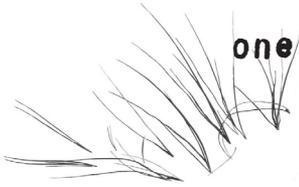


Underground Voices
Los Angeles, California
2014



**The Demon
Who Peddled
Longing**



Sometime in the night the woman woke. The wind had died down and the rain had stopped and now she could hear something bang against the piles of the house. Sitting up on her cot, she listened. In the sound of water lapping the piles there was the knocking of something. She listened to its cadence. Then she parted the mosquito net, rose and walked barefoot across the wooden floor to the door. She unlatched it, felt it tremble against the wind and pushed it open just a crack to look out into the night.

Down below, hung from a stilt, the lantern was bobbing like a pale yellow orb on the water. Chained to the wooden posts, cushioned by two rubber tires and covered with a white plastic sheet, her boat rocked on the current. Above the water she could see tips of grass that fringed the bottom of the boat and she could smell in the wind the warm, wet smells of quack

grass and water chestnut. Then she saw a large plank on the water directly below her and it hit a post each time the wind pushed the current. There was a body on it.

She made her way down the ladder, saw floating planks that got caught between the piles, curved planks with rattan ribbands trailing behind them. They looked like wreckage from a boat. The floodwater of September was warm, chest-high, as she waded around the piles to the plank. There she stood, hands on the body's shoulder. It lay prone in a white short-sleeved shirt, the back of which was ripped open, the white color turned dark purple from blood-red stains. Then a leg suddenly moved. It caught her eyes. She looked at the bent leg in dark gray trousers. Then she heard a moan.

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HE OPENED HIS EYES. The first movement of his body caused the cot to creak. He kept still. His body felt warm, reeking of alcohol. There was a damp odor of timber in the air. Lying on his side, he saw through the mosquito net the glimmering wooden floor perhaps a foot beneath the cot, and the low-lying cot had the same old brown color as the floor. At the door sat a woman, half turned toward him. Her long black hair that draped over the floor shocked him with its length. She had a bowl in one hand, a round bottle in the other. She poured herself a bowlful, set the bottle on the doorsill and raised the bowl with both hands and sipped. The bottle had a cockroach-reddish-brown color, topped with a cork. Outside it was gray. He couldn't tell if it was morning or dusk. His head felt heavy, his limbs tired, a deep tiredness in the joints. Yet he remembered stumbling

in the water with the woman trying to steady him as they made their way to the ladder and up its steps, his vision cloudy from dizziness, his body so weak, like it was made of dough.

He felt an awful thirst. All his saliva had dried up and his throat hurt when he swallowed. He turned over, looking up at the ridge of the mosquito net, and a dull pain stabbed the small of his back. He rolled onto his side, groping with his hand to feel the wound on the back where, as he recollected, he'd lost so much blood that his mind finally slipped away. There was something soft padding his lower back and it was tied in place with a thin string around his abdomen.

He was about to ask for water when the woman rose from the doorsill and turned and came toward him holding the bowl in her hands. A huge woman, yet she moved with grace, barely making a sound. He pushed himself up on his elbow, his head hurting, as she sat down by the cot, folding one leg under her, and her husky frame and her abundant hair draping around her took his breath away.

Drink this, she said, pulling up the front panel of the mosquito net, and brought the bowl to his lips. She had a deep, hoarse voice.

He sipped. It was burning in his throat. Liquor. He gasped, blew air out of his mouth.

You're a man, she said in an even tone. Don't drink like a sissy.

He could tell it was strong liquor, and she had been drinking it like drinking water. If it was still early in the morning, he'd be damned to hell to know who she was. He held the rim of the bowl against his lips and peered up at her.

Ma'am, he said, can you spare me a glass of water?

I don't drink water. There's no good water around here. Well, there is. The vat out there. No good under floodwater now.

He understood. It must be a vat that kept rainwater for her cooking. Without a word he sipped, holding the liquor in his mouth till its burning sensation went away, and gulped it down. He could drink liquor but not like this, when his body felt dead. His skin on the neck, the chest smelled of liquor, too. She must have rubbed his body with it when she brought him in. The dryness in his throat now went away. Maybe the liquor did it. It felt hot now in his empty stomach.

She took the bowl from his hands and drank and handed it back to him. Her face was white, the bland white of water chestnut's flesh. It looked spooky against the ghastly black of her hair.

Is it morning? he said.

She nodded and her hand pushed the bowl toward his mouth. He sipped as she watched. Her eyes were longish, narrow. In them was smoldering a look of neither anger nor hate but something that made him think of a wounded beast being cornered. It unsettled him.

What happened to you? she said, barely moving her lips, like her voice had just come up from nowhere.

A barge hit us.

Where?

Up the river. Broke the boat to pieces. Wasn't anything left of it. They all died probably.

Why didn't you?

I was sitting in the bow.

The bowl in his lap, he sat up on the cot now with the gauzy panels of the mosquito net draping his back. He'd been

flung into the river the moment the barge hit the boat and its impact nearly took out all his senses. His back hit something sharp over the gunwale. When he came up to the surface the river was black and quiet and the barge had been gone save for a faint whirring of its motor somewhere downriver. He swam.

His head was numb, his back throbbing. The river was wide and he didn't know where he was in the darkness and there was nothing in sight not even the riverbanks, except some blurred shapes of debris floating by. Then he felt a sharp pain in his leg and the cramp in the calf pulled him down, sinking, and he kicked and kicked with his other leg to keep himself buoyed and water then got into his nose, his mouth, and then his hand hit something hard. It was a big curved plank from the boat.

Now she took the bowl from his hands and drank, tipping back her head, and the liquor went down with a gurgling sound. Licking her lips, she set the bowl on the floor.

What's your name? she said.

Nam.

Your family, they're on that boat?

No. He looked away. I don't have a family.

When he looked back at her she was gazing at him, her eyes still like she was gauging something in her head. She wasn't fat, just large. She wasn't pretty. Far from it. But her full lips were, and they looked out of place on her squarish face, her heavysset frame.

I thought you were dead, she said. Dead like a coon. You know that? Thought you were a man.

He was a man. Barely twenty, though. But he didn't want to disagree with her on that.

Most boys your age look funny with a beard, she said tonelessly. Not beard, just a few hairs like a baby goat.

He grinned, and stopped, when she ran the back of her hand against his chest. It went across its breadth and down to his abdomen. She tested the tightness of the string that looped around his stomach.

You're fine now, you were cold as a clam, she said. Just rest on your side and you'd be all right. Her hand came up now to feel his full beard, from one side of the jaw to the other. Where were you heading to?

South. To the seaside.

South where?

Maybe near Cà Mau.

Got relatives there?

Nah. Just looking for work.

You mean at the fishing villages?

She didn't see him nodding as she took his hand in hers and spread out his fingers like a palm reader, bending back his fingers, squeezing his hand hard with her hand, thick, powerful. Good, she said in her impassive voice, you've done hard work before.

I used to fish on a riverboat, he said, letting her feel the calluses on his knuckles, his fingertips.

Are you any good? she said, checking his wrist bones.

I've done it since I was ten.

Good boy, she said with a muted satisfaction. You've got thick wrists. You're big-boned.

He saw her smile, just a flick of the corner of her mouth, the pretty lips barely parted. Why'd you quit? she said.

My uncle died. He owned the riverboat.

Died, eh? Folks don't live long today. He drink?

A little.

I've never found a fisherman who don't drink. Half of them die from that. Hope I won't.

What'd you do?

Fishing. Making a living here and there doing odd things.

My uncle he just fished. Fixed boats too.

Do you?

I've got a good hand.

You need a job, well, I've got a job for you.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Your boat needs fixing?

It needs many things. And I need somebody to haul in fish on days I can't.

He didn't want to ask why, deciding that was none of his concern. Where am I now? he said.

Plain of Reeds, she said. Can't you tell by the flooding? The plain is seven feet now under the water.

How can you get around?

That's what a boat is for. No boat, no go. She picked up the bowl and got to her feet nimbly. The air stirred with a wet alcohol smell. Looking down at him with her hair hanging to her knees and framing her chalk-white face, she canted her head to one side to appraise him. Looks like you need some clothing, she said, or you can wear mine while you're here till I get you something you call yours.

Yes, ma'am.

You hungry?

Yes, ma'am, if it isn't much to ask.

I'll fix you something. You like corns?

I'll eat anything.

You like it roasted or boiled?

You just do it, ma'am. I'm not gonna be difficult bout that.

Good boy. She turned and went to a brick hearth shaped like a half circle, which took up the whole corner to the left of the door. She bent and gathered an armful of twigs, each thin and mottled gray, and dropped them with a dry crackling sound onto the ashes in the hearth's pit. He left the cot and came to sit down next to her by the hearth, watching her stuff cajeput leaves dried and brown beneath the twigs. Then she flipped open a chrome lighter, its brushed metal a gleaming silver, and flicked it against the small heap of leaves. He watched the blue flame burning clean through the leaves as they curled and twisted, sending up smoke. The flame rose, tingling warm and changing to orange. She leaned into the corner where sat a reed basket and grabbed four ears of corn with both hands, each still clad in grasshopper-green husks, whiskered tips of auburn silks. She placed them on the leaves, now singed to brittle black layers, then, sitting back with one leg folded under her, the other stretched out behind him, gazed at the corns.

He watched them in silence. The husks now shrank, charred black along the edges, and the silky tufts frizzled. Then she leaned forward to turn over the ears of corn, barehanded, her long thick hair falling in abundance into the smoky fire. Just as she hitched up her shoulder like she always knew what to do, he reached and pulled back her hair.

I won't burn myself, she said, sitting up with a toss of her head. Don't ever think I'd let myself burn.

He shrank back. Yet the tone of her voice was casual and her faint smile put him at ease. From her long lavender blouse pocket she lifted a cigarette pack, badly bent, the figure of the camel distorted, slit the pack open with her finger and pulled

out the only cigarette left in it. Then she tossed the crumpled pack into the flame on top of the smoldering corns and leaned in to touch the tip of the cigarette against the flame, which rose occasionally when the wind blew in through a chink in the wall. She took a deep drag, turned and handed him her cigarette.

C'mon, she said, exhaling smoke. Keep yourself warm.

He didn't smoke but he took the cigarette. It was bent like a crooked finger and as he smoked it he could smell the strong dark smell of the cigarette and the wood-burned fire. He blew the smoke between his legs as he sat on his haunches, and looking down he could see a crack along the mortared base of the hearth and through it the silt-brown color of floodwater beneath the house.

Don't see many boys with a full beard like you, she said, pinching the cigarette he handed back. I mean, you don't look odd or out of place or anything. What made you?

My cousin, he said, she died. Then my uncle died. I guess I didn't care much for nothing else after that.

Ah, you poor soul. What got them?

What got them? he said, arching his brows. Bad things got them. Bad.

Sickness? Accident? She handed him what was left of her cigarette and he took a long drag and another long one, squeezing the stub with his thumb and forefinger, feeling the heat against his palm. He shook his head and tossed the stub into the fire.

Ni, he said, she was raped. They found her body up a creek.

The woman frowned. She pulled the ears of corn from the fire and set them on the rim of the hearth. The yellow-edged husks were paper-dry as he peeled them back. He inhaled their

aroma, the thick steam wetting the tip of his nose, and rolled the burning ear of corn back and forth from hand to hand while she yanked the husks off the ear, stroking down its length to gather the husks at its base, and sank her teeth into its kernels. He did what she did, sucking in the stinging heat that cut through his palms, and ate. His teeth ached sharply from the fiery heat in the kernels, his eyes teared.

Did you find who did it to her? she said.

No. Nobody did.

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. This is good corn, sweet, fresh, he thought. But you eat it this way every day your teeth will be gone in no time. In silence they ate.

What got your uncle? She tossed her finished ear of corn with husks and all into the fire.

Poisonous snakes. Happened when he went to the graveyard where she was buried.

What a curse!

I don't believe in none of em things. But things happened.

What'd you do with his boat?

Not his boat no more after his creditor claimed it. He gnawed off the last row of kernels and picked up the second ear on the hearth's rim. She didn't touch hers. It would be good if she stopped asking questions about what he dreaded most. It would be good if he never had to talk about it again.

How old was . . . what's her name? she said, picking up her share and putting it down in front of him.

Ni. He plucked the blackened silks. Seventeen.

And how old are you now?

Twenty.

You're only young once, she said. Yeah.

He didn't know what she meant by that.

HE FELT A FEVER COMING ON while he stood in the doorway looking down at the boat. The water-covered plain reddened as the sun went down, water and sky for one brief moment reflecting each other in a flaming red, and looking across the shimmering water he could see nothing in sight but clumps of tall bushwillows and beyond them dark rain clouds now rolling in from the horizon, gigantic billowing black shapes quickly filling up the sky, and distant roars of thunder reverberating over the horizon, seemingly coming from deep in the earth like drumrolls.

He came back in and sat down on his haunches by the hearth. The fever had turned to chills. Wrapping his arms around his torso, he shook, pressing his chin hard against his chest, teeth clenched.

Lie down, she said. That'll pass.

He didn't hear her footsteps. But he knew she was behind him. He nodded and lay down. She had spread a blanket on the floor and, as he rolled onto his side, draped him with another blanket. The howling wind blew the door shut. Then rain fell, lashing the roof, and he could hear its drumming in crescendo. She came with a bowl in one hand, a small knife in the other, sat by him and pulled down the blanket. Without a word she turned him over on his stomach and he felt her hand touching the wound on the small of his back.

I'm gonna wash it and change the bandage, she said.

What's in that bowl you've got?

Some ground leaves, some ground tobacco.

She snipped the binding string. The cold knife blade

pressed against his skin. He closed his eyes, shuddering, the muscles in his chest shaking uncontrollably because of the chills, as she slowly poured alcohol on the wound, pausing and dabbing it with a piece of cloth. He sucked in his breath at the sting of alcohol.

A nasty gash you've got there, she said. What got you?

I don't know, he spoke with his eyes shut. They had all kinds of bins and baskets on the boat. Got glass cutters, hand-saws, machetes. Coulda been a scythe.

He tried not to shiver while she fixed him up, yet his limbs, his body shook badly. When she was done with bandaging she pulled up the blanket to his neck, bending slightly, and her hair hung down, tickling the side of his face.

A small fire was burning in the pit of the hearth and the flame suddenly spurted when she fed cajeput leaves to the pit. Smoke clouded the hearth, smelling bitter. She leaned into it to place a pot on the fire. Her long shadow looked grim on the wall behind her. His eyes fluttered, the fire brightening then dimming, the color of flames now blue now orange. He knew he wasn't sleeping yet he saw himself sleep and in his sleep he smelled the acrid smell of cajeput leaves, the dry smell of corncobs as they all burned to ashes.

He woke to see her sit next to him. In her hand she held a bowl and steam was rising from it. A rich smell.

Sit up, she said, lowering the bowl to her lap.

I don't want to eat.

Well.

What's in it?

Mung bean soup.

Can I have some water? Then he remembered there was none.

All right. She brought the bowl to her lips and sipped, her eyes downcast. He laid his head on the fold of his arms, eyeing the olive-colored blanket and breathing in its musty odor. The chills were not coming as regularly now, though he felt damp even under the blanket. Then he saw her rise to her feet. From the floor he looked up at her huge shadow looming on the wall. It was dark now, save the glow of the fire in the hearth. Sitting down on the rim of the hearth, she cleaned the bowl with some cajeput leaves, the fire behind her a bright orange against the pale lavender of her blouse. As he watched, dimly thinking about the water, she began to unbutton the front of her blouse, her hands going down, her head bent forward. He stared. She opened the front of her blouse and, with one hand cupping a breast, began to knead it with her other hand. She paused, then, open-palmed, stroked down her breast. She stroked it firmly, patiently, her chin pressed down against her chest, her hair draping the sides of her body, till at last she reached for the bowl and brought it to the tip of her nipple. She kneaded her breast, hard, the bowl firmly held in place, and she didn't let up. Then she lifted her chin, gasped, and her hand slid away from her breast. Changing hands, she squeezed her other breast, unhurriedly, coaxing the milk to come forth. In the quiet the fire popped, spurted. She picked up the bowl again, her nipple kissing the bowl's rim, and strained herself till the liquid stopped flowing.

She brought the bowl to where he lay. He sat up, dazed. A smoky odor of wood and fire hung about her as she sat down, folding one leg under her.

Drink this, she said. Till I can get water after the flood.

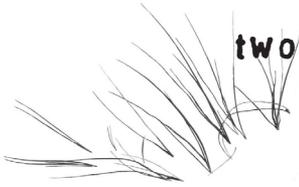
He took the bowl from her and looked at the white liquid in it. At his hesitancy she said, Drink it. He drank in one gulp,

not registering the taste. An aftertaste remained on his tongue, of something neither salty nor sweet but warm and thin. Then he handed the bowl back to her.

Thank you, ma'am.

Cover your head with the blanket, she said. Keep mosquitoes off. Rain like this keeps them out, otherwise they'll suck your blood dry. She stood up, looking down at him. I'll remember to get myself some more cajeput leaves. Them leaves when you burn drive mosquitoes away.

He watched her turn the twigs in the hearth. The taste on his tongue didn't go away. He wondered how a woman could make milk like that and after a while fell asleep with no answer.



The first sound of a motorboat that went by before it was light woke him. It came from a distance. Lying on the floor under the blanket, tucked in a corner across from her cot, he could hear the whirring of its motor die away. It was still dark. Over him was hung the mosquito net, white, gauzy, which kept out mosquitoes now that the floodwater had receded, the heat come back. It had been a week now since he came. At dusk, while they ate, he'd burn cajeput leaves in the hearth till the bluish smoke hung so thick, bitter smelling, that he had to open the door to let in the breeze. The plain was still a few feet under floodwater and the evening breeze of the wet season was chilly coming across the plain.

When he woke again the morning was pale gray through the tiny eyes of the cane-woven door. In the stillness came a sound of oars, gentle and steady, of a boat passing by on its way

to a market. The floor creaked when he tried to walk quietly to the door with a tool bag in his hand. She was undisturbed in her sleep. She slept very quietly, never snoring, never getting up in the middle of the night like he did when he had to go out to relieve himself. Down the ladder and to the bottom rung to empty his bladder over the water. Perhaps she got a bigger bladder than his, he thought, or the liquor must have evaporated better than water in her blood stream.

Outside the air was cool, the sun still a mild orange disc over the horizon where the water shone in silver white. He saw gray dots of storks flying low over the water, dipping suddenly and rising again and now skimming the water for fish. He waded knee-high in the water to the boat. The receding floodwater had left dark stains on the piles. Looking at them he thought how lucky she must have been, for the highest water-mark was just two feet below the house floor. Or, perhaps, she didn't care at all if the house was under the water. She could always unmoor the boat and go wherever she wanted to go.

It was a twenty-four-foot-long, wooden, flat-bottomed, open boat fitted with a kerosene outboard motor. He tossed the tool bag onto the boat, stood in the water and looked at the engine bed half submerged in the brown water. There were small snails and lichen, green, yellow, and brown, clinging to the damp interior wood. He sloshed around the boat, untying the knots of the tarpaulin. It took a while to free it from all the tangled knots and, once done, it took much longer for him to fold it up. He cursed under his breath at doing it in such an awkward position over the boat. On the deck, as he squatted, he ran his hands along the length of the oars, each latched to a side under the gunwale. On their dry blades were dots of gray and black lichen. This boat, he thought, must have been off the

rivers for some time. He wondered what she had been doing, if fishing was her trade. He sat down on the folded tarpaulin to flatten it. *Where does it go?* Then, as he turned his body toward the stern, he saw under the transom a latch. He lifted the board. There was a small compartment under the deck. Quickly he dropped the tarpaulin into it and closed the board.

Bending, he opened the tool bag and took out a chisel, a steel-headed hammer. He weighed the hammer in his hand. Its hardwood handle was light brown and felt solid. He moved forward on his knees to the bow, tracing the white-chalked x marks he left there the day before. They identified the spots damaged by rot where the wood had either warped or turned soft. She told him those spots were not worm-eaten, just rotten wood. She was right. There was standing rainwater underfoot that had got in beneath the tarpaulin. He saw a drain plug in the bow, but that was of no use now unless the boat was out of the water. He would have to scoop out water with a can.

Kneeling, he began to chip away the soft, damp wood of a rotted spot. The chisel went in easily under the crumbly wood. He tapped the chisel with the hammer, stopped, tapped again, excavating all the soft wood of the weakened area. He kept at it, poking, chiseling until he hit solid wood on all sides. Then he brushed the wood chips away with the heel of his palm, reached into the bag and took out a wire brush. He ran it back and forth over the cavity to remove all the debris. It wasn't a deep cavity, he thought. But he was sure there were some bad cavities among those he'd x-marked. A dull pain pricked his lower back. Stopping, he listened to the pinching of his wound till it sunk into his flesh. His forehead perspired. The early heat of the day seemed to rise from the water now shining across the plain as far as the horizon. He sat on one knee trailing his gaze

across the pencil-thin line of the horizon, wondering what was beyond it. There was nothing out there but clumps of cajeput trees and bushwillows and sometimes a huge mangrove tree gnarled and shaggy leaning out over the water like some aquatic monster. How did one find his way around in a place like this? No landmarks, no boundary markers. Just water brimming as far as the eye could see. You could be anywhere here, he thought, and it would look just like another place.

A bird shot up from a clump of bushwillow, fluttering over a spike of its creamy yellow flowers, and then plunged to the water. As he watched, it shook itself repeatedly in the water, sending shiny sprays flying around, and then abruptly took wing and made a beeline to the foliage where it was sheltered from the heat. He reached for the bag, picked up two rectangular cans and set them down side by side. One was the hardener, the other resin. He'd used them before to repair his uncle's boat, a year-round job for its upkeep. He laid a small tin pan in between the two cans and began pumping out the hardener and then the resin, one full stroke of the pump for each. He pumped till the pan was half filled for the job and then, with a flat wooden stick, worked the mixture over, scraping the sides, the bottom, the corners of the pan, so it all mixed thoroughly. He breathed in the familiar sharp vapor of the compound, off-white and putty looking, and he watched its thickness, its color, till it felt just right as he poked the stick into its mass. Then he took a small can of the filler and poured out a sand-like portion of it into his hand and then let it sift through his fingers into the pan. He stirred the mass carefully till it thickened into a light, tan consistency.

The sun felt hot on the back of his neck and his face was sweating by the time he had filled three cavities. He looked at

them, feeling good that they would cure nicely on a hot, sunny day like this. Then later he would come back and sand them down. There were several other spots, some warped badly, and he knew he would have to cut deep into the crumbled parts to get rid of the rot and fit the cavities with woodblocks. That would take more time. If it didn't rain in the next few days, this heat would dry the boat adequately for any additional filling or caulking jobs. He bent over the gunwale, looking at the side of the boat. The hull needed fixing, too. He was glad that the woman had stocked enough parts for the repair work. The boat had been patched in places, some with wood, others with filling. She must've done it herself before, he thought, though with some doubt.

Looking at the blackened spots on the hull, he couldn't help but feel glad that the modern tools and parts had made a repair job much easier. Back when he was still a boy, he had seen his uncle trying to fill cavities with coconut threads, sometimes with throwaway fishing nets, and then caulking the hull of his boat with a crushed blend of lime and resin, mixed in with wood oil. Then his uncle would coat the cavities with semi-liquid tar and polished them with wood oil till they shone with a shade of ocher. Now forgotten by many, his old-school way was but a memory that filled the boy's nostrils with the smells of tarred hulls.

He picked up the two cans of hardener and resin, shaking them. There wasn't enough left to do the whole job, if he wanted to fill most of the cavities. To save her money—and he knew these materials were expensive—it'd be better that he filled them with wood. That would take much longer, though with much less resin-hardener mixture. He looked up at the patches of clouds as far as he could see down the

horizon. There was more blue in the sky now and the warm breeze foretold heat in coming days. That's good, he thought. He would leave the boat uncovered overnight, and the sun-facing side where the boat was moored would help it dry more quickly.

He took off his shirt, which was a man's shirt—he had been surprised when she gave it to him—tossed it onto the transom and climbed down the boat. Washing his hands in the water to rid them of the biting smell of the filling compound, he eyed the watermark on the hull. Yes, he'd have to scoop out the standing water with a can. He moved in the water toward the back of the stilt house, going around clumps of Kans grass, tall, droopy, silt-nourished, monsoon-flood-thriving that rose like stands on the side of the house. In the back of the house, joined with the main structure, was a smaller house, more like a hut, with sections thatched with palm leaves or straw or rushes. He noticed that the floor planks had rotted through in several places as he climbed off the ladder and stood under the steep roof. Inside it was dank and dark. The mildewed air hung thick. There was a pile of logs by the doorway. All of them were still fresh, coming off a boat the other day. When they took the delivery of logs, the woman told him to stack them up in the hut, and he hauled them in several trips between the boat and the hut, wading in the water and then climbing up the ladder. He found out they were timber from vegetable hummingbird trees. Each hewed log was five feet long, the wood soft and white. The woman used them to grow straw mushrooms and wood ear mushrooms. Leave them there, she said, till they rot. Then what, he said. Then drill holes in them, she said, and drop white fungi in them.

Leaning against the back wall and side walls were rows of

those logs, standing on their ends. He stood in front of them, smelling their musty smells, looking at the holes now plugged with wedges that had been gouged out during the drilling. He bent to pick up a jug filled with floodwater and scooped up water with a small plastic cup. Slowly he poured water down the length of each log, making sure the water seeped into each plugged hole where inside the fungi was fermenting. There were more than fifty logs that he had to water, and he watered each of them twice. She also told him to water them twice a day, morning and late afternoon. The fungi, she said, needed much dampness to grow into mushrooms.

He was sweating heavily in the sultry heat inside the hut. Under his bare feet water was running off between the floor planks and dripping to the ground. How did she manage this type of work and still be able to fish for a living? The thought puzzled him. He found the saw he needed lying on the floor. Then he rummaged in a rice sack and came up with a sheet of sandpaper. In the weak light he walked around eyeing the floor till he found some woodblocks of odd shapes here and there. He dropped them all into the rice sack and carried it out of the hut and down the ladder.

The sun sat directly above his head as he started sanding the filling compounds that had cured in the heat. He sanded them down to a smooth surface, stopping now and then to blow away sanding dust, to wipe sweat off his face. A thirst seared his throat. He got off the boat and went to the earthen vat that was harnessed to a pile to keep it from being swept away by floodwater. The other day, as soon as rain had stopped, he'd helped her empty the vat of the soiled drinking water after it had sat underwater for several days. Then they bought fresh drinking water in jugs from a merchant boat that came by every

day and returned those jugs the following day once they had filled the vat.

He opened the lid, reached for the wooden ladle and scooped up water that tasted cool and clean as he drank it. The sound of a motor came across the water. He dropped the ladle into the vat, shut the lid and made his way to the front. The water darkened in the shade of the house. The piles looked much longer now because of their own vertical reflections in high noon. He could see apple snails, their shells coated with green moss, drifting about on the brown water. Then suddenly a powder-blue gourami leaped out of the water, gulped air and plopped back into the water. In this flooded plain he knew he could catch small fishes like anabas and gourami, but to catch bigger fish he must go to the rivers.

The merchant boat was coming toward him, splitting clumps of flat sedge as it churned up water, sending to air a dragonfly that had perched on a cluster of their quivering spikelets. The boat idled in the shadow of the house. As he moved in the water to its side, the boat owner was lifting up two one-gallon jugs of liquor and setting them down on the gunwale.

These here for the missus, the man said, tipping up his wide-brimmed hat to wipe his brow.

I'll need something else, too, he said, taking hold of the plastic jugs the man handed down.

Yeah. The missus told me. Got it right here when you come back.

He raised the jugs up on his shoulders and headed back to the ladder and gripped his toes on the mossy rungs as he went up. Inside the house the dimness cooled his eyes. As he laid the jugs down by the hearth he glanced across the room to the cot where the mosquito net was still down and she was still

asleep. He went around the hearth to the side facing the corner of his sleeping quarter and, bending, pulled out two bricks. There was a small tin can in the hollow. He took out some bills, the petty cash she kept in the can for every day expenditure, shoved the can back in and moved the bricks in place. Then he went back down to the boat. The man was waiting for him with a clear plastic bag laid across his forearms. Inside was a three-foot-long snakehead covered with crushed ice.

Fresh? he asked the man.

Hell yeah. Day old. Won't charge you for the bag and ice. Really?

Only for the missus.

He gave the man the rolled-up bills. The man shoved them into his trousers pocket, wiped sweat off his forehead with the heel of his palm. You her new helper? he said as his gold-capped front tooth glinted.

Yeah.

You're gonna stick around?

I don't know. I might.

Saw you working on that boat over there. You a boat fixer?

Yeah. He nodded, squinting up at the man. You know her well then?

Know, but not well. Sell her more stuff whenever she hits those jugs. She's just holed up in there. The guy before you did all the fishing for her. Just like you here before he quit.

Really? When was that?

Say, two months now?

Quit?

That's my conjecture. Left her with her big tummy.

Damn. Didn't see no baby myself.

Didn't materialize. That's what I've heard.

Dead baby?

Ask her.

None of my damn business.

She won't hurt ya.

I'm still learning my way around her.

Smart businesswoman. Fucked up in the head sometimes.

Around here she's a legend.

And what's that?

First time I heard it, I asked what legend meant. They said legend is something that did happen, is authenticized and true. Hehe.

She's authenticized all right. He grinned, looking at the man's gold tooth.

Tell her I'll come back for the mushrooms next week. . . . You need anything else? I won't be around for the rest of the week though.

Oh. Give me a carton of cigarettes.

Right on, chief.

The man's forefinger moved across the merchandise up and down the deck. It guided him with three steps over the goods strewn about him and he came back with a carton of one-humped Camels. Here goes, chief, he said. You need chewing gums?

Nah. She always smokes this type? He pointed at the camel on the carton.

Damn right. She won't smoke any other shit. Cussed me out once the time when I was out of it.

All right, he said, handing the man another bill for the cigarette carton. I need to get back to work.

Me too. Sure ya don't need anything else? How bout coffee? Got mountain grown coffee here.

I can't afford it. Aint got no money on me.

Use her money. She pays.

Nah. Aint right.

Aint right what? Who am I talking to here?

Well, you tell me. But I'll buy it when I get money. I like coffee.

And you can go without it. Just like that?

Sure can.

I don't believe it.

Well, I'll see you when you come back.

Right.

The man revved up the boat, swung it in a half-circle turn and left the way he came in.

The bag of iced fish in the crook of his left arm, the cigarette carton in the other, he went back up the ladder and left the plastic bag on the landing shaded by the overhang of the steep thatched roof. So she just had bad luck with her pregnancy, he thought. He drank her milk, which could have been there for the baby. *Well, just mind your own business.* Inside the house he leaned the cigarette carton against the wall beneath the wall-nailed wooden shelves on which she kept cans of cooking ingredients and cloves of garlic and ginger roots and bulbs of papery reddish shallots. There was a square glass jar of lard on the bottom shelf and next to it the cockroach-reddish-brown round bottle of her rice liquor. It was empty.

He went back down to the boat and continued to sand the rest of the fillings, and when he was done he began carving out the cavities of the warped spots. Each was more than an inch deep. He chiseled both ends so the sides beveled nicely

and then measured those freshly carved cavities that needed wood filling. He marked their measurements on the odd-sized woodblocks and felt glad that they would fit the dimensions of the hollows. He leaned down, holding firm one woodblock on the surface of the gunwale, and began to saw. He stopped several times to test the sharpness of the saw's toothed edge with his fingers, aggravated by its bluntness, and then sawed harder. His shoulder blades ached when he finished sawing off one block. He dropped the block into the cavity, nodded contentedly since it fit. Quickly he mixed the compound, just enough to coat the surface of the depression, and then sanded the block till it felt smooth on the cut surfaces and along the edges. By then the compound had gelled for the gluing job. Using the mixing stick, he spread the compound evenly on the surfaces of the cavity and then inserted the block, pressing it down firmly till he saw the compound ooze through the thin seams. He kept his weight on it by leaning down on his hands. The sun felt hot on the back of his neck and his shoulders, and sweat dripped down from his face onto the block. After a while, he let go and scraped off the glue excess with the stick. He knew he would need a sharper saw blade and his stomach was groaning from hunger. He hoped like hell there was another blade, better than the one he'd just used, in the hut. He got off the boat and was about to head up to the hut when he saw her sitting on the top step on the ladder, looking down at him. Silhouetted against the sun, her face was dark, shrouded by the mass of her black hair, and the white of her blouse hurt his eyes. She was smoking a cigarette.

Are you hungry? she said, the cigarette dangling between her lips.

Sure am. How bout you?

Come up. Good fish you've got.

He said just for you. Got your cigarettes and liquor in there too.

Good. I was out of it last night. He must be telepathic.

He guessed she must have meant the man answered her prayers as he stepped up on the ladder. She held him, bare-torsoed and sweating, in her gaze like he'd just materialized out of the netherworld. Her lips were rouged so vividly red he thought she was ready to go out on some special occasion.

You been working all morning? she said.

Just about.

Don't forget to water the mushrooms.

They're watered good.

Boat needs some fixing doesn't it?

It'll be fixed. Give me one more day. I was bent on getting me a better saw blade. One I've got is crappy.

There're more of them in the hut. Don't know if they're any better. Have a grindstone in there too.

A grindstone, huh?

He whetted them I believed. Saw him whet them when he patched the boat.

He remembered those patches. They were done nicely. Who's he? he asked.

Guy I hired. Worked on boat, fishing, ran errands. He's here no longer.

The boy looked back down at the boat and wiped his brow with his forearm. You know what? Gotta have more glue supplies.

I see what I can do. They aren't cheap.

Well, you've got more shallow holes than deep holes. I

mean those flat holes I can fix quick with glue. But, well, I can cut out wood and glue them in. Takes less glue that way but much longer.

If you don't mind doing it that way. I'd have to go to town for that kind of supply.

When're you set to go?

When I feel like going.

When's that?

In time.

He thought of the two fresh jugs of liquor and caught himself shaking his head.

What's wrong? she said, pinching the cigarette butt for one last puff.

Nothing. His gaze met hers. Oh, the guy said he'd be back next week for your mushrooms.

Good. They'll be ready by then. But you can help me drill holes in the fresh logs and get the fungi going. She flicked the stub over the rails. You always shake your head like that when you're hungry?

I might do that again and again.

She held his grin in her steady gaze. Then she rose to her feet. Let's cook the fish. You ever eaten snakehead?

Yeah. I know how to cook them too.

How?

Wrap them in straws and run a bamboo rod through them, mouth to tail, I mean. And cook them over the fire.

You'll lose the skin that way. It'll be burned and I don't like the burned smell when I eat it. When you cook it right, you lose nothing.

She stood barefoot by the bag, testing the firmness of the snakehead with her toe. She got small feet for a woman her size.

He watched her plump toe pushing the little ice cubes toward the edges of the bag. In the shade the thick, firm body of the fish shimmered in bluish black, striped with whitish lavender from head to tail. She spoke without looking at him, He must've got it yesterday, eh?

He must of. That's what he said. You want me to cook it?

I don't have straws for you to cook it your way. Then she motioned with her head toward the hut in the back. Go get me the bamboo rod in there. You'll find it where the fresh logs are. The rod, the grill, all there.

When he came back with the rod and the grill, she was squatting over the fish, flecking away the scales with a knife. When she was done with one side she flipped the fish over and scaled the other side. Then, palm down, she ran her hand along the fish's firm body, stopping at the tail. She flicked a tiny scale off her thumb with the tip of the knife, which she then used to gather all the scales on the plastic bag into one small heap. Then she scooped them up with the knife blade and shoved them into the bag.

Give me the rod, she said, laying down the knife.

He handed her the heat-browned bamboo rod. She pressed the fish's mouth open with her hand and looked down into its mouth. He could see the curved, sharp, mean-looking teeth, the pink gum. The eyes of the fish, way forward on the head, were two marbles gone opaque, and from where he stood he could see the head shaped like that of a snake. She inserted the rod into its opened mouth, slowly pushing the rod down, listening with her eyes half closed. She stopped and moved the rod back just enough to pierce it deeper and then shoved it till the rod's shaft was buried three-fourths of its length in the fish's body.

Take the grill in there, she said with an upward jerk of her chin. Build me a fire.

He left the grill beside the hearth and gathered dried twigs from the pile against the wall. The riverhemp wood burned with less smoke than other kinds, she'd told him. Just as the fire started crackling, she carried the fish in on the plastic bag and laid them on the rim of the hearth.

Water off the smell out there for me, she said to him as she grabbed two bulbs of shallots and a ginger root from the shelf.

There was no smell on the landing but it felt slimy when he stepped out on it. He took a can in the boat and filled it with floodwater. Then he went back up the ladder and splashed water across the landing and went back down for more water. After several washes the slime from the fish was gone when he slid his bare feet across the wooden planks. He could smell fried shallots coming out through the door and the smell made him hungrier.

She was coating a skillet with a slab of lard and it melted quickly over the heat. She scooped the rest of chopped shallots on the cutting board and dropped them onto the skillet. They popped and sizzled while she spun the skillet several times so they turned brown evenly. Then she brought the skillet off the fire, tilting it, and with a spatula shoved the fried shallots away from the simmering liquid and down into a bowl.

Go soak rice papers, she said as she started slicing a root of ginger. Get a pan in that cupboard. Rice papers in there too. And soak them in the water. One at a time. Know how?

Guess so, he said, walking to the chest-high cupboard that sat to the right of the door. A wooden cupboard painted red with two doors, its bright red must have been pretty when new but now had faded. There were deep scratches and blisters

around the two black iron knobs. The black iron hinges clacked loosely as he opened the doors. He looked up and down the shelves among bowls and wooden plates and oversized chopsticks bundled up in rubber bands and odd-shaped jugs, each stoppered with a cork that must have been filled once with liquor but now was empty. He found a round pan on the bottom shelf and next to it a packet of rice papers.

She was setting up the grill over the fire. It stood up on four long legs. She sprinkled ginger slices evenly on the fish's upward-facing side and then lifted it onto the grill. As she added more twigs to the fire, the flames rose but they didn't lick the underside of the fish. Her face glowed in the heat, her rouged lips looked blood red.

He went down to the vat and filled the pan with drinking water and carried it back up. By the time he got in she'd laid a sheaf of large banana leaves on the edge of the hearth. Soak them, she said, pointing to the rice papers, and dry them over here on these banana leaves.

He floated a crisp rice paper in the pan, pushing it down and watching it slowly rise up. Moments later he dipped his hand under it, lifting it up, and ran his fingers over its wet, soft surface. She nodded approval. He transferred the wet rice paper to a banana leaf. The woman watched the fire, now and then adding some more twigs to keep the flames just high enough so that they wouldn't burn the fish's skin. Droplets of fat were dripping into the fire with small hisses and the flames shuddered. A fatty odor hung in his nostrils. He knew he was very hungry. Once as he glanced up at the fire, he could see her watching him through her narrowed eyes. He could feel the heat of the fire tingling on his bare torso and he'd stop occasionally to wipe sweat off his face, his chest. She lowered

her head to look at the underside of the fish, where the flames were browning its skin into tiny warts and the fat-filmed skin glistened. Carefully she ran the knife blade across the top side and pushed all the ginger slices into a bowl. Then with one hand she grabbed the rod that stuck out of the fish's mouth and, with the other hand, held its tail and slowly turned it over. Now she pinched the ginger slices and spread them on top of the side she had just turned over.

She looked at the stack of rice papers he'd wet. Separate them, she said, or they'll stick like glue.

He began peeling each of them, noticing how sticky they had become, with his fingers sliding across their round surfaces, carefully so as not to tear them. She was crushing some hot peppers in a little bowl with a spoon, the red of their skins as fierce as the color of her lips. Finished with the hot peppers, she brought out from the cupboard a small jar filled with a paste the color of burned sienna. She dipped her finger into the jar and smeared the fingertip with a glob of the paste and, with the spoon, scraped it into the hot-peppered bowl.

What's that stuff? he asked.

Tamarind paste, she said, rising to her feet. From a wall shelf she picked up the fish sauce jar, unplugged the cork, and poured till it half filled the bowl. Watching her stir it up into a deep amber liquid with red flecks, the spoon going round and round with tiny clinks, his mouth watered. She eyed the fish. It was smoking now with a thin vapor hovering over its blistering skin and it permeated the air with a dark, fatty smell. She went to the cupboard and returned with a jar filled with crushed peanuts and motioned with her head toward the wall shelves. Get the liquor, she said.

He lifted one of the two jugs of liquor on the floor beneath

the shelves and grabbed an empty bowl, the plain blue crockery she used for drinking. On the rim of the hearth she had spread out a large banana leaf and, as he stood over her with the jug and the bowl, she lifted the fish by the rod and the tail and brought it down onto the leaf. It sizzled and white vapor rose up from the leaf. She sank the knife into the fish's fat side and slit it open, letting out a steaming aroma.

Know how to eat this with rice paper? she said, getting herself a banana leaf.

Yeah, he said as he watched her smoothing out a moist rice paper on the leaf.

She wiped her hands on the front of her blouse, hoisted the jug onto her lap, and sat stroking it like a pet. Go ahead, she said, checking him with her eyes. Make me a roll.

He eyed her. Okay, he said and reached for her banana leaf. Sitting on his haunches on the floor with the leaf on the rim of the hearth, he leaned in and began to carve out a good chunk of white flesh from the fish's side, scooping it with the knife blade and dropping it toward the bottom edge of the rice paper. He gathered the smoking meat with his fingers, firming it up, and opened the jar of peanuts. He passed it under his nose. A dark, fresh aroma of ground peanuts. He sprinkled some of it on the white meat, then some of the fried shallots, and rolled the rice paper up from the base, tucking in the meat with his fingertips to keep it tight, then folded the sides in. Then he rolled it all the way home to seal the side flappers. The roll felt compact in his palm.

She took the roll he handed her, weighed it in her hand, stroking it to feel its firmness. Her fingers caressed its whole length, back and forth. Then she dipped it in the sauce, twisting it to slather it in the sauce, and brought it to her mouth.

He watched her chew, her eyes closed, her vividly red lips wet. His mouth watered.

Pour me a bowl, she said, dipping the roll again in the sauce.

He opened the jug and poured a half-full bowl.

Go on, eat, she said, lifting up the bowl to her lips, and took a small sip, rolling the liquor on the tip of her tongue, and then took a longer sip. The bowl was near empty as she set it down, sliding it toward him. Try it, she said, licking her lips. Moonshine rice liquor.

He got a banana leaf and made himself a roll. The sauce was stinging hot, deliciously good. It made his mouth burn, his eyes wet and all the while he could taste a ginger-scented fatty flavor in the thick chunk of fish. Then he took a drink. It tasted wickedly tart, washing his insides with glowing warmth. He breathed in its faintly sweet and palely dry aroma. *Whew!* He pushed the bowl to her.

She was serving herself a large hunk of fish, dousing it liberally with the sauce. Then she broke the chunk in half and finger-fed herself. By the time they turned the fish over and carved off most of it, they no longer ate it with the rice paper. She stopping briefly to make another fresh bowl of sauce, crushing the hot peppers and licking their seeds off the spoon, her face glistening with perspiration yet hardly red. Her lips had lost the rouged red, now looking fuller and fuller. She never changed her sitting posture, sitting with one leg folded under her, the other stretched out in such an angle that caused the front of her pantaloons to pinch and crease sharply at her crotch. Each time he lifted his gaze he could see that she wore nothing underneath. He looked back down at his share, wondering why there were no chairs around. So

he asked her that as she was lighting her first cigarette from the new carton.

I have no use for them, she said, dragging deeply on the cigarette, and then reached for the bowl and took a swig.

He shrugged.

Why'd you ask? she said, leaning toward the pit to flick off the cigarette ash.

Just curious.

I hate wearing shoes, I never drink from glasses, I don't like sitting in chairs, or anything uncomfortable. I like these. She pinched the side of her loose-fitting blouse that draped around her waist, jangling the keys in its pocket. He could see that she wore no bra under it, and the loose blouse didn't hide the abundant flesh of her breasts either. As he was scraping the flesh along the spine of the fish, her hand that pinched the cigarette came within an inch of his eyes. The curling smoke smelled acrid. Then the butt came to his lips and he just had to part them to take a drag without raising his gaze at her.

We're going to town tomorrow, she said.

We will? He stopped his scraping and looked up at her. She inhaled the smoke, paused to take a gulp from the bowl and then drove out the smoke through her nostrils.

I'll get you some clothes, she said, puckering her lips. I speculate that there's enough fuel in the boat.

I don't know. I saw a blue can of kerosene in the hut. Half full.

That's good enough.

How far to town?

Good distance. We'll haul in some fish on the way there.

You ready for that?

I'm ready when I feel like.

She poured herself another bowl, this time taking a sip and then passing the bowl to him. He didn't touch it. I need to get back to the boat, he said.

Won't hurt none. I know you can drink.

I can.

Then what's stopping you?

At night, maybe.

We'll be up early before dawn.

Okay, he said, tapping the side of the bowl with his finger. The guy said he wouldn't be back till next week. You think you won't be out of this moonshine stuff by then?

We'll get a jug or two in town. No moonshine stuff. Tastes okay, nothing sinfully bad.

He raised the bowl and sipped. Is it a big town? he said as he put the bowl down.

It's not a city if that's what you're looking for.

Just curious. He shrugged. In case I aim to ask around.

What'd you want to ask?

Whereabouts of somebody.

Somebody who? Relatives?

Somebody I need to chase down.

A girl?

No. Somebody I must chase down.

§

BEFORE HE WAS AWAKE he saw himself lying on the dew-wet straw somewhere in the translucent dawn, and there was a black snake slithering through the leg of his pants and up to his crotch. It crawled across his groin, stopped and twisted itself around his penis. He felt it squeezed, relaxed then squeezed

again till he became achingly hard and yet he felt no pain. Then he woke.

Dark, save for the pale white of her blouse, she was sitting beside him inside the mosquito net. He felt her hand on his penis. His groin felt cool. His boxer shorts were down around his thighs. He held still. In his nostrils was a faint odor of wood smoke, a redolent trail of rice liquor. He felt her hand caressing his manhood like a holy object, the flesh of her palm warm, fingertips touching the tip of his sex, circling and then trailing down along its length, then the caresses becoming firm, the fingers twining round the pulsating shaft. Her hair draped across his chest, hiding her face. In the dark, the only raspy breathing wasn't his but hers coming behind that blackest mass of hair like the moaning of a spirit. *Let her have her way. Let her.* He had no thoughts. He wanted to think of nothing but hold still, not scared just hollow and estranged. He could feel her hand working feverishly, opened then closed, her wheezing coaxing her hand, small hisses between her teeth, the ripe sweet smell of rice liquor coming back again like it was part of her flesh. Then she stopped.

In the dark he saw her rise halfway up from the floor, working herself out of her baggy pantaloons, and as his insides churned wildly he stifled his breath the moment she climbed over him, heavy and large, her hair falling thick onto his chest hiding her face save a pale white of her throat as she tossed back her head trying to work her way down into him. Then a hand took hold of his hardness just momentarily like it was the only thing that throbbed in their nocturnal existence, like it was a churning passion that wedged its way into a crevice of delirium.