

Down the Other Side

Black crow sitting on a whitewashed fence
Sun coming up behind
Drive all night until I can't see straight
And the road is a crooked line
Counting sheep in a farmer's field
In the shade of a big Jack pine
Got lost where the roads crisscrossed
And I'm going to be hard to find

It'll be alright

Red-tailed hawk and a small white cross
High on the Great Divide
Drive on by until the tears I cry
Roll down the other side
Some I lost when a line got crossed
Some I just left behind
Some got lost to a coin toss
Some of the coins were mine

It'll be alright

White horse standing by a white oak tree
In the cool of the mountainside
Follow the creek and long for a steep
And rocky trail to ride
Edge of town and the clouds come down
I'm looking for a place to hide
Thunderclap in a roadside chapel
Say it's not my time

No, it'll be alright

Black crow sitting on a whitewashed fence
Sun coming up behind
Drive all night until I can't see straight
And the road is a crooked line
Counting sheep in a farmer's field
In the shade of a big Jack pine
Got lost where the roads crisscrossed
And I'm going to be hard to find

It'll be alright

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Thicker Than Water

I fell in love with horses when I heard a poem by Lorca. I was seventeen and bored in class, gazing out the window while my English teacher, Mrs Morrison, an ageless, sexless crone with glasses, droned on and on and on. There was a map of the world pinned crooked on the cork board. I could hear the boy in the seat behind me digging a hole in his desktop with a ballpoint pen. And then I heard Mrs Morrison say the words "white horse grazing near the river dust" and all my hair stood up. It was the restless melancholy in those words that matched the restless melancholy in me, a timeless, incarnate vision that startled something secret wide open. I listened as she read on, not to the poem, but to the motion of blood in my veins, the wakening of what I couldn't locate in my brain, a yearning for something fierce and profound and dark and holy and profane and as yet unavailable. It was not the teenage boys with their diffuse atomic particles and dirty minds, not the comic book outline cartoon of high school, or the ribcage of family life. It was something compelling and unknown. And so, in spite of Mrs Morrison's next poem, in which "the little horse must think it queer," I volunteered at McManahan's Stables, mucking stalls, pitching hay, hauling water, currying coats, picking hooves, working with horses that bucked and bolted and shook the earth and that responded to me. I immersed myself in a very physical world of sweat and flies and shit and that sweet horse smell, knowing but not noticing that I was chasing a mystery, living a metaphor, following an instinct as I saddled the Arab mare I called Rocco and rode out on the trails after chores, believing for the moment I was Soledad, the gypsy girl, blood thicker than water, riding out to meet her lover, opening my shirt as far as I dared, my hair long and tangled in the wind, and Rocco wise and understanding, leading me out the trails farther and farther, keeping me out until the barn windows were yellow as we came back across the dusty fields and Colleen McManahan was annoyed and later, at home, my mother would have to reheat the meatloaf while I showered.

Soledad rides her silver horse down the steep and rocky trail under a gypsy moon, stars swimming over her head like minnows

Honey, your brother finished off the green beans, would you like a salad?

Down, always downhill she rides towards the sea, through meadows scented with mint and basil, under the forest's dark canopy, beside a rushing stream where her horse dips his head to drink.

Watch your elbow! Oh never mind, I'll get a towel.

Dew settles on her skin and she shivers but on she rides, on and on to meet her lover by the sea.

There was some mail for you, I left it on the telephone stand in the hall.

On and on she rides to meet her lover, his letter folded and pressed against her heart, meet me by the sea at the delta where the river bed flows against the shore, my love, and never be lonely forevermore.

Your grandmother is coming over tomorrow, maybe you can come home early and help me with dinner.

Soledad, Soledad, blood thicker than water, rides her night horse toward the place where the river gives itself to the sea, where love builds a fire and waits under the swimming stars and the fish rise phosphorescent from the waves, and the sky floats timeless clear to the sunrise as tomorrow races toward her from the other side of the world

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Pearl Street

It was the last time we were ever all together
The old house on Pearl Street, late summer afternoon
Richard was just out of the service, he played piano
He and Betsi sang old show tunes
And everyone was drinking cheap champagne except for me
Because I was underage
And when Richard played How High the Moon
And all the others joined in, drunk and out of tune
I leaned across his arm and turned the page

Then Richard went out to smoke a cigarette
Betsi made a call, could hear her in the kitchen crying on the phone
My mother went upstairs complaining of a headache
I borrowed keys to father's Cimarron and I drove Grandma home
And on the road along the river I thought of driving on forever
But I took the long way back instead
When I got in the house was quiet
I poured myself some whiskey just to try it
Lay awake wondering how it feels to smoke in bed

Maybe everything happens for a reason
Richard took the nasty habits he'd picked up overseas
And moved to San Francisco with his friends from the armed forces
Betsi got married to a man who raises horses
And I spent a hundred bucks to buy a travel trailer up on blocks
Moved to Dean and Betsi's land
And I wake restless, wild to fall
In love or trouble, anything at all
Like waiting for the day is more than I can stand

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Skinny Arms

Jack was good with horses
He worked trails in Michigan
To watch him ride that Bay
Took my breath away
Although there were better looking men

My sister Betsi's husband Dean grew up with Jack
The night Kentucky kicked me
Jack kept pouring whiskey
Until I got my sense of humor back

Kept pouring whiskey
Soft hay in the barn
Baby I remember
Your long skinny arms

Night at Wither's Tavern
Playing songs for pints of beer
Jack played Paint it Black
And Betsi sang the backup
With a finger in her ear

Then we had that hailstorm
Half the crew got caught
When Jack and Betsi's horses
Came home riderless of course
We all had our own thoughts

We all had our own thoughts
Waiting out the storm
Maybe I was thinking too much
About those long skinny arms

Betsi took the baby
Left Dean with the horses
He sold a tract of land
And grew some contraband
Barely covered the divorce

Jack found work in Tennessee
Took off heading south
Ooh yeah and I
Just lay awake all night
Thinking about the curve of Jack's mouth

Lay awake all night
Ceiling spinning around
Man I remember
Those long skinny arms

Jack was out of touch so long
I gave him up for dead
Then Betsi said he's phoned
From north of San Antonio
In a government hospital bed

I bought an old ford pinto
I took a job in town
Feel so much older
All my friends got sober
I have to drink with strangers now

I drink with strangers
Faceless in the dark
Drinking to remember

Those long skinny arms
Babe, I still remember

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Grace

I remember everything that last slow summer
Time moved out of sequence, roses bloomed against the screens
and Grace slept in her chair on the long afternoons
While I sat watch with my sketchbooks and my magazines

"Don't draw my picture" she said to me "this is not who I am"
So I didn't
Instead I filled my sketchbooks with the empty space around her
Practiced looking at the world without Grace in it

Stories Grace told that summer all began "when Johnny was little, he..."
Had a puppy or a paper route, then they moved through proms and telegrams
And ended abruptly somewhere in the sky above Italy

We'd look at the framed photo on the mantle: a young man in uniform
Too young, too sad, cap too big too low on his brow
Johnny died yesterday, Johnny died today and he will die again tomorrow

Late afternoon breeze lifts the curtain. Grace wakes
Calls me Helen, my mother's name. Grandma, it's Kate I say
And she frowns up confused and my heart breaks

That was the summer Betsi's baby was born
Named Grace for Grandma, Betsi brought her to visit, just four days old
Grace reached for that baby, held her all afternoon
While time moved out of sequence and roses bloomed

We are waiting for the kettle to boil. I brush Grace's hair, long white curls
I braid it and pin it up. I say, "Do you remember brushing my hair when I was a little girl?"

We are waiting for the kettle to boil. Grace says: didn't I have some pretty cups once?
I go to the attic in the clutter of cartons and old clothes find a white paper box, tied with satin, dark with dust
I bring it down and unpack it on the floor, six bone china cups in nests of excelsior
Grace holds one up to the light. She says, "All the years I've been saving these
What was I saving them for?"
Here's a sketch of my grandfather's overstuffed armchair
Cushions broken in as if they still bore his weight

Here's a sketch of the dining room table, chairs all pushed back at odd angles
Here's the west facing window with the lace pulled back on the climbing rose in full bloom
Here's a porcelain teacup on a hardwood floor, softly glowing in the last low light of a long afternoon

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Jack

Jack was washing dishes in the kitchen in the back of Johnny's Suds and Spuds when Saigon fell
When the news came on the radio, guys all stopped working long enough to raise their fists and holler
Then went back to burning hell
Jack high fived with the guys but he was secretly disappointed
I was born too late, he thought, it's my time when it's winding down
His heroes were like Mike the grill cook who had hair down past his waist (when it wasn't tucked inside his chef's hat) and who said that represented how long he'd been with the Weather Underground

Jack's hair was past his collar then, but barely
By the time it reached his shoulders even Mike had sold his soul
Jack kept talking about '70s iconoclasts by their first names
But changed the code on hair from politics to rock and roll
By the time his hair was halfway down his back he'd gotten good
He toured with Billy Kitchen, then he moved to San Francisco
Sat in with psychedelic bands on Haight but he was born too late
The only guys working steady were the ones playing disco

Jack was burned out in no time on requests for Stayin' Alive
He took off on the road playing Dust My Broom and Death Don't Have No Mercy on the streets of small towns off of I-5
He couldn't sleep and he had no place to go once the bars closed
So he'd drive all night, buying gas with small change
And drinking no name whiskey until he woke up in a ditch
Hanging head down by his seatbelt while the radio blared out La Grange

When Jack hitchhiked to El Paso he had hair down to his waist
And a little dog named Sampson, half bulldog and half mutt
He took a job with a rancher out of town, hauling hay and working horses
With a bunch of skinhead rednecks out to kick his butt
But Jack was good with the horses and Sampson had a short upper lip and long teeth
Jack got by on hard feelings
Nights he's drink alone in his flat above the laundromat
Turn his amp up loud until the neighbors hammered on the ceiling

Jack hid his hair underneath a five gallon Stetson
Hitchhiked across Texas, got mistaken for a Texan
By a trucker out of Tucson who just had to call him Bub
He was on his way to Pensacola with a load of bathtubs
Jack was saying "I might like the cowboy life if it wasn't for the cowboys"
When the trucker looked him sidelong, saying "Bub, you get out now, boy"
So he let him out in Houston with the bar bands and the strippers
And a crowd around the big screen shouting "Win one for the gipper!"

Jack let his hair down at Houlihan's that night
Sitting at the bar, lining up the Black & White
There was a dark-haired woman playing a vintage Gibson to the tuesday night crowd
Jack switched to Cuba Libras, moved down front and clapped too loud
And because he had himself believing she played Jack of Diamonds just for him
He followed her down the hall at the end of the evening

To that back room where the bands write their names on the wall
Kinky Friedman Kinky Friedman Kinky Friedman Kinky Friedman

Jack's hair was hitting him in the ass, and so was his reputation
He split town on a Greyhound heading to Fort Worth
He met a guy named Guy who spiked his coffee at the Greyhound station
And told him he'd signed on to work a tourist ranch up north
So Jack bought a one-way ticket, and first thing when they got there
After eating from machines and sleeping wrong for days
They saw a barefoot girl with long red hair riding bareback on a big black mare
"Whoa" said Guy, "Yeah, right" said Jack, "Hippie tie-dye yay!"

Jack broke his second metacarpal on Guy's mandible
But Guy got the girl anyhow and Jack found himself standing on the shoulder of the road
With a pack on his back, guitar case in his good hand
And his other hand set in a plaster hitchhiker's pose
Cars were flying by by by and Jack waxed philosophical
Saying - all the things I've done in my life and only one I can claim success to a significant degree
And that was growing out my hair - and he saw himself standing there on the side of the road
Doing what he did best while the world passed him by until his hair grew down to his knees

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Betsi Went to Jersey

Betsi went to Jersey
I stayed with the baby
Just shy of her birthday and learning to stand
I told her a story
I sang You Can Close Your Eyes
She drifted to sleep holding my hand in her tiny hand

When Betsi was little
She learned how to tap dance
Then she went through clothes, fast friends
And the hit parade
But I was still dancing
With nobody watching
To music that poured through Betsi's door
A Horse With No Name

Now for all Betsi's horses
And all Betsi's men
The baby is life, without parole and Jack is her crime
But I still remember
Nights when I held him
Like I hold the baby and wish she had been mine

The baby is waking
Her smile is the sunrise
I give her a rattle, put a bottle on to warm

She crawls on the kitchen rug
Holds the chair, standing up
Then takes her first baby steps into my arms

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I Think About Richard

I think about Richard in the basement of the house on Pearl Street playing “Don’t Tell Your Monkey Man” on an old upright piano. Richard in the darkroom he built down there processing photographs he took of shadowbox dioramas he made by arranging dollhouse furniture, silverware, plastic toys, doll parts, darts and old toothbrushes into cartoon scenarios with the script cut out of magazines and glued on cardboard clouds suspended by piano wires. I thought he was a genius. He always was elusive and evasive and he had a secret life, but back then it seemed to me to be a magician’s secret, the power of the mystery, the deep meaning of dark shadows. And maybe there was something I missed, some time I could have done or said something that would have changed the way the story went, or maybe the story was always true, maybe he was already turning in a dark, crooked spiral, I don’t know. I don’t know, and for all the times I’ve run the movie backwards looking for clues, I still don’t even know when the floors stopped shaking from the piano’s walking bass runs, when his secrets turned sinister, or more personal and guarded and dangerous. I remember him staying out late and often. I remember a broken bottle in the driveway. I remember Richard in the basement, not making a sound. When he left to join the service, there were postcards, and when he came home the postcards stopped. The grown man in person was distant, dark and moody with dirt ground deep in his fingerprints. And when he moved to California, it was a perfect sleight of hand. He just disappeared. He slipped away and I let him go. I knew by then that he was a nasty drunk, and the rest I guess I didn’t want to know.

But the night the phone woke me at 4 am I jumped up as sure as if I had been waiting for that call. It was Betsi’s voice coming through the handset, almost unrecognizable, Richard lost and found face down in an alley, all his dark secrets undefended, the mechanics of his magic spilled out for all to judge and demean and decry and mourn, Betsi cried on the phone a long time while I remembered once years ago when I found Richard’s shadowbox dioramas set out for the trash and ruined by the rain, how I cried to see them stripped of their power and art and subtracted back into a pile of useless and meaningless broken parts.

After we hung up the phone, I went outside to sit on the step and shiver underneath a million cold stars. I could hear the horses stamping in their stalls and far away a car throwing gravel on the curve. I wished for a blanket around my shoulders, or for someone to talk to, but it seemed like comfort I didn’t deserve. And then slowly the stars faded, the sky grew bright and the sun came up, warm and strong and clear like absolution. But it was still dark in California, and I couldn’t remember if there had ever been a time when I didn’t know the ending of my brother Richard’s story.

I have a photograph of Richard bent over the piano keys, at once a haunted genius maestro and a parody. He could really play piano but he never could take himself seriously.

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Tulsa

I met Jack for a drink one night
In Tulsa Oklahoma
He was working on the road crew

I was just passing through
On the long way from Baton Rouge to Arizona

Jack was drinking coffee
At the table by the stairs
Music came up loud
I leaned in close to talk above the crowd
He put his hand on my arm and left it there

I said — Jack, when you left town
My house of cards came all the way down
I felt a little used and kind of bitter
But time goes by and so much has changed
We've both been to hell and back and hey,
It was good to get your letter

Jack said — There is so much I regret
All that pain and trouble
I was living hard and going for broke
I burned that road as far as it would go
I was working high when the scaffold buckled

Weeks I drifted out of dreams
On the ward at the mercy of machines
I fell so far no one could reach me
So when a voice spoke to my soul
In that holiest of hellholes
I was ready to listen and believe

Jack, I said
You've never seemed so strong or looked so good
You are where you should be, that's for sure
But you know, I don't live in that world
Though there are times I wish I could

Out the westbound highway thinking
Maybe if I had another drink or two
I wouldn't feel so lost and doubting
And on the way to Arizona
I thought - Jack, you know I've never really known you
I just know a lot about you

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