

## **Down the Other Side**

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

It'll be alright

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

It'll be alright

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

No, it'll be alright

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

It'll be alright

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## **Thicker Than Water**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**Pearl Street**

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

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

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

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## **Skinny Arms**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I drink with strangers  
Faceless in the dark  
Drinking to remember

Those long skinny arms  
Babe, I still remember

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## Grace

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Jack

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Betsi Went to Jersey**

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

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

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

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

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

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## **I Think About Richard**

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

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

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

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

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## **Tulsa**

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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