

Magical Thinking

Rowena Black Crow and her grand-daughter, Willow Horn, sat on the front porch of Rowena's log cabin, drinking Wild Irish Rosé. The two women drank steadily: Rowena, because that was what she always did - it mitigated the isolation in which she, as a Conjure Woman, had had to live her eighty odd years; Willow, because she hoped she might blunt the sharp edge of the pain that drove down into her breast like a dagger. It hurt so, it was a wonder to her that it didn't exist in actual fact, that she could not see it or run her finger down the edge of its fine steel blade.

Willow had left Toronto the day before. She had been a long time away, but, like a bird, she found she had a homing instinct. It was burned into her brain, part of her circuitry. When instinct kicked in, she acted, almost without knowing why. (Of course she did know.) She packed a bag, took a taxi to the Lester B. Pearson Airport, stood in line, bought a ticket, boarded a plane. Inside the great, humming bird, nested, bird within a bird like Babushka dolls, the choreographer, who had just begun to make a name for herself with the Toronto Jazz Theatre, was buffeted by head winds of her own making. Like a bird with a broken wing she flew wild, listed. Of course it wasn't her wing that was broken, but her heart.

"It's not like it's the first time it's happened," she observed miserably. Love had dappled the former dancer's life. "It's just

that it's taken so long to mend." Something was different this time. Wrong. The girl had grown into a woman. The woman had aged. Organs of longing, like bones, grow brittle with age. "My heart is a puzzle in pieces," she tried to explain. "Some of the pieces are missing."

Willow flew home so that her grandmother would stick her back together again, mend her like the old woman mended everything broken that crossed her threshold: old teapots, old saucers. That was the reason she gave herself. It was not, of course, the real reason. She had flown home because her mother's mother had to her credit a score of cures, disasters averted, loves restored, unborn children who, thanks to her, withered in a womb which then sloughed them off, and curses so effective they ruined lives and families. Willow flew home because she was in sore need of a curse, but this was too painful, too hateful, for her to acknowledge to herself. So she had simply gotten off the plane at Asheville, rented a car, and driven the fifty miles to the Qualla Boundary, almost without thinking.

"Come all ye fair and tender maidens/take warning how you court young men," Rowena sang in an age-cragged voice that rattled in her throat like the rattler of a snake.

"I'm scarcely what you'd call a 'maiden'," Willow interjected drunkenly from her place at Rowena's gnarled, root-like feet. "Thirty seven years old. . . . Goddamit! How'd that happen?"

"They're like the stars of a summer's morning," Rowena warbled darkly - the allusion was to men. "First they appear, and then they're gone."

The porch offered one vista, a view down the long valley towards that tree-softened cleft in the Smokies called Fancy Gap. The women peered at it through an increasingly alcoholic haze. It was late afternoon, and the quality of the light that dazzled through the pines was peculiarly intense, as things are on the point of fading - stars, for example, or a woman's beauty.

The mountain was quiet up here towards Spiny Bole. Rowena's eruption into raucous song had pierced the silence like a pin. Her nearest neighbor lived about two miles down the fire road towards Birdtown - general feeling has it that a Conjure Woman needs a lot of personal space. So most days it was only the chickens pecking in a desultory way at feed in the dirt yard, only the old bag-of-bones dog, half-eaten by mange and scratching at fleas in the shade of a wind-stunted loblolly, that kept the old woman company. But now Willow, maimed and needy and very drunk. . . .

"They'll tell to you some loving story/ they'll tell to you some far-flung lie . . ." Rowena screeched, snapping the stem of a milkweed in two and squeezing its whitish liquor into a little, scooped-out bowl. Small and wizened, red as a lobster, bald in patches, she managed to chew tobacco with her surviving teeth and sing at the same time. "And then they'll go and court

another/ and for that other one pass you by!' That what happen, Goose Girl?" the old woman stopped singing to inquire. When Willow had been a child, that was what Rowena had called her: Goose Girl. She spat a long stream of brown tobacco juice into the scrub to one side of the porch.

"Well, she was his wife," Willow admitted. Her gaze met Rowena's for only an instant before she felt herself forced to glance down and to one side. It was not her grandmother's disapproval which she could not confront - Conjure Women have small use for social contracts - but her eyes. Twin funnels of Rowena's tornado-heart, they would have sucked hers in but for the milky bluish cast in her left eye which enabled the Conjure Woman to dry up cow's milk, mother's milk, and vaginal secretions; which was like a hand closing a door against a forbidden sight: a murder, an abortion, an unholy coupling, the dark things a Conjure Woman sees in her heart, hidden deep in a swirling mayhem of cones and rods.

"Loving a married man is like pumping air into a tire with a big puncture in it," Rowena pointed out. "So, this man of yours. . . . He just e't you up and shit you out?"

Willow winced. "This man of *hers*," she corrected the old woman.

The coarseness of her grandmother's language, the brutality of her assessment made Willow squirm. It had been her father, Braddock Horn, a white man, who had raised her, down there in

the Piedmont, beyond the Yancy River. She had come here to the mountains only in the summers. Still, despite the years that separated them, the wedge of acculturation that drove them apart, she recognized Rowena as something she had sprung from, a source of the power that drove her forward into her life; time and distance had spun the thread of blood that bound them thin as the strand of a spider's web, but it was tensile and strong. It held.

"He didn't know what he wanted," she defended her lover, as if the forgiveness she bestowed on him here, without his knowledge, were a hook by which she might still catch him, as if generosity were a line by which she might reel him in. She still hoped. "He couldn't make up his mind. I can't fault him for that."

"Something wrong with you then," Rowena pronounced tartly. Age had stripped the tenderness from her heart like it had stripped the flesh from her bones. She spat again: a long trajectory of brown fluid into the tangle of rhododendron. "'I wish I was some little sparrow/ that I had wings could fly so high./ I'd fly away to my false true lover/ and when he's talking I'd be by,'" the Conjure Woman sang. Then she sighed, shrugged. "Men," she observed. She shook her head. "Don't change much, century to century." She shivered, like a ghost had just come, sat on her lap. Rowena trafficked with spirits - it was not impossible that this happen. "Let's go inside, Goose-Girl-that-flies-South," she said softly, tapping Willow on the shoulder with a witch's finger. "I'm of-a-sudden cold at the bone."

They had drunk the darkness in: attenuated shadows stretched across the raw pine of the plank floor, dusky fingers of encroaching night. The two women sat at the table, leaned elbows on rough-hewn wood that sprouted in places, green, tender shoots like a sapling, like a living thing, grown up through the floor. A kerosene lamp in the center of the table spilled yellow light onto the wood. Beside it stood a battered copper bowl of withered apples. They drank burdock tea out of cracked cups the color of a frog's skin; the hard glaze on the cups had a dull, thick glimmer to it. On top of the wood stove Rowena boiled up a mess of herbs. Steam that smelled like compost filled the cabin.

"What's in that brew?" Willow asked. The steam made her woozey, brought her to the threshold of a memory. . . . But of what? she asked herself. The memory seemed imminent to her, like something loose in a maze in which she herself wandered - sooner or later she must collide with it.

"Grass clippings," said Rowena slyly. She lied, of course, but with no expectation that Willow would believe her: a Conjure Woman does not lend recipes. "What Jackson Walkingstick dumps out of the bagger on his lawn mower," she added, by way of embellishment. Willow knew that her grandmother was far from casual in her concoctions. She had watched her harvest the forest for herbs. Under her direction, she had gathered mushrooms and pried bracket fungus free from the trunk of trees: "This one!" "No, not that one!" She had watched her wind cobweb onto a stick like flax onto a spindle. Upon such occasions the Conjure

Woman had the concentrated and ferocious air of a seasoned shopper who knows the relative value of each item in a store she has long patronized.

"I remember. . . ," Willow began. "I seem to remember. . . ."

"Yes?" Rowena asked.

Willow pressed her fingers to her forehead in an effort to squeeze out the memory.

"Remember what?" the old woman encouraged her.

Long ago. . . . This very room. Willow looked around. These walls, papered with yellowing back issues of the Cherokee One Feather. Steam had filled the room like a fog. As now. "There was a woman. . . ," she said. She spoke slowly, her words keeping pace with her recollection: an unfolding, an unrolling, as of a carpet. She remembered that the woman had been weeping, distraught. A tall woman, supple-bodied and strong, with long, dark hair and green eyes. Not Cherokee, but not white either - there was a burnish to her skin and a way her bones had of running at slants that was Indian. As for Willow, she had sat in the corner, over by the stove, by the pile of kindling. She had hidden, lungs laboring as she struggled to breathe the steam-thickened air. "I was young," she remembered. "I was a child." She had a sensation of something warm that turned cold upon her cheek. She brushed it with two fingers. "Tears?" she asked.

Her grandmother nodded.

"Who was the woman?" Willow asked.

The Conjure Woman gave her a look - calculating. "There have been so many," was all she would say.

"But I remember only one," Willow insisted. "You must remember, Grandmother. A man had left her, gone off. She was sick with grief. Crazy with it."

Rowena shrugged. "Me. My mother. Your mother. You. Different women," she said. "Same story."

"I remember how she wept," Willow continued. "She wept and wept. She could not stop. No woman has ever wept so many tears! In the end, she grew tired of weeping. In the end . . . she wanted revenge." Her voice registered surprise. Her green eyes widened. It was as though she had discovered something the existence of which had been unknown to her. "Revenge," she repeated.

"All women want revenge." Her grandmother spoke softly.

Willow shook her head. "Not me," she protested.

Rowena did not reply.

"And you. . . . I can't remember what you called it," Willow said. Winding her fingers in her long, loose hair, she inclined her head to one side and pulled her hair so taut that it tugged at her scalp. "You took her on. . . ."

"A Black Crow Fly," the old woman supplied.

"Yes," cried Willow. Then, more softly, releasing her hair, a finger to her lips. "Yes! Of course!" she murmured. Picking up the cracked cup, she stared at the dregs of her tea.

Rowena stood and crossed to one side of Willow's chair.

"Grandmother!" Willow spoke with difficulty. She could barely move her lips to form the words. "That was not . . . tea," she whispered.

The floor began to list a little to one side, as if it were the deck of a ship at sea. The Conjure Woman did not reply. Bending over, she pried the cracked cup from Willow's grasp, set it on the table. Slowly the floor righted itself.

"Who was that woman?" Willow gasped as the cabin began to tilt in the opposite direction. Twisting in her chair, she threw her arms around her grandmother's waist and clung to her, her face buried in her stomach. "Who was she?" she cried.

The Conjure Woman did not answer but only stroked her hair.

Now there were three people in the room: Rowena, and the woman Rowena had been and Willow had become, and the child that Rowena and Willow had both been. Rowena sat rocking in the old hickory rocker, her hands gripping the arms of the chair, her bare, gnarled feet dangling a couple of inches above the floor. Willow lay on her back on the old army cot that served the Conjure Woman as bed, draped in a Road to Dover quilt, her eyes closed. She seemed to sleep. As for the child. . . . She crouched yonder, over in the corner, beside the wood stove, beside the pile of kindling. She watched the woman in the bed and kept very still.

"We going on a Black Crow Fly," Rowena intoned.

There is a way of speaking Cherokee adopt in matters of law or religion - a kind of truculent metaphorization called "Talking Like An Indian." Rowena fell into that now.

"I be the crow," she chanted. "Willow be the soul of the crow that tells the crow where to go." The Conjure Woman closed her eyes. Her eyelids were paper-thin, membranous, like the eyelids of a bird. The child could see the quick back-and-forth movements of her eyes through their pale transparency. "I be that old crow now," the old woman cried. She flung arms crooked at the elbow up in the air. Her voice was hushed, distant. It seemed to come

from far away, from high up. "I be flying now. I be looking.
Where be this man of yours, Goose Girl?"

The woman on the bed stirred, opened her eyes. She stared at the ceiling like a person who does not know where they are. She spoke like a person coming out of a dream, mechanically, responding before she had half registered the question. Her voice was flat, her face without expression. "Toronto," she said, blinking at the ceiling. "Crawford Street." She frowned, remembering. She had never gone in the house. Of course not. It was her house - the other's. But she had driven past it many times. She had haunted it like a ghost. "It's a duplex," she said. "Blue . . . door."

"Up! Up! Up!" cried Rowena. "Around and around! There! There it is! I see it. I fly down and land on a branch outside the window and look in." Then, "Oh!"

Willow rolled onto her side. "What is it?" she asked. "What do you see?"

"Him! Him!" cawed the old woman.

"Where?" Willow demanded, for Rowena had not opened her eyes.

"There!" she cried. "Oh, here! On the underside of my eyelids! Close your eyes, and you will see him, too!" The old woman

rocked back and forth in her seat. "Oh! Oh!" she moaned. "A little speck in the distance! Goose Girl! He is small! So small! So small that I can barely see him! Is it true that you have thrown your heart away on such a tiny little man?"

Willow closed her eyes. She could see him too. He was always with her, since first she laid eyes on him - love had burned his image onto the backs of her eyelids, branded her. Would she never be free of him? She was tired of loving, done with it. (But she would never be done with it.) The fingers of her hands curled into fists. (The child also closed her eyes but saw nothing. All this lay before her.) "To me," she told her grandmother, "he is enormous."

"No, he is small. Believe me, child, for I know. Small and like a bug, and you feel for him the purest hatred," Rowena told Willow. "He didn't love you. That's a crime, the sin a proud and beautiful woman cannot forgive."

"I have no pride. . . ," Willow objected. "I crawled to him like a snake on its belly . . ."

"Like a snake!" Rowena cried. "Like a snake goin' to strike! You are proud, Goose Girl! You are Black Crow proud. You are proud like an Indian. You are proud like a woman who has come this far on your own. You are proud like the sky that is so high and covers all, Willow-down-by-the-river, and you hate this man. He is a tiny, little man, Goose Girl, and he has broken your heart. Hurt him

now, Willow. Now. At least hurt him. It is within your power. I place it within your power."

Willow stared at her grandmother for a moment and then, drawing breath sharply, she let herself fall back on her elbows. Drawing breath again, again sharply, she spoke. "All right," she said. "All right. I'll do it." She closed her eyes. "It's raining," she said evenly. "Oh, raining, raining." She shook her head. "It's been raining for days. And soon it will be winter. Snow. The child is bored, underfoot. It gets in the way, trips over things. It sends things crashing to the ground. He never wanted the child. His wife did. To fill up the hole in her life, to hold him. But now I curse him with no job. He has lost his job. And he will have to look after the child while his wife goes out to work - no more daycare. So he will be unable to write, and he will hate the wife for having the child. He will resent the child. I curse the child for being the child I did not have by him.

"And his wife is at him. Nothing he can do is right. She says he has ruined her life; she blames him for her disappointments. She won't let up. She can't. I won't allow her. I poison their marriage - each word said that can't be unsaid a drop of poison. He will never forgive her. She hears herself and feels terrible fear, a sinking in her stomach - she knows how tenuous her hold on him is. She is desperate, wanting to stop. Inside herself, she screams, 'No! No more!' She knows how little patience he has for anyone else's pain, but she can't help herself. That is my curse on her for having met him before I did, for winning the battle she did not even know she fought. I am the secret enemy, and I attack at

night, under cover of dark, and from the quarter least expected - her own mouth!"

"She curses the death of her hopes and dreams. He thinks of you. The child nags the mother. Rain rots the eaves troughs," observed the Black Crow from its perch. Then its scratchy voice turned soft, insinuating, like the voice of a salesman trying to sell a customer on an optional feature. "I see inside him," the crow spoke, slowly, cunningly, opening him up, having a look inside. "His coward's heart." She shook her head. "Not big enough to hold you. . . . The rivers of his blood could run slower, Goose Girl. The channels could grow narrow."

But Willow was satisfied with her curse. "No, Grandmother," she murmured. She was feeling drowsy again. "It is enough to make him come back to me, and that's what I wanted." She lay on her side, pulling her knees into her body, the quilt up about her chin. "I love him after all. Love and hate. . . . Hate and love. . . ." She closed her eyes and slept.

The Conjure Woman opened her eyes. She fixed her hard and steady gaze upon the sleeping body of her granddaughter. It was a young woman looked out through those old eyes, the woman nested within, who had loved and wept, who had wept until she had no more tears in her, until grief had distilled love into something purer, into hatred; who, hating, had become, with time, crow and crone. "No," she spoke softly, almost under her breath - so softly that the child by the stove, startled by the

sudden youthfulness of her voice, struggled to match voice to lips in the gloom. "You will not cheat me," the Conjure Woman said. "You curse the wife and child. You do not curse the man. And that I do require. My reservoirs are too full of hate for me to be satisfied with such petty vengeance as you seek, Goose Girl. You do not ease my pain with such light cursing. No, Willow, no." Closing her eyes and tipping back her head so that her long chin pointed to the ceiling, she struck her chest once, hard, with the heel of her hand. She shook her head. "You have just tapped my stores," she said.

As the woman Willow had become slept, the woman she would become, the Conjure Woman, sat rocking. The water boiled dry under the pot. The girl rose briefly from her place by the stove and set the pot to one side before resuming her position. This was her job, to watch, to learn what it is to be a woman, and she did it without prompting. The steam dissipated. The fire in the wood stove burned low. Night fell. It fell like a black snow -- softly, silently, mantling everything with darkness. It erased the visible. Nothing exists if it is not seen: thus did the world outside the cabin, outside the pool of yellow light cast by the kerosene lamp on the table that lived because it grew, fall away into a great abyss of silence and emptiness. Inside the circle of light the witch rode that rocking chair of old hickory twigs like it was a train; the floor slipped beneath its rockers like rails beneath a train's wheels. She rode it deep into the night, into the future, while the past that was the girl sat crouched by the stove, watching, watching. All of time was in that room; all the women who ever loved lay in that bed. Lay dreaming. The man whose image was

burned into the back of their eyelids bent over them and took them in his arms.

Far to the north, beyond the furthest extent of this curling spur of upheaved earthen crust, in a city of houses on the shores of a great inland sea, in a house with a blue door, a man sat writing at a table. Rain beat a light tattoo against the roof of his house - it was like fingers drumming. And outside his window a large crow perched on the branch of a city-stunted tree, sleek black and quick-eyed.

"Can't you do something with this child?" his wife complained. "For Heaven's sake!" she yelled at their son. "Leave that alone! Get out from under there! John!" she said to her husband. "Can't you amuse him or something? Are you listening to me?"

Now the girl that Willow had been rose from her place by the stove. Glancing warily at the woman asleep in the bed, she tiptoed across the floor to where her grandmother sat in the rocking chair - she feared that, were she to wake the woman, she herself might be absorbed into her, cease to exist.

"Grandmother," she whispered, worried, not understanding. "Is it true that I am to be my own lover's ruin?"

Rowena smiled at her child self, then, reaching into the copper bowl on the table, she took from it an apple which she handed the girl. "This," Rowena told her, "is his heart."

The girl looked at the apple - it was old, windfall from an uncultivated tree, wrinkled, brown, and spotted.

She started to hand it back to Rowena, but the old woman shook her head. "It's yours," she told her.

The girl's fingers curled around the apple. She pressed it to her breast and sank down on the edge of the bed in which her older self lay sleeping, poor victim of desire. Not knowing quite why -- for she herself had not yet loved and could not understand the pain of the woman she was to be -- she wept. She wept for the strangeness of things, for wonder. Her weeping disturbed the woman. She stirred in her sleep, flung her arm to one side as if reaching for something, called out a man's name: "John! John!"

The man who lived behind the blue door paused for a moment in his writing, laid down his pen, and stared straight ahead.

Suddenly - he couldn't think why -- the image of Willow as he had last seen her had come whole into his mind: in his mind's eye she lay curled on her side, asleep in a bed still warm from their love, her knees drawn up towards her chest, a quilt draped loosely over her body. "John!" she had cried in her sleep as he pulled close the door behind him. He had not answered, but had quickly left. Her voice had pursued him down the corridor, down the street, like a pack of hounds.

The girl, weary from her long watch, the late hour, lay down next to the woman and slept, the apple in her hand. And, as she slept,

she became less and less herself and more and more the woman that she was to become, until she had been completely absorbed into her, assimilated into her. Now, as before, there were only two people in the room, the Willow that both was and is, and the grandmother who is both, and all three, and forever.

Grey dawn littered the pine floor of the one-room cabin with its dirty light. Willow woke to cold and discomfort. The mattress was hard and lumpy. She could feel the bed slats through it - each one - and her head was big from drinking wine and painful. She sat carefully up and squinted at her grandmother. Still seated in the rocking chair but slumped to one side, the Conjure Woman slept, living mummy, all withered flesh and dusty hair. Only the spasmodic jerking of the old woman's ribcage beneath the faded calico of her dress showed she breathed and therefore lived.

It was some moments before Willow was able to satisfactorily locate her extremities -- the cold feet upon the floor, the hand which held the apple. Surprised, she lifted it to her eyes and examined it carefully. How had she had come by it? It was a poor specimen, but she could detect no worm holes and she was hungry and didn't have the energy to forage in her grandmother's meager stores. Lifting the apple to her lips, she took a bite.

The man who sat daydreaming of Willow in the house with the blue door felt a ragged pain, as jagged as lightning. He took the jab in his left shoulder as if it had been an invisible spear hurled down at him from some unsuspected height -- he felt the muscles

tear, the bone shiver on impact and split. Then a giant hand, hard-heeled, pressed him back into his chair and held him there. A hole rent in the sheer fabric of atmosphere created a vacuum which sucked the breath from him -- it half pulled his entrails after it. He opened his mouth to scream, but, as in a nightmare, could utter no sound. It was as if a fist had rammed its way down his throat and then opened up into hard, sharp-nailed fingers. The hand, spread-fingered, twisted now in his throat, tearing the membranes. He tasted fear as bitter blood. There was a slippage, as when tectonic plates shift. Standing on the edge, he lost his balance, fell from one era to another. He was ten years old again, and skating with his brothers over the frozen surface of a lake up North. A sound like the earth's bones being wrenched from their sockets, then the ice split, cracked like an egg, and the lake's cold hands reached out of the chasm and dragged him in. He's whirled away into an icy darkness. Rolled. The cold water lacerates his skin. He feels as though he's being rolled in broken glass. Sleeping fish, somnambulant, butt blindly, stupidly against his struggling body. Turning, he sees the green thickness overhead, the ice skin of the lake. He claws at it with fingers so numb he can no longer feel them. The lake that seemed so still moments before. . . . It's like chaos here, below the surface. It's a whirlpool as big as the world. Again the hands reach for him. Again they drag him under. Lights burst before his eyes, shatter into a rain of colors. The fish thumping against him burst; inside are different fish with teeth like forks and knives. They slice him up, eat him in strips and chunks.

But they rescued me, he remembered suddenly. He remembers

different hands, warm hands reaching down through the hole in the ice. Didn't they rescue me? My brothers? My father?

But, no, no, he corrected himself. They mustn't have. It mustn't have happened, because here I am, back inside that moment again, the moment of death. My life must be only a fantasy constructed in this half-second. I have imagined thirty years.

"All the promises! What you told me! None of it has come true! Nothing has turned out! Are you listening to me?" his wife demanded again, hands on her hips. His back was to her. She could not read the fear on his face or taste the salt tears on his lips. "John! Look at me, you bastard!"

But now he is impaled upon pain that is like a stake being driven up through him -- slow, implacable. He can feel each blow of the mallet; his bones register the shock. Now that it's done, finished, he hangs upon it, helpless as a butterfly on a pin. It is like a second spine, electrified. He dangles, writhes, twists. He tries to pull free of it, as if it were a hook, as if he were a fish, and caught, caught. He lunges forward, to the floor, to his knees. He pulls it after him - no escaping. He crosses his arms over his chest, doubles over, hoping in this way to contain the heart that now explodes inside him, but he can't contain it. The explosion is so great that it bursts through his skin. There is a hole in his chest the size of a cannon ball. He grits his teeth, on the edge of disintegration, feeling the wind whistle through him.

Scales on a butterfly's wings, he remembers now, in this last moment, as the color begins to drain away, and the light begins to fade. He sees himself a boy. Chloroform on a white handkerchief - false emblem of false truce, as he advances slowly upon the insect, but not alarmed, no, not guilty - the brain of an insect is, after all, unequal to the task of comprehending its own, approaching death. The pin as it pierces the chitinous body encounters no resistance. You could blow those scales into dust, he remembers, watching the scattering of iridescent dust that his memory has preserved for him. Like a dandelion clock.

But the darkness is seeping in, spreading slow and magical, filling up the cracks where light lingers. Thick and black, easeful -- it is like a dark unguent. Fingers reach into his blown heart, scoop out its contents, empty it as one might empty a melon of its seeds. The fingers burn like fire. They seal the wound.

Willow. At the end it was her name which came to him, which played in his mind like the memory of the dust of scales. But why? Why Willow? Even her name. . . so sweet. No, she was all curved generosity, he countered this last treacherous thought. All soft love. Nothing a man might fear.

Willow had thought she came to Spiny Bole because she loved. She had come there because she hated. She had come home because home was mountains, and from mountains you can see a long way, as far as the future if the day is a clear one. And the air is rarer the higher up you climb - a curse carries from a mountain

peak. It gains in substance as it falls. Gravity lends it weight. It falls tipped with acid. It arches like a long-range missile: a contrail rainbow. And like a long-range missile it is pre-programmed with a knowledge of its target. It sniffs it out. Which is why Conjure-folk so often live in high places. It's a question of maximization, of effectiveness.

The apple was surprisingly sweet. Willow had not expected this. She had expected it to taste musty, fermented. She ate it slowly, bite by bite, savoring its sweetness, as, far to the north and by degrees the man behind the blue door died - it is not so far from Cherokee Country to Toronto, as the crow flies.

When she had finished the apple, she rose and, crossing to the wood stove, opened its door and threw the core onto the cold, gray ashes. As she closed the door, the words of the last verse of the song Rowena had sung her the day before on the porch came back to her: her grandmother used to sing it to her when she was a child, as she lay on her bed, held in that fragile equipoise between consciousness and sleep:

*If I'd a knowed afore I courted,
I never would have courted none.
I'd have locked my heart in a box of golden
and tied it up with a silver thread.*