

The Woman in the Water · Katharine Haake

PENELOPE IS THINKING: *The night I am remembering marks the exact moment in my life when longing split off from desire. What is the difference between longing and desire?* she thinks, and then she decides that longing is unconnected with anything familiar or concrete, free-floating, she thinks, and smiles, but not, it would seem, with any pleasure.

In her head, though twenty years have passed, more than half her life, it is as clear as it was back then: the black expanse of sky, brightly studded with stars, the blacker lake spreading out beyond them, lapping, lapping softly at the dusty shore, the dark thrust of pines behind them, and high above—the trestle, blackest of all, crossing the arm of the lake, stern and absolute against the unspeakable tenderness of that warm late summer night.

Penelope is wandering as she often does in early evening through the neighborhoods that spread out around the tiny alley where she lives in half a tiny house, a duplex she has shared for the past several weeks with a pock-marked Indian boy, a prospective missionary who smells of marijuana, and before that, before the Navajo, an old woman who gardened, raised irises and roses, and who kept Penelope's tables, when the flowers were in bloom, richly adorned with her labor. Nearby in the neighborhoods the large frame houses seem midwestern to Penelope, who has never been to the midwest and imagines it as wholesome and empty, endless acres of corn where red-cheeked children lose themselves and grow, somehow, into patriotic adulthood. Penelope herself prefers the desert these days, mean land where life itself seems rare and therefore elegant.

That night on the lake, the eve of Penelope's sixteenth birthday, it was beautiful, she was surrounded by friends who adored her, she was about to discover her sex, even that dry air, still rank with the dust raised by her boyfriend's parents' car, smelled of mystery and promise.

Penelope cuts across an empty lot that she knows in several weeks will be overgrown with someone else's irises, for they are on the edge of yet another spring, a season akin to desire she thinks, for you can name it, you know how it will be: sweet nights and all those flowers, the profusion of growing things, warmth. This was something that amazed her when she first came to Salt Lake City, all the flowers, and she marvels once again at how the people of this place, long ago in their history, turned the desert to

a garden and still maintain it. Though Penelope was not looking for gardens back then, she has lived among them for three years, down her tiny alley where even the tiniest yards boast a rosebush, tulips, camellias. This time of year, when spring will come, finally, to the Rockies and turn the sky high and violet in the evening, the air sweet, exotic, Penelope, dislocated as always and without even houseplants of her own, plunges back into that awful sense of longing that has plagued her ever since that night on the lake when nothing turned out as she expected and she lost what, as a child, had always seemed her sure sense of direction.

Now she thinks: *In a few years I'll be forty. When do I reconnect?* She squats to examine a small, early yellow-centered flower. Her thighs pull. That boyfriend had thick lips and an exalted sense of what he called her innocence. The word he used was *love*: he would prove his love for her. Now, after so many years, Penelope wants to touch herself, to determine something, what feeling remains, but an old man nearby is turning his soil and Penelope, instead, lifts up her head, smiles, and waves.

The Indian's name is Morris. He is a thin young man, knobby as a boy, badly complected, a loner. Outside the tight circle of his adoptive family he was, as a youth, often perceived to be insolent, even, at times, a menace. During the worst years his cheeks erupted in large red pustules and his voice was unreliable. To compensate, he prayed fervently many times a day and dreamed of the planet that would someday be his.

Years later, to Penelope, he will say, "I knew how it would be, with no one like me in it at all. Fair-skinned, blonde, with the clearest blue eyes, we would live on the edge of a beautiful lake. If the people were bad, I would freeze the lake and the fish would die, the people would starve." When he says it to Penelope, who says, "Oh Moe, all those poor people," it seems harsh even to himself, but as a child the judgment seemed sound, just, the balance of all things benignly restored.

But in truth, though Morris hardly knew it, since his mother signed the papers with the Mormon all things had been strangely out of balance. Morris does not really remember his mother, but he remembers the metal legs of the folding chair on which the Mormon sat while he completed the transaction. They gleamed in the sun, their little rubber casters buried in dust. The Mormon wore gray slacks and a starched white shirt, and spoke in a gravelly voice. All around Morris the old ones clustered, their own

voices high and hysterical, arguing the pros and cons, pulling at Morris' ears, his tattered woolen leggings, smoothing his red shirt and hair. One woman's hands came at his face over and over, rubbing, petting, tracing the arch of his brow, his chin, as if to memorize them through the independent will of her own body. Morris remembers those hands, the rough fingers, the dirty nails, and the smell that came from them, earthy and insistent, and he remembers batting them away as he turned toward the Mormon, smiling broadly. Behind him there rose a tremendous wail. The Mormon kept repeating words Morris would soon come to recognize: electricity, education, t.v. Then two great arms clasped around his head, pulling him back and burying his face among warm mounds of breasts that tasted, when he licked them, of salt. Morris was four years old and cannot now remember if the salt came from tears or his mother's sweat. What he does remember is the huge white hand of the Mormon clamping down on his shoulder, and then the woman whispered something in his ear, and they were gone.

Years later, when Morris would accompany his adoptive parents back onto the reservation, it would seem to him prosaic and backwards, and he would often have to be coaxed from the car to perform his complex algebraic equations for the old ones while behind the soiled skirts of the women, children hid. Morris made the numbers and the signs come out even. The old ones nodded, clucking. What Morris was forbidden to say was that if they kept their mouths shut, the kids could be like him, able now to read the true word of God and, when he got to heaven, to turn white.

Still, he was convincing, and often they would return with young Navajo children destined for faraway places — Idaho or San Bernardino, California. Sometimes, later, as they waited to board the bus in their new gray slacks and starched white shirts, their cropped hair damp and shiny, their dark eyes frightened, there would be about them something that would strike Morris as odd and unnerving, like his dream in which a great red canyon split the earth before him, revealing tiny people far below whose voices rose toward him on the wind. More often he would send them off with a quick smile and wave, confident that in thus performing God's will he was earning himself a sure place in the top ranks of heaven. Then his skin went bad and he turned within himself, silent and morose, for the first time experiencing doubt.

Marijuana restored Morris' faith. With it he could clearly hear the voices at the bottom of the canyon. What they said was, "If you're bad, your skin will burn." As Morris' skin continued to burn he resolved again but even more firmly to discover the true will of God and follow it. In his heart, he was praying for visions.

After Penelope finished college she had an undistinguished BA in social anthropology and a dread of what must surely lie ahead. She also had a free-floating feeling of restlessness, a sense that if no clear purpose existed in her life it was because since she turned sixteen she had never yet examined what had happened but had accepted it as fate, as pure and as inevitable as her new conviction that as soon as she could find a proper mate she would settle down and bear him sons, turning them, as time went by, into everything she could never be. So Penelope trashed her diploma and, loosely calculating odds, moved to San Diego, where she took a job at a bookstore by the sea. At the store, the customers would ask her advice on the latest fiction, on books about pregnancy and building your own home, on the new Watergate books. All day Penelope would stare out the windows at the sea, quietly dispensing advice. Occasionally, the customers would come back, pleased with what she'd recommended and wanting to know what came next.

In this way Penelope met the men she placed her hopes on for a number of years, most of them on the thin side, with uneven voices and a preference for clear liquors, vodka and gin on the rocks. In this way, too, gradually, as year after unsuccessful year passed and the men kept getting drunker, Penelope grew tired of the San Diego night scene with its overpriced fish restaurants and started approaching the aspiring young male authors who read at the bookstore and who were always very happy to sign her copies of their books, using words like *fondly* and *with deep appreciation*, the true depth of which Penelope longed to discover. Thus, in time, she married and was whisked north to a small California beach town where the people dressed like loggers and the damp chill of fog was never quite gone from the air. On weekends they went clamming, boiled huge pots of clams and fed all their friends, who brought ale and toddlers to the bakes. Penelope loved to watch the youngsters experiment with language as, inevitably, the adults got drunker and drunker. Later, drunk herself and divinely convinced she had somehow got her purpose back, she would

tumble into bed with her husband and offer up a little prayer for grace.

What I'm trying to establish is a pattern in Penelope's past, an odd kind of formlessness, a desire to discover some, any effective way to be. I'm trying to make you see how possible it is that had she got her first job in some realty office she'd have married a broker instead and be living high off the hog. But people like Penelope didn't sell land deeds in those days, and I suppose that in her heart she was still trying to recover her high sweet sense of expectation, the conviction that with some luck and the right set of circumstances, everything, everything would be flooded with light. But God never listened to her in that life either, and Penelope and her husband remained childless.

And so there is another memory Penelope often worries as she wanders through Salt Lake: They are standing on the beach, she and her ex-husband. Seagulls circle above them, and he is yelling, but in her memory all is silent and Penelope, distracted by the steady rolling in of a thick fog-bank, finds it impossible to concentrate on what he must be saying. All she really remembers very clearly is the slice of his hands against the fog, and her alarming sense that if they are not careful, they will disappear, disperse in that fog, and be lost forever from each other. And there's one other thing, what she wants to tell him, that after so many years of fertility workups, intrusive surgeries, hormonal and chemical treatments, and finally unnatural practices, he must believe they have tried everything but there's one thing they haven't tried, and she turns briefly toward the sea to gather the courage to say so, to say *now place your faith in God*, but when she turns back he is already gone.

For weeks after the original other tenant of Penelope's Salt Lake duplex, the elderly woman with a penchant for exotic irises, died quietly in her sleep, the apartment lay silent and empty. Then one day the landlord came and packaged everything up in enormous U-Haul boxes.

"Aren't you going to label them?" Penelope asked as she watched him work. "You should label them."

The landlord grunted and offered her a table full of dishes, some ice trays, and unopened discounted sponges. Penelope took the sponges, strangely comforted by their colors, their pale green, their creamy light orange. She thought about what the old woman once told her about flowers.

“You have to specialize,” she’d said. “Otherwise the possibilities proliferate. Remember what I say, Penelope. Over the long course of a single life it’s very easy to get lost, and then where are you?”

She said this months before she died, but Penelope, as instructed, remembered. Now she squeezed the sponges, longing to open them, wanting the landlord to stop. He reminded her a bit of her ex-husband, stubborn, taciturn, broad at the hips, only blonde and blue-eyed, diffuse, not intense. Still, in another set of circumstances she might have lain with him, opening her legs in a final attempt to convince herself the old woman was wrong: it was not necessary to choose or even to know.

Penelope sat in the doorway and watched the landlord fold thin, yellowed bedding. Almost, she wanted to tell him what she never told her neighbor, that she was just the opposite and had come to conceive of the life she had lived as having been constituted by a variety of separate and distinct existences. In each of them, at the end, the man turned deliberately from her and walked away in a straight line: across a trestle, into fog, down (the one, she now believes, who gave her gonorrhea and scarred her tubes for life) a shimmering highway, his long thumb cocked to the oncoming cars. In this way, the object of her desire, having removed itself from her, condemned her again to the formless longing that consumed her. So she wandered, aimless, in circles, retracing the same steps over and over, then thrusting out in new directions that turned sharply in on themselves, for Penelope could never bear the finality of the straight line, the line that took all things away.

By the time Penelope was thirty-six Salt Lake seemed a logical next step, not simply because having passed through once at dawn she believed she would find it inspiring to live beneath the stern hood of the Rockies, but also because her ex-husband had sent her a postcard from there of the elegant Angel Moroni lifting his gold trumpet upward toward heaven. Perhaps, Penelope reasoned, God had forsaken California. Perhaps all she had lost could yet be recovered in the desert.

But of course you know from how I started that the Mormons turned the desert to a garden and also what you might suspect, that without a husband and a passle of children at her age Penelope would remain a pariah. But at her age, too, Penelope had used up her capacity for wandering, and so she stayed, confining her still restless circles to the streets around her home, relentlessly returning to the tiny duplex and the impenetrable advice of the old woman.

All this Penelope wanted to tell someone, but because she knew the landlord would not really understand, what she said was, “I want her seed catalogues too.”

The landlord looked up from the old woman’s books and said, “She left those to the Church, for Temple Square.”

Penelope said, “I think you ought to know she had promised to teach me about irises.”

Hours later, when he was finally done, the landlord came next door and told her, “Morris. My wife’s second cousin’s son. You look after him, you hear? He’s still wet behind the ears.”

And so I have brought us full circle to where we began, that Rocky Mountain evening on the near edge of spring several weeks after Morris’ arrival when Penelope, squatting to examine an early yellow-centered flower, looks up and waves to the old man turning his soil.

“Yank it up,” he calls. “That weed will spread.”

Penelope shrugs. Overhead, at the peaks of the mountains, clouds are beginning to darken.

“Cool, don’t you think, for the time of year?” he adds.

Cool, Penelope thinks as she smiles blandly and rises to go, turning the word over in her head. It feels odd, misshapen, with something wrong about it, like an intimation of things out of balance or something disturbed at the center. In spring the weather turns warm. The desert is warm; bed is warm. The word *warm* satisfies her. *Perhaps*, Penelope thinks, *between longing and desire it is simply a matter of difference in degree and kind of warmth*. She finds it strangely comforting that though she was never warm enough to cultivate a zygote, gonococcus thrived in her, invisible, persistent. It was always cold on the coast, except in San Diego, which was warm, like the desert. *San Diego is the desert*, Penelope thinks. Penelope thinks that perhaps desire always proceeds into longing. Penelope thinks that it’s really not cool, that they have arrived at the season of rain, a season without temperature at all.

But she’s wrong, for the clouds that gather on the peaks of the Rockies that night will bring snow before morning, heavy and wet in the city, glistening white on the mountains from a distance. Even now the air takes on a deeper chill as Penelope turns deliberately toward home, pulling on the blue hood of her sweatshirt. What she has long since ceased to think about

is the original attraction of the desert — the absence of water, the possibility of being burned clean — for having arrived in a world of gardens she has had no choice but to adjust her expectations, to embrace the wide range of the unnatural.

So this is how Morris and Penelope meet, on the night edge of an unseasonal storm, when Penelope, having made her slow way back, turns the corner to her alley and finds Morris, forlorn and a little bit stoned, sitting on the front porch in his pressed gray slacks, staring out beyond at something private.

“I’m waiting for my call,” he announces, and Penelope looks down at him curiously. “In the meantime,” he confesses, “I have locked myself out.”

For three weeks she has been listening to him move about in his side of the duplex, and there has seemed something furtive, something stealthy about him. Now she is surprised to find his deeply scarred face both moony and intense. It is as if he harbors some powerful secret, though Penelope does not yet suspect it.

“Have you called the landlord?” she says.

Morris shrugs. “He’s at temple.”

Penelope nods, a bit distracted. She is having trouble with her own key and doesn’t think ahead to the moment when her door will open, the blast of heated air will engulf her. Then Morris is standing beside her, his hand on hers on the key.

Later, she will say he just barged into my life, he’s so thin, he was shivering, he wanted Coke but all I had was tea. She will say, one of his shoulders is stooped and he limps. She will say he’s only nineteen, all alone in the city, he was lonely.

What she will not say is how Morris stretches his legs down the length of her couch, and then puts one finger to his lips. She will not say what he says when she has stood there watching him for some time, concerned about the caffeine in her tea.

What he says is, “Sometimes I can almost feel it shimmering all around me since I came here.”

“Feel what?” Penelope says.

“The presence of God,” Morris says in dead earnest. “It gleams from the trumpet of the Angel Moroni.”

At first Penelope wants to laugh, but Morris eyes her steadily, his rav-

aged face a confusion of strong, harsh planes, and suddenly she is saying instead, “Sometimes I know what you mean, I think — a kind of humming?”

And then you wonder, because finally you can’t not, what is it about Penelope—her single-mindedness? her vulnerability? her sense of loss?— that compels me to her story. You think she’s going nowhere, her life is a shambles, she keeps making the same mistakes over again. You are alarmed at how easily she lies to Morris, claiming his conviction as her own. And you want story, again you can’t not. It is almost a craving with you. You want that things should proceed, logically and with a clear purpose to their order, toward some transcendent point of resolution. You are unwilling to believe it is enough that, having said that she hears humming, indeed, very faintly, Penelope begins to hear humming.

And so I will give you your story, which begins on the eve of Penelope’s sixteenth birthday, hard into the night I began with her remembering (though not quite, even then, exactly as it happened), on the edge of that pine and dust-fringed lake where Penelope finds herself surrounded by a party of friends who adore her, and her boyfriend of that summer, the one with thick lips and an exaggerated sense of the romantic. For an hour they’ve been driving through the hills, Penelope blindfolded and all of them buzzed from the beer her boyfriend got from his brother for the special occasion of Penelope’s passing into womanhood. They have come to this lake, below the black trestle. In just a minute now there will be another round of toasts, some childhood reminiscences, and then the friends will toss two sleeping bags from the back of the car and leave Penelope and her boyfriend there until morning.

Because of the blindfold, Penelope feels dizzy, dislocated, and euphoric. Her boyfriend grins, his thick lips stretched across his broad face. And then they are alone amid the dust of that late August night and neither of them knows what to do.

And so are you following your story: two adolescents alone in the woods with nothing between them and what they conceive of adulthood but their own inexperience and desire. If so, you will not be surprised that when the last sound of the car dies away and only the sough of the wind remains, what Penelope wants more than anything is to strip herself naked and plunge into the water, following the pale strip of the moonlight toward its center. She arches her back, imagining it. She is not prepared for

the moist assault of lips, which when they cover hers take all her breath away and keep on sucking.

What Penelope often thinks about when she thinks about this night is what if she hadn't turned away, what if the shudder that convulsed along her spine hadn't gripped her so utterly, leaving her gasping for air like a dying fish. There wasn't anything bad about what her boyfriend did. She was unprepared, was all. She was young. She thought he had watched too many movies, and could not yet imagine herself in the opposite role. And she had no way of knowing that by her involuntary action, her instinctive resistance to being somehow swallowed up in his embrace, she would leave him no choice, or so he said, but to prove his love for her.

For years after Penelope's thick-lipped first boyfriend fell from the trestle he insisted on climbing to prove his love for her, she slept with anyone, trying to make it up to him whose death would be her curse, to discover, at the very least, the true meaning of love and so somehow reconnect with what she'd lost. Then she married and convinced herself that she would bear a son and make it up that way. By the time she began, very slowly, to turn her faith toward God her life was such a mess that even the desert, where she had believed she might finally be burned clean, turned out to be a lush garden, tidy and mysterious with its own secrets.

Not that night does Penelope take Morris to her bed that has been empty since that other night in California when what her husband told her on the beach, if she could just remember it, was finally she had lost touch with everything. Not for several weeks, even, does she decide to take her husband literally, to begin by touching the body. As they wait out the end of an unnaturally long winter she begins with her own, her thighs, her breasts. On the other side of the duplex wall Morris continues his stealthy movements; Penelope can't help but listen for humming. And then spring begins with a vengeance.

That first day when the temperature rises from near fifty to eighty and Penelope throws open all her windows Morris is already up, weeding the iris plots in navy blue shorts and sweating through his t-shirt, though it is early. Since they have spoken about angels, they have been cordial if perhaps a bit distant, what Penelope would have to call polite. Now she wants to be spontaneous, run out in her robe and offer him coffee and a warm breakfast roll. She wants to pull him down among the weeds and see if it is different when you're in touch with God.

Morris, of course, does not drink coffee, and if Penelope were to ask him he would no doubt tell her he's been waiting not so much for a sign from her as for the cool weather to change. It will still be hours before he goes to bed with her, during which there is much to achieve. *Don't you know, don't you know*, he is humming to himself, *God helps those who help themselves*. The first thing Morris needs is more marijuana, and he knows just where to get it.

So that is how it happens that Morris takes Penelope later to the park: she brings him juice, not in her robe but a sundress; they both feel giddy from the mounting heat of the day.

At the park they spread a pale green blanket on a low knoll just above the playground. Penelope watches Morris closely, finding his actions both graceless and endearing. She is nearly twice his age, yet today she feels as young and, yes, as innocent as the children playing below. This is still before Morris disappears to make his deal. This is before, in his absence, the question of desire reasserts itself to Penelope and, catching her off guard, sends her reeling.

To steady herself she watches the children, swooping down slides, pumping high, up high on the swings. One fat boy chases a pack of shrieking girls with a rubber snake. The girls, in desperation, assault the jungle gym, and the boy plunges in among them. All around the sand area other children bounce furiously on painted iron animals anchored by thick coiled springs. It is enough, instead, to make Penelope dizzy. She lies back and watches the soft swirl of clouds in the high blue shimmering sky. Her hands on her thighs readjust themselves. She closes her eyes and listens to the merry-go-round squeal.

"Do you know what I was thinking?" she says when Morris comes back, grinning and clearly in tune with whatever he hears. There is something about him, almost beatific. Penelope, for her part, feels like talking. "I was thinking about an earlier time in my life, a time full of children. We lived on the coast and had friends who had passles of children. We had clambakes. I was married to a man who wrote books. Then all of that came to an end. Do you know what I mean?"

Morris, still grinning, shakes his head no.

"I never had any of my own, is all. You find yourself losing touch with things."

Between then and when she takes him out to dinner at the Sizzler Penel-

ope learns that God works in mysterious ways. She learns that if she herself were never blessed with children, Morris had two sets of parents.

“What you have to understand,” he says, sucking on long new blades of grass, “is my first parents were a biological necessity; my second ones brought me to the Light.

“But neither is God’s plan for us to understand,” he says. “You think the Light is something else when you first see it, and then it multiplies. Every week since I turned thirteen I have dunked for my ancestors. Jesus came to North America but might have missed them.”

Morris leaps up and runs down to bounce on a green iron skunk, saddled in brilliant yellow. “When I die,” he calls back, “and get my own planet I’ll bless all the young women, like you, with babies.”

More slowly, Penelope joins him on a purple-saddled squat pink pig. She sits sideways and rocks gently back and forth. Morris’ knees crumple up to his chest as he works his animal ecstatically.

“One for each arm,” he cries out, breathless. “New babies every year.” Then suddenly he stops and says, “I’m starved. Let’s get all you can eat.”

At the Sizzler later, while Morris eats handfuls of pale hard shrimp, Penelope ponders his notion of light. For her, it is as if these past long years since she turned hard into her sixteenth year have been mired in perpetual darkness. She had wanted something — a kind of certainty, a sense of fulfillment, when perhaps the wiser course would have been to do as Morris did, as indeed the happy diners all around them must have done, to have slipped without loss into light.

Light, Penelope forms the word in her head. The idea appeals enormously to her. Morris beckons for more shrimp. What does one do, Penelope wonders. Does one have to plunge into the water by oneself, or can Morris dunk for her as well? Penelope is wondering about this so intensely that when Morris reaches under the table for her thigh she starts.

“Don’t think too much,” he warns her hoarsely. “God comes to each of us by grace, not will. Grace,” he says again. “Penelope, grace.”

The sun shines for days, reeling the afternoons well into the nineties as Penelope sheds layers of clothes like the dried husks of unnecessary skins and Morris appears never to waver. High in the mountains above them the world slips an extra degree into the next season without pausing long enough to allow for the consequences. Thus the record snowpack gives

way to a sky unyielding in its blueness. Morris returns from Meeting, alarmed, intense, joyous.

“Rub lotion on my back,” Penelope tells him.

“If we don’t get a cloud layer soon,” Morris says, “this will be bigger than the locusts.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When I was a boy, I had a vision of a canyon that split the earth before me. There were people in the bottom. They said my skin would burn but now I see them drowning.”

Penelope sits, brushes hair back from her damp forehead, and squints up at him. She moves slowly, as if drugged by the heat. She says, “Morris, you are raving.” It is what she likes about him.

“Trial by water,” he announces. “Already it’s beginning.”

Two hours later, they are climbing the bleak path to the top of Antelope Island, from the peak of which, as they survey the barrenness, Penelope thinks that, even so, she may have underestimated Morris. Below, the Great Salt Lake spreads endlessly west, encroaching, Penelope can feel it even now, on where they stand. All around its shore, extending perhaps five feet out into the water, a wide black swath of fly larvae seethes. Higher up, swarms of brine flies swoop around Penelope and Morris. Penelope, weak now from the heat and the stench of decay, wants to sit, but the ground is crusted with salt and there are other insects busy there. Not far away, bleached white antelope bones gleam, and Penelope starts toward them, her hand raised to her eyes as if to shield them from the light.

“Two to three feet a day,” Morris says, “that’s how fast the lake’s been rising. Tomorrow,” he turns and points behind them toward the mainland from which they have come, “they close the causeway. All this is history.”

But Penelope is intent on the bones — two long smooth ones and a part of a skull — and appears not to hear him. In three years she has never come out to the lake, and yet there is something uncanny and familiar about it. She has heard that an amusement park along its shores once attracted vacationers from five western states, that people believed in the medicinal quality of the water. Now it is as if she once dreamed as a child of swimming among the ill bathers, as buoyant herself as the gaily colored inflatable swim toys all around her. She believes she can hear the echo of the ferris wheel music, the shrieks that rise up from the roller coaster plunge. Her mouth, as she reaches for the long bones, warmed by the dizzying sun,

waters for cotton candy. But what she tastes when she sucks in her breath is the salt in the air, and everything instantly realigns itself into an order both known and forlorn.

“What?” she cries turning toward Morris. “It is the same here as the ocean, only everything here is dead. Did you know that, Morris? Is that why we’ve come?”

“I’ve never been to the ocean,” he says.

“Stick your tongue out, you can taste it.”

“You’re not listening,” Morris says. “The causeway will soon be underwater. Tomorrow we sandbag the streets.”

Penelope, who under the circumstances wants, despite herself, to break down and weep, recognizes too the triumph in Morris’ stance. She is torn between pulling him down to embrace her on the rotting earth and confronting the ghosts that have risen to torment her here in this unlikely place. Even the lap of the water, like the sea at low tide, is quiet and lulling. And behind them the causeway is fast disappearing, cutting off escape if they don’t hurry. When Penelope turns back toward Morris he has raised both fists toward the sky.

“Thus you bear witness to the glory of God,” he cries out, falling to his knees, his scarred face transformed. “All my life I have been called to meet this trial. Penelope,” and now he is reaching for her, who drops her bones and tumbles toward him, “together we enter the heart of the flood.”

Is Morris crazy, then? Does he intend to keep Penelope there until they are trapped by the rising water, until, for them just to get home, they are forced to abandon Penelope’s car and wade back through fly larvae to safety? Are they in danger of drowning, or has Penelope got the terms wrong all along and what she’s really meant was never longing, and never desire, but plain and simple lust?

If you think that, what you clearly have not understood is how literal Morris is in his devotion. For Morris means what he says: all his life he has expected to be tried. That day on the lake what he understands is that Penelope has been sent to be his witness. They are two unlikely people for such a union, but each for separate reasons, as they plunge headlong into the working out of Morris’ vision, clings to the other, stubbornly convinced that whatever purpose is about to be revealed will resolve the many awkward failures of their lives. Penelope will conceive; Morris will skip

the worldly torment and transcend, young and randy, straight to his private planet in heaven.

And yet as they enter the season of floods they are neither one of them prepared for the violence of water: for the temperatures, having soared, never waver and when they start to go, those layers and layers of ice and snow, they go all at once in this heat, glutting the already swollen creeks, soaking the saturated hillsides, gathering in every slight depression of the earth and running off, running down to the lowlands, where slower but equally inexorable, the waters of the lake and all the muddy creek bottoms rise, rise up to meet them.

So Morris joins the crews of dedicated flood workers. So Penelope enters a series of dreams in which water rises, sometimes with a terrifying rush, sometimes languidly submerging everything in its path. Morris, who works round-the-clock shifts, often interrupts them, wet, muddy, exhausted and in ecstasy from extended close contact with God.

“God willing,” he whispers nightly as he wraps his spindly legs around Penelope’s, “we will turn the waters back.”

And Penelope sighs and turns a bit deeper into his sweaty embrace. There is a word, she believes, for what she feels in the arms of this young boy, but it resists her will to find and shape it, unlike the water, which in the hands of so many devout workers like Morris, curls gracefully within the walls of sandbags they have set out to circumvent it, docile and obedient in the complicated network of artificial rivers that laces the heart of the city.

Sometimes, afterwards, when Morris has fallen into his beatific sleep, Penelope lies as if stunned beside him. What she is thinking at such moments, if indeed she can be said to be thinking, is how after nearly half her life she has come to expect that the function of men is to fail her, to take the straight line, inevitably to abandon her to the wide expanse of her own empty heart. Now, beside her, this unlikely boy holds back the water. Penelope touches his forehead, his lips. Every afternoon she basks beneath the hot sun of this flood-ravaged city and, far from the water herself, contemplates the miracle of salvation.

But fate has a way of intervening in the lives of those least likely to resist it and the closer Morris draws to God, the more, unknown to him, he is pulled back to his origins. For Morris’ first mother has had for all these years her own version of the story and, like him, takes spring’s fury as a sign.

I cannot tell you how she gets there. Maybe she hitchhikes; maybe she takes the long bus ride. Nor can I tell you how she knows where to find him. Mothers have their ways is all. They have their incomparable instincts. What I can say is she comes at night. And I can say that when Penelope finds her in the morning, crouched upon the porch and chanting in a low voice, her red wool dress wrapped tight around her thighs, the moment of recognition is both immediate and absolute.

This you will have to imagine: the gray-haired Indian woman praying on the porch; Penelope kneeling beside her. And what, is she weeping? I believe that she would weep at such a time, for they are in collusion, these two women, mother and lover, who however at odds they may ultimately be are first bound together at the heart. Thus it is a wordless understanding that passes between them on this warm May morning. It precedes betrayal. It does not acknowledge that Morris lies now in Penelope's bed, nor that the woman wants nothing less than to take him away—home, she would say, if they spoke the same language.

Or put it differently, what I mean is you choose your own story. Sixteen years ago this woman watched her son drive away in the gray car of a stranger. Those same sixteen years ago Penelope watched her boyfriend plunge from the black arm of the trestle. Now that their two lives have converged, they have options. Penelope can ask her in for breakfast, squeeze oranges, fry eggs, toast toast. The woman can offer Penelope her shawl. They can work their hands furiously, trying to communicate. They can embrace. And indeed as they do embrace neither one of them imagines that Morris will have his own opinions; that having worked for days against something so tangible and threatening as a late spring flood, he is not prepared to be tested like this; that he is tired; and that never will he be stoned enough to accept the sight of these two women, nearly the same age, entwined at dawn in the other's arms, each with her own claims to lay.

But Penelope is tired too, worn out from the unexpected passion of these last few weeks and the unsettling demands of Morris' visionary nature, and there is something so absolutely comforting, so benign and reassuring about rendering herself up to this other dark woman that she does not once consider how tenuous the moment is, and how irrevocable. For Morris is waking even now and wondering where she is, his lover and his witness, and he is about to go looking for her, barefooted, shirtless, his sweat-

clotted hair falling over his face. And Morris' mother is now taking stock of the configuration of the two apartments, the shared porch, the adjoining doors, the whiteness of this girl who clings to her so fiercely and weeps.

Any way you look at it you could not prevent Morris' emerging from Penelope's door, the two women standing, and what Penelope will never now be able to forget: the look that passes between mother and son, the one who must have in that moment felt her life returned to her, and the other whose God retreats forever from his reach in her presence. Thus you could not stop him either from opening his mouth and uttering the one, harsh, guttural sound Penelope will never know the meaning of, for when he has spoken Morris slams her door and disappears behind his on his side of the duplex. In the devastated silence that follows Morris' mother turns her despair and fury on Penelope and uttering a sound very like the one her son made, raises her hand and slaps Penelope hard across one cheek, then the other.

If you were to ask her, Penelope would tell you that she has no choice, then, but to follow this Navajo woman through the cool deserted dawn streets of this flood-ravaged desert city. It is not that she knows what she intends, only that having touched, this other woman and herself, they have formed an unholy alliance, and that Penelope suspects if she can find a way to speak, to articulate the words, however harsh and guttural, she will make it right again: the woman will come back, God will not forsake her lover, the waters will begin to recede.

But though the woman moves slowly enough, Penelope can't bring herself either to rush ahead and catch her. Rather, she follows at a distance, waiting for the appropriate moment, the knowledge she feels certain will come, for all she knows for certain at this moment is that she does not know, nor has she ever known the least or simplest thing about longing. As for the Navajo woman, she maintains her even pace, proceeding steadily forward along sidewalks lined with irises, and does not look from right to left, nor to the back, but concentrates on something far ahead, something, if Penelope could only once imagine it, beyond betrayal, beyond even loss.

In this way they arrive, eventually, at the downtown business district where the monument of Morris' handiwork, two chest-high banks of sandbags, routes the inexorable floodwaters between bank buildings, department stores, and hotels. Penelope, who until now has avoided the

scene of the disaster, is both stunned and a little perplexed by the ingenuity of a street thus transformed to a river, but the Navajo woman, having come that way earlier, takes the whole thing as just one more part of the urban landscape and, hitching her skirts, clambers over the bank and lets herself down into the water that eddies up around her thighs as three early morning kayakers whiz by in their straight swift lines. In that instant Penelope knows as surely as she once knew that her thick-lipped boyfriend would fall or that her husband would desert her, disappearing into fog, that once the woman reaches the other side and hoists herself over the opposite bank all will be as before, silent and undisturbed. And the river will continue to make its forty-five degree turn in front of the Temple, routing the excess water safely off to the lake, which Penelope also knows will keep on rising.

Between those two relentlessly encroaching shores, the word Morris, and then his mother, uttered echoes bleakly. For Penelope also suspects it is a choice between learning that word and following this new straight-edged river. And then, from somewhere deep in herself, another word forms, surprising her with its force and simplicity. "No," Penelope calls out, and again, "no." The Navajo woman stops. Penelope places one hand on the top of the sandbags. They are rough and cool and, she knows, heavy, but not, she thinks, immovable, for Morris himself has placed them there. Thus there is something high and light in Penelope's heart as she reaches for the top of the unnatural bank and, pulling with all her strength against it, calls out one more time to the woman in the water.