, you
cut your yellow ribbons,
threw off official hat and robe,
drank 'til day.
You went back to family,
no white-brush honors on your head.
Is it any wonder my fame
dropped behind everyone's?

You stooped in vain calling me friend;
I offended your eyes.
Just when you pushed to draw me up,
your strong rope snapped.
Winds from the Lo-Yang led my horse
as I entered the long frontier pass.
Still, closed doors never opened for me--
I was met by feral dogs.

Who would believe those famous horsemen
Chien and Tu were careless judges?
Alone on my traveler's pillow
I watched the spring grow old.
I came back skin and bones,
my sleek face ruined.
Disease rushed around my head
while hair grew sparse as stems.

I want to write trivia
to gain the Office of Heaven.
A royal misfit,
who would pity me?
Tomorrow at daybreak
I'll try the western road again.
In the K'ung-t'ung hills
we'll be far away as sky.

Song of the Old Jade Hunter

Fishing for jade, fishing out jade,
it must be water emeralds
he cuts to make hair-piece
shake-as-she-walks,
and only exquisite colors.

Old man, hungry and cold,
even dragons grieve for him.
Indigo River steams,
its current wild, not white.

Rain-drenched nights
on the hilltop ridge,
he scrambles for hazel nuts.
The old man weeps like the cuckoo
whose throat is clogged with blood.

The waters of Indigo River
flow, glutted with life.
Bodies dead ten thousand years
still hate this water.

There on the mountain, wind in cypress,
rain whistles like spirits.
He hangs deep in the river
waist tied to a rope,
green spinning around him.

The old man thinks of his village,
infants in his cold white house.
Green tendrils like children
creep down the ancient stone cliff.

Plant No Trees

Don't plant trees in your garden,
their seeds fill each season with grief.
I sleep alone,
moon above my southern couch
this autumn, every autumn past.

Four Poems About New Bamboo Shoots in My North Garden at Ch'ang-Ku

I

The first leaves of new bamboo drop
 from their long stems like peeled jade.
 Sir, you can tell from mother bamboos--
 this is the stuff of dragons.
 It changes in a single night,
 lunging up a thousand feet.
 Inches of mud part
 by the garden pool.

II

I make my cut; select bright greens
 to write my own Ch'u poems.
 Like smooth perfume,
 spring's powder dimmed--
 passionless, hateful,
 who will see them?
 Weighed down by dew,
 countless branches grieve in mist.

III

Between stony gaps in the family well--
 three bamboo stems.
 At dawn I found the secret roots,
 their veined purple life.
 This year spring waters bend
 on top of sand.
 A new reed straight as a flute,
 I'll pluck the jades and greens.

IV

Ancient bamboo, whose aged tips
rouse the jade green clouds.
Like Mao-ling, I've come home
to rest and sigh in cool poverty.
Wind blows across a thousand acres
whistling to meet the rain.
Birds heavy on their one branch
dip into my wine.