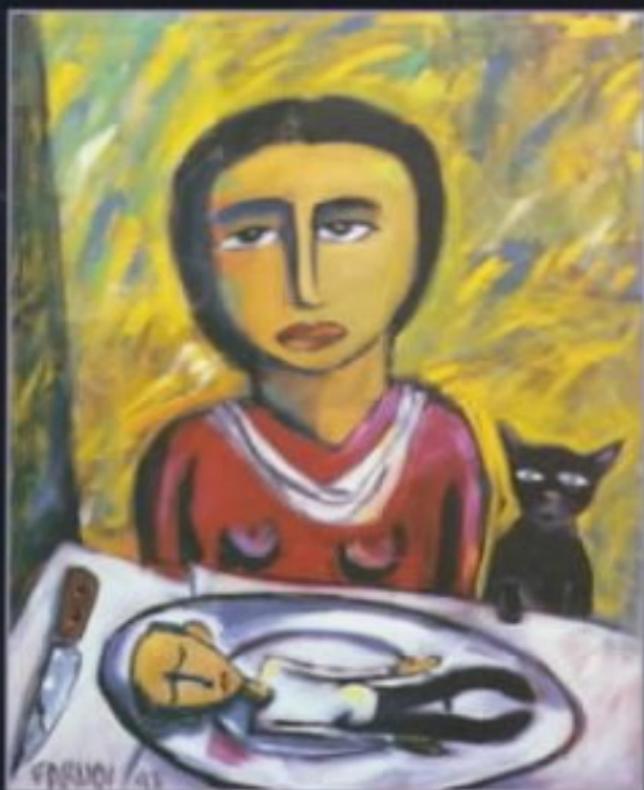


Women & other animals



stories by

bonnie

jo

Campbell

Women & Other Animals
Stories

Bonnie Jo Campbell

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Third Coast, Spring 1999: "Gorilla Girl"

And three cheers for the Detroit Auto Dealers Association for making "Shifting Gears" the official story of the 1999 Detroit Auto Show.

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Circus Matinee

Though Big Joanie senses something is wrong, she does not turn to look at the tiger. Instead, she places snow cones into the outstretched hands of three black-haired girls, making certain that each girl firmly grips the plastic cup before she lets go. Big Joanie accepts clean dollar bills from the girls' father, who wears a denim shirt, probably washed by a wife who buries her face in her husband's shirts to remind herself of him when he's gone. In less than two minutes, Big Joanie must move out of this cramped front row because the lights will go out, and when they come back on, Helmut, the world's best animal trainer, will appear in the center ring with his Asian tigers. Big Joanie can't quite straighten her body against the hip-high barricade between the front row and the arena floor, but she raises her arm and holds her snow cones high in the air like an offering.

Behind the oldest black-haired girl, who is about eleven and wears a silver cross with Jesus crucified on it, a man in reflector aviator sunglasses holds up his finger to signify a snow cone. More than once, Big Joanie has carried a man as big as this man from his truck to his bedroom, then pulled off his boots and unbuttoned his shirt. She has gotten undressed and folded her pants, blouse, and bra into a neat pile on a chair and crawled in bed beside him.

Big Joanie need not look behind her to know that Conroy has wheeled the first tiger cage into position, to know that Conroy, who invited Big Joanie to his room fourteen times last summer, has gone behind the velvet curtain to retrieve the second tiger. Everything is the same as every other show, she tells herself, but she senses a disequilibrium, the kind of apprehension a flightless bird must feel before an earthquake.

The band and clowns clamor on, and the audience bites into snow cones. Big Joanie lowers the tray to her shoulder. Her nostrils itch, and she smells the sweat of the crowd beneath the mask of aftershave and perfume and the orangy scent of her own deodorant. Ignoring the hair standing up on the back of her neck, shoving aside the thoughts of men she's known for just one night, she leans across the oldest girl carefully, so as not to drip cherry juice onto her blouse or jeans. Big Joanie offers the sunglasses man the snow cone, and his hand closes around it, but as she lets go the cup slips and crashes to the floor. The man's face changes, stretches as though made out of clown rubber. Big Joanie has never seen a man struck dumb like this. Some men have regarded her with disgust in the morning, seeming to have forgotten the way they whispered to her the night before, but she didn't sleep with this man. She only handed him a snow cone, the way she's handed snow cones to thousands of men.

In the same moment, the expressions of people sitting near the sunglasses man freeze the same way. Have they all just noticed Big Joanie's over-large head and her hips as wide as the length of an axe-handle? Are they stunned by her acne-pocked face? By her lightning-struck hair? Then she sees the answer reflected in the man's glasses, a double rearview vision of a compacted and curved circus world in which a miniature tiger stands in front of, not inside, its cage.

Scraping feet and muffled screams are not quite drowned out by the circus band. People at the top of the section and in the aisle seats escape toward the exits, falling upon one another. But at the bottom center, those sitting in a half-circle around Big Joanie are trapped in their seats.

"Stay still!" shouts a voice from the floor, Conroy's voice. Big

Joanie has heard it in ninety-seven arenas, in the pie car, and whispering in his lower bunk in train car eighty-five, but never has she heard such urgency. Conroy is the assistant to Helmut's assistant Bela; Conroy is the person who makes sure the six-inch steel pin is dropped through the slot to secure the doors on each tiger cage as it is pulled into the arena. Conroy shouts, "Y'all stay still. We'll get her back in." Whenever Big Joanie went to Conroy's room on train car eighty-five last summer, Conroy's roommate eventually stumbled in drunk and turned on the light. Conroy would pull the blanket over Big Joanie's head, uncovering her feet which hung off the end of his bunk.

"Just stay still. Nobody'll get hurt if you all just stay still." Conroy's voice cajoles in an attempt to soothe the tiger. "Queenie, take it easy," he says three times, as if trying to convince a small, pretty woman to come to his room. "If y'all move," he says to Big Joanie and the audience, "this girl might get excited."

Big Joanie can imagine Conroy—he has small hands and a bald spot the size of a copper pot scrubber—but that doesn't help her now. She tries to feel Conroy in her nerves and bones, the way she felt him last summer, but she senses instead the tiger pacing. Each stride is longer than the last, looser, as though in the pads of its feet it has stored a genetic memory of life in the Asian forests where its ancestors took down game.

Big Joanie doesn't move. Her size twelve canvas shoes stick to the snow cone juice and flattened cotton candy as the tiger's feet meet clean floor mats, swept and scrubbed after each show. For six years, in sometimes three shows a day, Big Joanie has seen this tiger pour into the caged center ring, but she never considered the possibility of the tiger walking free. Now she imagines tiger feet prowling her spine, stepping on vertebrae which float up her back like bone islands.

The three black-haired girls are crying, but their sobs are so quiet Big Joanie must strain to hear them. She has never looked squarely into the faces of frightened girls, has never watched their pretty cheeks being sliced by tears. The girls have just seen a woman no bigger than the eleven-year-old and clad only in a glittering bikini let go of the rope and spin by her braid; they have seen the Polish

acrobats pile atop one another, stretching upward in a human tower of Babel, risking everything to get their body language to the upper tiers of the arena. A daredevil rode a motorcycle upside down, but nothing prepared the girls for this.

In two of the cheapest seats, way up in section P, a manager of a regional sales office sits with his girlfriend, who compares to his wife as filet mignon compares to a cubed steak. During the first half of this matinee, people filled many of the seats, but by twos and threes they have migrated to lower sections into better seats than they'd paid for. The loudspeaker behind the couple bangs out a sped-up version of "The Entertainer," but their distance from the arena mutes the action. The manager watches clown stooges hit each other with handbags and plastic hammers far below. A female clown whose figure is camouflaged in polka dots hangs shirts on a clothesline. When she turns her back, a little dog jumps up and tears them down.

The chain-link enclosure appeared miraculously in the dark of the center ring while that tiny woman spun by her hair in the spotlight above, and now a tiger has been wheeled out in a cage. The tiger is the brightest toy in this toy circus, a butane tiger-torch, a brilliant carved bit of amber the manager might hang on a chain. In China, he has heard, men increase their virility by eating the powdered penises of tigers.

Christ, he loved that sparkling little woman who spun by her hair. She had seemed small enough to fit in his hand, as perfect as a wish, a bikini-clad genie he could conceal in the pencil holder on his desk. His girlfriend loved the animal acts—the camels, the bareback stunts, even the ridiculous bow-tied and skirted poodles.

His girlfriend hasn't noticed the tiger. Her fingers have been sliding upward from his knee and now she unfastens his fly. He shifts in his seat to help her. There is nobody else around, and even the pushy vendors won't bother coming here for only two people. This is precisely what he hoped for, precisely why he didn't buy better seats. His girlfriend is a district sales manager; she has thick dark hair and an apartment not far from the office. She reaches through the fold of his shorts. They have eaten restaurant meals at

corner tables, and she has never done more in public than touch his leg. She lowers her head into his lap, and he strokes her shoulders. Two men emerge from behind the purple curtain with a second tiger cage, but they stop halfway across the arena. The manager sees what they see. The first tiger is stepping out through the open door of its cage, the powerful head first, then front paws, back paws, and long, muscled tail. Or is he imagining this? His girlfriend doesn't even notice when the music slows.

Big Joanie wonders why they don't stop the music altogether. The faces before her are pale with fear. Behind her, the cat stretches farther with each stride. The memory of prowling Asian forests travels from its feet into the muscles of its legs. The tiger spikes the air with growls, tests its space, tastes its freedom.

When Joanie was twelve, a year older than the oldest blackhaired girl, she was working alone in her mother's garden, on the far side of the barnyard, along the road. She was weeding a row of bush beans, straddling the plants on her knees, when she heard noises behind her. Instead of investigating the noises, she kept weeding. She sensed danger up and down her spine, noticed her spine, maybe for the first time, as if it were a closely planted row of beans or seed corn sprouting in her back. The men came from behind, through the garden gate with a gunny sack which they pulled over her head without even shaking out the last of the chicken feed.

She had never breathed the fine dust of chicken feed so deeply, or felt it cake her eyes, or filter into her hair and catch on her scalp. The men pressed her into the sand and garden dung, so that the grit worked itself into her armpits.

Joanie was as big as a grown-up, and probably those men had mistaken her for a grown woman, her mother said later, scrubbing chicken manure off brown eggs with enough force that she would soon break one. A few mornings later when Joanie was standing in the driveway with her arms across her chest, her father, who was a big man but not an ugly man, said those men were probably from out of town. He looked as though he wanted to say more, but he grew unsteady watching his only daughter—who was already

as tall as he was—hug herself and rock back and forth, and he slammed the truck door and left for work.

The first man pinched her breasts and called her ugly. "You'll like this, you ugly bitch." Coming from a grown man that word "ugly" stung her. The second man spoke sweetly. "Oh baby, this feels good." When he said, "I want to kiss you," the first man kicked dirt on them and said, "She'll see us, you asshole." With the first man, Joanie just prayed for it to be over, for the day to be over so she could go to bed, for this life to be over so she could start again and run when she first heard the noises. As the second man whispered kind words to her, Joanie felt dulled by a sympathy toward him, a sickening camaraderie which slowed time.

"Don't take that bag off," the first man said, "or we're coming back." Joanie lay across the bush beans, sticky, pasted with sand and dung, her T-shirt pushed up under the chicken feed sack, her throat clogged by the mash. The men tore through the garden, trampling her mother's tomato and squash plants as Joanie lay listening to the mockery of crows above. She felt herself separating, the way a garden divides into rows of snap beans and corn and tomatoes. Her spine had only just come alive minutes before, but now she thought of the way vertebrae boiled apart in oxtail stew. Her mind halved, and halved again, endless halving. She lay swathed in an awful calm, feeling the rhythm of the men's bodies long after they were gone.

"Doughnut move," says Conroy's boss, Bela, the assistant to Helmut. "Stay calm, everybody. Doughnut move."

Big Joanie wishes she could sink behind the barricade, but there is no room, and she wants to stand up straight, but the ledge on the barricade cuts into her, so she continues to bend slightly forward, touching the eleven-year-old's knees with her own big knees. When a drop of cherry juice is poised to drip from her snow cone tray, Big Joanie shifts so the drop doesn't fall on the girl's white denim but instead runs ice-cold down her own chest inside her uniform shirt. The smallest girl buries her face in her father's sleeve, but the older girls shrink against their own seats. Big Joanie feels herself stretch wide across the tiger's field of vision. She wonders if she will be

ripped open and devoured like a milk cow, like an Asian water buffalo.

"Freeze," comes the voice of Helmut, the world's best animal trainer. "Nobody will move." In less than a minute, Helmut should be performing, so he is wearing silk pants and a vest with no shirt. His blond hair lies perfectly in place, even as sprigs of her own hair snap loose from her pony tail. The tiger Helmut has trained continues to pace, orange, black, orange stripes rippling across big cat muscle. "Nobody will move," commands Helmut.

Though she always has remembered that afternoon in the garden, has used it as a marker, a zero point on her own time line, she has never had a good hold of it. She knew those men with voices but no faces about as well as she knew God. Big Joanie obeys the world's best animal trainer, but she hates it that every person in this arena except her can see the tiger. Only about a minute has passed since the sunglasses man dropped the snow cone; the cherry color hasn't even begun to fade from her remaining snow. But the air has changed, become as empty as before a tornado. If she dares look up, the roof of the arena will be sucked away, and open sky will mock her. In arenas across the country, she has held her snow cones high as an offering, but today God has made it clear, he will not bargain with Big Joanie.

The manager's girlfriend begins to lick him. He blinks to clear his vision and loosens his tie. The girlfriend samples him, tastes him. Small, insignificant circus people scatter in the tiger's wake. A dozen men in blue coveralls draw near the tiger, then back away, like the tide coming in and going out. Still, the music blasts. The manager presses the bleached cuff of his shirt sleeve against his forehead. The tiger pads back and forth between the cage and the front center seats. His girlfriend's mouth closes around him.

Below, that big-headed, big-assed snow cone girl is wedged against a low barrier between the arena and the seats, her back to the tiger. That girl lugged herself up and down the stairs of this section early in the show. She was double-bag-ugly but oddly voluptuous, her breasts and hips pomographic in their proportion. Lying

with that giantess, eyes closed, a man might feel he'd come home after a long journey. Still, even a man who liked them big couldn't get past the face. A man who would take that to bed was a man who entertained no illusions of himself. That's what the manager had been thinking when she looked right at him, through eyes as close set as double barrels of a shotgun. She seemed to know what he'd been thinking and that he'd lied to four creditors on the phone this morning. Then, just as abruptly, she looked away.

His girlfriend purrs, her breath raspy. He grabs a handful of that glorious hair and pushes her head down harder, establishes a better rhythm. Sweet God in heaven, he thinks, but his pleasure is lashed to his fear that she will stop. He knows she would like nothing more than to look up and see this tiger loose on the arena floor, but he can't bring himself to tell her.

Tiger muscles flex behind Big Joanie, close enough that the sharp smell of tiger urine is overpowering. Helmut, Bela, and Conroy draw near, pushing the tiger closer to the barricade and closer to Big Joanie. Helmut speaks to the tiger in German, words that sound as if they emanate from some private train car where the three men sit, smoking cigars and drinking liquor in comfortable chairs. The tiger stops. Big Joanie hasn't realized the world could be motionless, but the tiger stops pacing, and the world is like a still-life: ugly woman and tiger.

"Nobody will move," whispers Helmut in English. "Everything will be fine." He speaks so softly that Big Joanie wonders if she is reading his mind rather than hearing him. The voice mesmerizes her, connects her to him. He will lift her from danger before the audience of thousands.

But the tiger growls and severs their connection. Of the two creatures, Helmut is the weaker. The tiger's eyes cut into Big Joanie, sending twisty patterns of electricity through her. The tiger is aware of her rushing blood and of the muscle beneath her fat.

"You will not move." Helmut's voice travels easily into her, and if Helmut or any man had ever declared loyalty to her, Joanie might stop.

"Doughnut move, girl," says Bela. But Bela has never cared for

her either. Remembering the men she's known is futile, though she can't stop herself. Pictures of them rattle through her like strungtogether boxcars.

"Big Joanie, stay still!" commands Conroy. If he had invited her to his room last night, she might obey. If Conroy had covered her head to protect her and not to hide her, if he had ever sat beside her in the pie car or held her hand, she would become meat for him now.

Instead, Big Joanie wills herself to turn, and as she does, lost vertebrae line up and reconnect. Big Joanie feels puzzle pieces snap into place. She turns broad shoulders to face the tiger, straight on, full frame. The creature is as strange as Asia, as familiar as her own reflection.

She rests her snow cone tray on the barricade. She sees the tiger more clearly than the hair-spinning woman sees the husband who controls the rope that holds her aloft, more clearly than Big Joanie's mother ever saw her father, more clearly than any pretty woman will ever see an ordinary man. The tiger is more golden than orange, its black stripes as delicate as smoke trails from a cigarette, as painful to Joanie as whip marks. One pale front leg barren of stripes reveals an asymmetry. Shaggy feet with claws like dark quarter-moons grip the rubber mat uneasily, as if testing foreign soil. Big Joanie has seen this tiger jump through a ring of fire, yet she has never really seen its yellow god's eyes or read the calligraphy of its war-paint face. The tiger stares back at her. She weighs what it weighs. If the tiger pounces, she will be overcome, but the tiger must look at her and acknowledge her, and Big Joanie will know the face of the animal that devours her.

Tiger muscles tense and contract as they do before springing at Helmut's bidding. But the tiger hesitates. It shifts its weight and looks away from Big Joanie, retracts its claws. The tiger glances toward the empty cage, and shifts its weight again. Seconds flash in Joanie's mind like glimpses of sun between boxcars. The tiger twists its body, tilts its head, and roars into the bank of lights.

Rhyme Game

Tinny Marie and her mother rattled along Halfmoon Road in the pickup truck, heading east toward the risen sun. Bits of trash flew out of the cans and barrels in the back—a plastic bag from Spartan egg noodles, a popsicle wrapper, grocery store receipts. Tinny Marie's mother had canceled weekly garbage service because she could save money by storing the trash until she had a truckload and then dumping it herself. The longer she saved it, the more she was getting out of her eight-dollar compactor fee. Between compactor visits, cans of garbage lined up outside the back door, waiting.

Tinny Marie's mother was driving with one hand and holding a cup of coffee with the other. Coffee sloshed with each bump, spilling and soaking into the foam rubber where the bench seat was ripped. The smell of burned coffee made Tinny want to gag. She knelt on the seat sideways and leaned out the window to watch the swamp glide past. The tips of marsh grasses were white with frost. When the pickup crossed the stream which flowed under the road and later crossed their property, Tinny spit out the window toward the water. She turned her side-view mirror in all directions to see the road shimmy up from behind.

"That coffee smells real bad," she said.

"Best coffee I ever had," said her mother.

"Does the coffee make you glad? Or mad?"

Tinny's mother honked and waved at a man coming toward them in the opposite lane in a Martin's Excavating dump truck. In order to wave, she let loose the wheel, causing the truck to swerve right. Tinny closed her eyes and clutched the cracked seat and door handle. Her brothers had promised to take her with them to the auto parts junk yard, but the way her mother drove, there was no guarantee she'd be alive to go. Loose gravel spit up as Tinny's mother jerked the truck back onto the pavement.

"Looks like we're here," said her mother as she braked to turn into the compactor driveway.

"Let's have a beer," said Tinny Marie.

"Did you peer in the mirror?"

"I'm a queer reindeer."

They backed into the unloading zone, and Tinny helped her mother empty the blue plastic oil drums and galvanized metal cans. The more an object was unlike garbage, the better Tinny liked throwing it into the pit. Her favorites included pieces of busted furniture, appliances, and books. A handwritten sign on the side of the operator's shack said "No TVs!" Tinny Marie would've liked nothing better than to see a TV explode.

After they had emptied the cans and barrels and swept out the rusting truck bed, Tinny climbed on top of the cab. The roof bowed and made a sound like thunder beneath her weight. From inside his shack below her, the compactor man turned on the hydraulics and a chunk of the world began to compress. Lengths of wood splintered and snapped like bones. Cans flattened and bottles popped. Tinny imagined a stray cat jumping into the hole. She closed her eyes and hunched her shoulders against a shiver.

"Tinny Marie, what do you see?" asked her mother from the ground.

Tinny opened her eyes. "I see a tree and it sees me."

"What if I were you?" asked her mother. "And you were me?"

"What if bumbles was a bee? What if there was a flea on that bee? On his knee?"

Tinny's mother carried her empty cup into the shack with the compactor man and closed the door. Hands on her hips, Tinny

surveyed the field beyond the mowed grounds. She could see all the way through to Indian Road from her perch, nearly all the way home across the yellow scratch of fall. The reds of the sumac trees are like scabs, she thought, on hills that are like knees. "These trees are bees' fleas' knees," she said aloud.

From the top of the truck, she could see Jimmy Poke's red and white cows lounging in the sun beside the farm pond edged with frost. The cows didn't seem to care that winter was coming. They lay chewing as if seasons didn't change. Jimmy Poke was a friend of her mother's. He dragged one leg behind him as he walked and called all the women "Dahlin'." He always kissed her mother on the mouth. Tinny Marie said "Dah-lin" twice out loud but couldn't find a rhyme.

Late last winter, Jimmy Poke had called their house to say that one of his cows had walked out on the ice and fallen through. If there was a thaw, he said, the carcass would poison the water. Her mother could have the meat if they could get the cow out. Tinny had gone along but stayed on shore while her mom and two brothers went out with a rowboat. They took lengths of rope and a chain saw as well as a splitting maul to bust up the ice.

The cow in the water was frozen solid, and that was why they had to cut her legs off. As the chain saw buzzed, Tinny had buried her face in the shoulder of a Guernsey heifer. Her brothers tossed the legs one at a time toward the shore. The legs clattered as they skipped across the ice. If those cold white legs were there now, she would kick them into the compactor and bravely watch them snap. Last winter they had carried the frozen cow home in the back of the truck, and her brothers had skinned her and hung her body in the garage. The weather broke, and over the next few days the boys cut the meat from the bones. Her mother finished the job on the kitchen table, wrapping ugly five-pound chunks in freezer paper and gray tape.

The truckload of garbage was smashed into a tight package, and through the window of the little hut, Tinny Marie could see her mother laughing with the compactor man. Their mouths moved in speech she couldn't hear. When finally another truck pulled in and honked, the two strolled out, her mother with a full cup of coffee.

From the truck cab roof, Tinny watched her mother place the cup on the dashboard below her. A ghost of steam formed above it on the windshield. Her mother turned the key and the truck made spiraling sounds until the engine caught. She yelled up, "Tinny Marie, what do you see?"

"The hill is my knee," she said. "My scab is a tree."

"Come on down and get in with me."

"I see a cow right now."

"Get in. We've got to go," said her mother.

"How about a one-legged crow." Tinny laughed at the vision she'd conjured up: a one-legged crow standing on that one leg, then flying off with no problem. She slid into the passenger's seat through the window. It'd been years since the door opened. They turned back onto Halfmoon Road and her mother waved goodbye to the compactor man. As they bumped over the pavement, Tinny watched Jimmy Poke's cows chew their cud in the rearview mirror until they were lazy dots of fur. The pond shone like an icy mirror, then disappeared behind a hill.

"There's a *two*-leg-ged crow," said her mother.

"So?" Tinny hung partway out the window.

Her mother began to sing, "There lived an old Lord by the Northern Sea, bow down . . ." Tinny watched the marsh. The sun was warming the air, and the iced tips of the grasses were melting. When they crossed the shallow stream again, Tinny threw one of her yellow plastic barrettes into the current and watched it float and turn and fall behind them. When she got home, she'd run to the creek to wait for it and see how long it took to travel. Slowly, as if in a daydream, a giant black bird lifted itself into flight with a bony stretch of wings.

"Look! The biggest crow in the world," said Tinny. As her mother turned to see, the truck hit a pothole, and hot coffee splashed down the front of her mother's shirt. She swore and pulled the shirt cloth away from her. Tinny saw another truck was coming toward them, and her mother was not paying attention. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth until she heard her mother resume singing, "I gave my lo-ove a gay gold ring, the boughs they bend to me . . ."

Tinny Marie opened her eyes slowly. The truck had not hit them. Their own truck had not been reduced to shattered glass and bent steel, nor she and Mother to bloody muscle and splintered bone. Their limbs would not be severed, and they would not be tossed piece by piece into the compactor to be crushed. Her mother apparently hadn't noticed how close they'd come to dying, for she just smiled at Tinny and took another drink of what coffee remained in her cup. The truck bounced and rattled on. Tinny spotted the big crow soaring above the marsh. It swooped clumsily to rest at the top of a swamp oak, on a tiny branch that bent beneath its weight. Tinny Marie turned backward in her seat to watch the crow flap its wings to keep its balance. She longed to view the world from such a height.

"I'll fly to the top of that big crow's tree," said Tinny Marie.

"Long as I can see you, and you can see me," said her mother.

Gorilla Girl

When beer is mixed and left to ferment and bread is set out to rise, they sometimes collect wild yeasts; these foreigners drop out of the jet stream or rise up from the bowels of the planet, unwelcome particles which give the finished product a sharp flavor. I suspect this is what happened to my mother when she was pregnant with me. Sometime during the first trimester she must have let her guard down, perhaps in the public toilet at the flea market in Paw Paw; in a moment of inattention, something airborne and bony slipped inside her to poison the brew, something like a curse.

If I cared to describe the details of my birth and the ecstasy of release from that suffocating maternal clench, you might question whether I actually recall such an early event. In fact, I recall in miserable detail this and every sensation that has followed in the tangled and knotted lifeline connecting that howling newborn to me, seventeen years later. I recall that despite the humid heat of the southern Michigan summer, my parents kept me at optimum temperature with air conditioning, and in the bitter winter I was warmed by a clean-burning gas furnace whose filter they changed regularly. Despite these ideal conditions, I was an unhappy baby, screaming during the day and most of the night as well, whether flat on my back or rolled onto my stomach, whether a gentle breeze