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The Folklore Muse

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Worldview and Belief

As conceived by anthropologists and folklorists, worldview is certainly a very broad concept: the characteristic way in which a society envisions the nature of the universe and how people and things and forces operate within it. It is made up of many constituent parts, including a variety of folk beliefs (though that term has usually been used as a more acceptable stand-in for “superstition”). Whether beneficent forces may be called in to protect us or witches wish us harm or fate is fickle or certain might all be aspects of a culture’s worldview.

Jeannie Banks Thomas’s whimsical “Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill” presents impressions of a place, but a place forever linked to its past as the site of famous witch trials and executions in colonial times, to a former worldview very different from our own, though one which continues to fascinate us. Today, of course, the town uses its witchcraft past and our fascination with it as a focus for tourism, so Thomas is able to touch on the role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore. The “haunted house business” looms and a TV witch and great American writers who were intrigued by the gothic appear like ghosts.

In her story “Haints” Teresa Bergen looks at a conflict of worldviews and, indeed, of folk beliefs. Based on materials Bergen encountered in archiving a state-wide field recording project, the powerful story about love and tense relationships lays out conflicting social attitudes toward traditional belief systems, the conflicts in worldview mirroring those in the personal lives of the characters.

Jeannie Banks Thomas

Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill

Poe comes North
and bumps Hawthorne
out of
the haunted house
business

Samantha Stevens is on
the street corner
twitching
her nose

Fried dough in the cemetery

Get your cards read
Everywhere

Fagan plays a boom box
while a one-armed girl
in a leotard
assists
the New Zealand contortionist

And then,
the rain

and that bar
with the Dominican slow eggs
and the promise of live

music
later.

Haints

I guess that's love, when you give up what you want and where you want to be in favor of who you want to be with. And that's what I'm doing, so I guess that proves I love Natalie. This thin girl beside me, sitting on the bus headed east. She's huddled against the window under my big coat. I see her profile in the dark, her head bobbing against the pane as she sleeps.

Across the aisle, a mother scolds her son for fidgeting. The kid can't sleep. The woman is big and ornery. She caused a scene in Portland, stalling the line as she asked, "Are you sure it costs that much to Lafayette? Lafayette, Louisiana?" There was some trouble with changing her ticket, and we almost missed our bus waiting for her to resolve her stupid problem. Now she gets up every hour to go to the bathroom, and she swings one of her garbage bags against me. She carries garbage bags as luggage and takes one with her every time she goes to the bathroom. She can't leave that bag unattended for a minute. What's in it? Gold? Plus, she has a stupid straw hat on. The brim has come detached from the crown so that now the brim sits on her head like a brim should, but the crown is joined only by a plastic thread, which falls off her head every time she stands up. It hangs down her neck like a basket. Sometimes she fixes it, sometimes she doesn't. It couldn't have cost more than \$2.99. Why doesn't she throw that piece-of-shit hat away? I hate this lady and everyone on the bus, and I hate my life. And I guess I hate Natalie as much as I love her. I mean, why did she go and have a breakdown just when everything was going so well?

Look at the facts: We've both lived twenty-three years in Baton Rouge, our whole lives. Baton Rouge is a hellhole where I'll grow old and die long before anyone gives a fuck about my music. I waited for her to finish her degree because she said she'd go with me. I could have left two years ago if I knew she didn't mean it.

The bus stops in some anonymous town. I don't know if we're still in Oregon or maybe Idaho. Natalie doesn't wake up. I think, I could sneak off the bus. I could go back to Portland. They'd give me my job back at the restaurant, and I'd get that drummer back, and I could probably stay with him for a week or so until I found someplace to live.

But then I look at her. I remember when she drove in a thunderstorm to get me ibuprofen at four A.M. I remember how she looked sitting in front of a bonfire in our

old backyard, smiling at me with the flames behind her, the straps of her sundress falling down her shoulders, after the other guests had left. Beckoning me to join her on a blanket. Back when she liked me to look at her, to touch her. Before all the craziness. And I'm even willing to go back home if things can be that way again.

When things were good between us, she gave off a kind of glow that I could get inside of. If my skin were within an inch of hers, I felt waves of incredible well-being. I liked nothing better than to lie beside her, on the bed or the futon, and soak up that feeling. Now she gave off a vibe of being sick and broken.

I don't get off the bus to ditch her. I reach out and smooth her hair. But even in sleep, she flinches. My hand feels cold and falls away. These months of small rejections have taken on a life of injury. At first, I said to myself, she doesn't want to hold my hand right now. No big deal. She doesn't want me to touch her hair. So what? But day after day it added up and up. My touch became tentative, uncertain, and I tried to calculate the odds first. What is the likelihood that my hand on her knee will be brushed off like garbage? That she'll wipe off her mouth if I kiss her? That she'll move farther away, crossing her legs and arms, everything just for herself?

I consider sleep. On the one hand, I want to be awake every minute, to prolong this trip, not to be back in the place I hate. On the other hand, I'm so tired, so depressed. What good is being awake just to feel like this?

I long to put my arms around Natalie's thin shoulders and chest, to hold her against me as we sleep in our seats. But there's no way in hell I'm setting myself up for more rejection right now.

The bus isn't crowded. No one is sitting in the seats two rows up. I stand, trying to accidentally hit the fat lady across the aisle with my backpack, but I just hit the edge of her seat. I stumble up a few rows so I can stretch out a little. This is our first of three nights on the bus, and I know I'll only get more tired and more depressed.

I dream that we were living in a little house on a tree-lined street. I built a huge sculpture out of glass. The sculpture was so extraordinary that we gave away the dining room table and put it in there by itself. So I come home early one day from waiting tables, and I look in the dining room window and see Nat in there throwing canned peas and beans and corn at my sculpture, shattering it to pieces. I run inside, but she must have heard the door because she's hid all the cans and when I burst into the dining room she sits crying amidst the shards. "I was dusting," she says. "I lost my balance." Next thing I'm bandaging her cut arms, and I don't say a thing about what I saw through the window.

So I'm not one for subtle dreams that need experts to interpret them.

I wake up pissed.

Then I realize Natalie doesn't know I'm up here, and she is probably having a panic attack by now. The sky is light. I've been asleep a long time.

I spring up and turn to see Natalie talking to the horrid woman across the aisle. In Portland she'd developed an intense phobia of strangers. But now that melted away with the miles.

“Look, Randy,” she says when I reach our aisle. “This is Gina’s dog.” She holds a few snapshots out to me.

“Uh huh.” She’s stolen my seat so I climb over her and sit beside the window.

“Mugsy won a prize at the doggy parade,” Gina’s boy says.

“Now don’t go telling strangers all your business,” Gina scolds.

“That’s an unusual hat,” I say to Gina.

“You got something to say about my hat?”

“Never mind,” I mumble. I am secretly frightened of big, loud black women.

Gina looks like she might be forty and life hasn’t been easy. Her skin is dark and a gold canine tooth catches the light as she talks. “Lord, yes, I’m glad to be getting out of Portland. That weather! Them gray clouds hanging over the city every day! And the whole place stinking like that brewery downtown!”

“It was so cold and wet and . . . ghostly,” Natalie says. “I could only think of awful dank things the whole time we were there.”

She’d majored in English and read too many creepy Gothic books. “We were only there six weeks,” I say. “I’m sure it would have got warmer in summer.”

Immediately her eyes get that wet look. Jesus, she’s going to cry again. Everything I say she construes as blame. Which I guess it is. But it *is* her fault.

I can’t seem to get this one image of home out of my head. There’s this vintage guitar store where all the local rock kids hang out and talk about their bands that will never go anywhere. The place is crowded with musty old couches so it looks like a drop-in center for the homeless. There’s lots of cool guitars and parts of drum sets and tools and music magazines around. We all listlessly play the guitars and sit on the couches and complain about the lack of a scene and plan how one day we’ll get out of here and do something. It’s like a limbo for musicians. If you go there to buy strings, it will take two hours. Lots of the people have left Baton Rouge and come back. I always thought they were doubly losers. Once you finally get out, why the hell would you ever return?

The guitar store is owned by the king of local assholes. He made it out of Baton Rouge for a few years, during which time he played in some bands and had bit parts in some independent films. One day he came back—temporarily, he said—but then he got together with some cute girl ten years younger than him and next thing she’s pregnant, and so he stays and tells everyone his life is over. Twice we’ve been somewhere with a TV on, and he’s pointed to guys in rock videos and said he used to play in bands with them.

I don’t want to walk into that guitar store and announce my return.

“And is this your cat?” Natalie asks Gina’s son. Her eyes sparkle as she talks to the boy. I know she hopes to have a son and daughter of her own someday. Of our own. I think of that asshole who owns the music store and how his girlfriend got pregnant and his song writing went to hell, and I think, oh shit.

“Where are these animals?” I ask.

“They’re with a neighbor,” Gina says. “We’re gonna send for them once we get a place.”

I hear tension in her voice, a speck of strain, and I know she's lying. Who "sends for" their pets? How do you transport a pet across the country, anyway, unless you drive its meowing, crying ass yourself? If they had money to fly pets, they'd probably be on a plane themselves. One day the kid would look back and realize his mother had lied, that she had no intention of sending for the pets.

I told Natalie that I was going to sit by myself and try to sleep some more, and she just said OK. Like she's a totally normal person. Not like someone who stayed in a dark room for days, not talking to anyone but me.

I take my bag with me to the new seat because I don't intend to sleep at all. I get out my notebook to work on lyrics but everything I write sucks. I've lost something, maybe hope or inspiration. My words are too depressing for pop songs. It's like a fifteen year old goth writing in his notebook during a despised math class. Who wants to listen to that?

The day whizzes by, which I don't expect. Any bus ride should seem like forever. But maybe the bus drives twice as fast because it shuttles me toward what I don't want. I give up writing my lyrics. I stare out the window and see lots of trees and mountains and stuff people who care call beautiful. I see a deer at the side of the road, and I'm scared it will run in front of the bus just as I hope it does. It doesn't. Just stands there.

The driver announces a dinner stop at the Salt Lake City bus station, where our bus isn't scheduled to leave for three hours. There's snow on the ground, but the night sky is clear. I see stars as I get off the bus. Ten steps later I'm in the station. Greyhound, USA. Could be any city. Natalie is just behind me. "You hungry?" I ask, slipping my hand around hers, which remains cool and neutral, failing to wrap around mine. I let go.

"Not really hungry," she shrugs, back to her glassy-eyed Portland self.

"You need to eat, girl!" Gina says, clasping a hand on Natalie's shoulder from behind. Great move, I think, expecting my girlfriend to jump two feet at a stranger's touch. Instead, she lets her shoulder sink back into Gina's dark meaty hand.

"You think so?" she asks.

Then Gina guides her to a red plastic cafeteria table with four attached red plastic seats. Her garbage bags drag behind. "You wait here," she commands. "I'm gonna get you something to eat." Then she glares at me like I don't know how to take care of my woman, and she's off to the cafeteria line, her little boy dragging behind, attached by a hand. I sigh and shuffle around, feeling incompetent. "I thought you weren't hungry," I say, my voice coming out whiny and pitiful. She just shrugs and stares at the red table. "I'm starving," I mutter, wanting to get food but afraid to leave her alone. Jesus, she'd been a mess for a whole month, her eyes red and swollen, practically allergic to a light being turned on in our dark bedroom, totally unable to go out and look for a job or anything.

I perch on the edge of the table until Gina returns. I wonder what she'll bring Natalie. My girlfriend never eats at places like Greyhound cafeterias. She is very fussy and has paranoid attitudes toward food, especially grease and fat, which are probably staples of the Greyhound kitchen.

Gina brings back a heaping plastic tray, weighed down with all kinds of steaming shit. She unloads green beans, carrots, corn, and some grayish meat, maybe beef, in front of Natalie. I expect Nat's eyes to catch mine, pleading to help her escape this nauseating food. I won't bail her out of this one. I head for the cafeteria line, leaving her to deal with the mess in front of her.

Some weird kind of gnome woman—very short, with a hooked nose and excessively long fingernails inside plastic gloves—tends the hot food items. "What's it gonna be, fellow?" she asks, spatula poised over some grayish muck.

"Uh, nothing," I answer, hurrying past. The little boxes of cereal look safer. I settle on a box of Fruit Loops, a stale bagel, and an apple. I wash the apple as best as I can in the drinking fountain, then polish it with a napkin. The station has a kind of diseased feeling, like when I went to Mexico once and even the water was toxic.

As I trudge back to the table, I can see Natalie eating her hot food, leaning in toward the loud woman with the stupid hat as if she had something fascinating to say. When I set my tray down they ignore me, except for the little boy. He has large luminous eyes in a big head. He gazes at me solemnly, his eyes looking even larger because his body is so skinny. When I realize Gina is talking on and on about her boy, I understood why he looks like he'd rather be just about anyplace else. Just like me.

"But why would someone put the evil eye on a child?" Natalie asks. She's eaten half her food and is still shoveling it into her mouth. I haven't seen her eat so much since we left Baton Rouge.

"Little Eden's father is a bad, bad man. A bad, powerful man. He's a hard to get to sort of man. So, I guess his enemies gone after my Little Eden instead. But they such fools! He just a weak little boy, not a big, strapping evil man like his father! They don't realize evil ain't always passed down. Look at my boy! Does he look evil?" Gina looks at me for the first time since I'd sat down, daring me to contradict her.

"Of course not," I mutter, my mouth half full of bagel. "Bunch of superstitious crap."

Gina gets red in the face and her hat's crown shakes on the string it hangs from. "Excuse me?" I shrug and keep eating. "Excuse me?" she repeats, louder.

"I don't believe in that stuff," I say, avoiding her eyes, pretending something interesting is going on just past her.

Gina reaches across and suddenly her big hand is gently but firmly turning my chin to meet her gaze. "Look here, Mister I-don't-believe-in-superstitious-crap. What about this girl of yours, huh? Have you even noticed what's wrong with her? HMMMM?"

"She's been depressed," I say through strained vocal cords, since she is still holding my chin, and through gritted teeth, since I am angry enough to stab her with my cream-cheese knife. "I think she has Seasonal Affective Disorder. From the lack of sunlight in Portland."

"Wrong!" Gina snaps, releasing my neck with a little twist. She's probably killed a lot of chickens in her day, I think. My heart pounds. "Girl's got a haint on her."

“What the hell?” I explode, but Gina turns her evil eye on me, and I shut up in a hurry. I have no doubt now that this big woman could break my neck if she wants to.

“A haint,” she repeats slowly. I glance at Nat, who’s stopped eating and sits staring at the traces of food left on her plate. “She got some kind of spirit on her. Someone set it on her, or maybe it just up and attached itself. Saw a weak girl, far from her family, all alone in a big city.”

“She wasn’t alone!” I cry.

“You ain’t strong,” Gina says in this powerful quiet voice.

“I . . .” but I break off under her gaze. Am I going to debate my personal strength with a stranger? Without thinking, I reach an arm around Natalie’s skinny shoulders, but she shrugs it off.

“See there?” Gina says. “Still trying to suck strength off that poor girl. She feeding you and a haint, and you both hungry.”

“This is crazy,” I say, unable to stop defending myself. I should make Natalie get up and walk away with me, maybe wait for the next bus to avoid this perverted woman putting sick ideas in my girlfriend’s head. But instead, I sink to engaging her. “I stayed with her day after day in the dark. Comforting her. I got her whatever she asked for.”

Gina shakes her head as I talk. “You kept this girl in the dark, waiting for her to tell you what she needed. The girl has a haint on her! How she supposed to tell you nothing! Time like this, you gotta be strong for her! You gotta tell *her* what she needs!”

“Hey, I respect Natalie and know she’ll tell me what she needs!”

“Girl got a haint on her, don’t know what she needs.”

“Look, you don’t know shit about me and my girlfriend.”

“You keep that little girl in the dark day after day. . .”

“She wanted it dark!” I interrupt. “She wouldn’t let me put the lights on!”

“You keep her in the dark, you rolling out the welcome mat for that haint. You saying ‘Come on in, Mister Haint! Make yo’self at home feeding on my girl!’ And what you mean, this girl won’t let you put the lights on? You saying this little thing stop a grown man like you from flipping on a switch?”

“You think I should boss her around? Tell her when to turn the lights on and off?”

“I think you should be a man when your girl needs a man. You ain’t very big,” she says, looking me rudely up and down, “but you still a man.”

“From now on, lady,” I say slowly, shaking with rage and gesticulating with a cream-cheese-covered knife, “from now on, you better mind your own business.”

Gina lets out a whoop of angry laughter. Her hand shoots out before I see it coming and pulls the knife from between my fingers. The laughter disappears fast as it came and her face looks serious as a thundercloud. “Ain’t nobody on God’s green earth gonna tell me what to mind.”

Natalie pushes back her chair, and Gina and I both flinch at the sound of metal

legs on Greyhound flooring. "I'm going to the bathroom," she mumbles, kind of staggering off.

Gina shoots me one last look, daring me to say a word. Then she turns to her boy. "Come on, Little Eden." She grabs his hand and follows my girlfriend toward the restroom. Leaving me alone with the remains of a cafeteria dinner, everyone's luggage, and a push-pull in my gut between rage and terror.

Look what I gave up for that girl! After I did everything I could for her in Portland, I gave up all I dreamed of to accompany her home, because home was what she said she wanted. How could I have done better for her than that?

We are in Salt Lake City, a place I've never seen. If I just pick up my own bag and ditch their luggage, I could creep into the snowy night, get my own motel room, have a look around. I could probably get someone to open the luggage compartment of the bus and give me my guitar. If Natalie prefers Gina to me, if she'd rather hole up in the bathroom with that voodoo bitch than be with me, what am I doing hanging around the Greyhound cafeteria watching their shit? Is it too much to think my girlfriend could have stuck up for me under Gina's tirade?

"Hey there," comes a voice from the next table. I turn to see our Greyhound driver, a middle-aged black man with a kind expression on his face. "I was just gonna get me some coffee. You like a cup?"

I miss a beat, wondering why the driver is so friendly. Then I realize he must have heard the whole exchange and feels sorry for me. "No thanks, man," I say. "I'm OK."

"You sure?"

I must look pretty much not OK. "Uh huh."

The driver keeps looking at me. "Don't let all that stuff get you down. Bunch of woman nonsense. I spent some time in Washington State, got a touch of Seasonal Affective Disorder myself."

"Thanks, man," I say, really meaning it despite my embarrassment.

The driver goes after his coffee, and I try to psych myself into a Salt Lake City vacation. What do I owe a girl who won't even defend me against a stranger? Just then, this image of Natalie at Mardi Gras pops into my head. It must have been two years ago. We were down in New Orleans and had spent a couple of drunken days and nights. Natalie really wanted to get up early on Mardi Gras day to see the Zulu parade, an all-black krewe that stuck to a jungle theme. I remember being hung over, hanging back against a tall, wrought-iron fence. But my girlfriend looked beautiful, despite the substances and sleeplessness. She'd made herself a skirt out of Mardi Gras beads. She jumped the police barricade to join the other people shouting and groveling beside the floats. I remember her skinny arms in the air, her dark hair hanging long down her back. A black man in black face reached down to her and handed her one of the coveted Zulu coconuts spray painted gold. She came right back to me, her eyes blazing, a huge smile on her face, and said, "Look, love. I've brought you a coconut." She hadn't even thought twice about it but brought her prize straight to me.

I can't take the cafeteria anymore, so I load myself down with my backpack, Nat's bag, and the two garbage sacks full of Gina and Little Eden's things. I manage to drag it all into the main part of the station. I head for the least congested row of chairs and plop down in a seat to wait. Gina's garbage bags repel me. I hate to even touch them. Yet I am dying to look inside.

They don't come out of that bathroom until our bus is announced. Gina bears down on me, grabbing her garbage bags from near my feet like I am trying to steal them.

"Denver-bound passengers to gate six," the voice on the loudspeaker repeats, then lists all the intermediate stops. Natalie doesn't want to meet my gaze.

"Natalie," I say in a low voice, wishing Gina would go far, far away. "Natalie. How you doing?" She shrugs, not looking at me.

My girlfriend sits with Gina on the bus, Little Eden across the aisle from them. I sit six rows up, stewing, unable to write even the lamest lyrics, wishing I knew how to fight for my girlfriend. I've always figured people want to be together or they don't. Maybe a girl would stop wanting me, and it would hurt like hell, but that was her right. But this is different. Something is wrong with her. She needs saving, and I fall short of the task. I feel a few tears but manage to fight them back. I can imagine how Gina would mock that proof of my impotence.

I fall asleep eventually. I wake dark and cramped at some ungodly hour of the night. The Greyhound is totally quiet except the sounds of the road and a few soft snores. I feel a living pressure beside me and almost scream before I realized those big eyes staring at me belong to Little Eden. I recoil from the spawn of Gina. "What are you doing here?" I whisper. He just stares. "What's the idea, waking me up?" No response, just those big eyes. "What do you want?" I ask, louder and angrier. The boy gives me the creeps.

"Mama says I have a haint on me, too. Like Natti."

I groan.

"Mama says the haint gonna keep me from growing into a man."

"There's nothing wrong with you. Your mama just likes to scare people." This kid would definitely be better off in a foster home. I have this vision of me and Natalie adopting him. Great, I think. Family of five: me, Nat, Little Eden, and their two haints.

"Mama says there's only one cure when a haint's on you."

"What's that?" I ask, not sure I want to know.

He shrugs. "Don't know." He curls up against the arm rest.

"You can't sleep here," I say. He ignores me. He doesn't take up much space. I start to move to carry him back to his seat, then realize I don't really want the creepy little kid to go away. I guess I must be pretty goddamned lonely. I fall asleep again listening to Little Eden's breathing. I dream I can see Natalie's haint, a gray cloud like thick smog hanging over her, with vague facial features. When I wake up, Little Eden is gone. I'm glad the sky is light. It helps me remember that I don't believe in all that supernatural bullshit.

I have to check on Nat. I stand reluctantly, my failure heavy upon me. I walk six rows back and find Natalie sprawled in two seats of her own, across the aisle from Gina and Little Eden. Gina's mouth hangs open as she sleeps. Little Eden meets my gaze, his eyes somber. I reach down and gently move Natalie's legs to make room for me. She wakes with a start, flashing a look of fear at me.

"Good morning, Nat," I whisper.

"I'm sleeping," she reproaches me. "Finally sleeping."

"Come on. You're moving up front with me."

"What? No, I'm right here." She struggles to look around me, and I know she seeks Gina.

"Natalie, tell me what's wrong. Why have you turned on me?"

"I haven't turned," she says, looking at the seat in front of her. "There's something wrong with me."

"Yes, we both know that. That's why I'm taking you home."

"It won't help," she whispers. Her dark hair hangs tangled before eyes shadowed by sleeplessness. "It won't cure me."

I sigh. "What will cure you?" I can't help sounding impatient. She shrugs. "Look, Nat, I want you to stop listening to that woman. I don't know why she gets her kicks out of scaring people weaker than she is. But you don't have to listen to her anymore. I'm taking you home to your family. Your mom will help you. And if you need more, we'll send you to a psychologist. Now just hold on. We'll be home in a day and a-half. Then you'll be better."

"Gina says there's only one cure when a haint's on you," she whispers.

"Goddamn! Did you listen to a word I just said? Now get your stuff together and move up to where I'm sitting. I don't want to hear another word about that bitch's voodoo bullshit!"

"Excuse me?" I hear from just behind. "Excuse me? Is the white boy yelling at his poor sick girl? What kind of man you ever gonna turn out to be?"

I take a deep breath. "Nat," I try again, my voice calmer. "Nat, we've had four great years together. Why are you turning your back on all that? You can pull through with this, with whatever's wrong with you. I want to help. I've been trying and trying to help you."

"Excuse me? Has the white boy lost his hearing?"

"Come on, Nat, move up to where I'm sitting."

"White boy not gonna answer me?"

I can't ignore the bitch any longer. I turn slowly and face Gina. The stupid hat is back on her head, crown balanced, for now, in its rightful place. "I'm trying to work things out with my girlfriend. From now on, please mind your own business and don't talk to us."

Her eyes narrow and intensify, and a chill seizes my neck. I can almost believe in the evil eye. "Boy, you don't know what you're talking about. That haint's gonna suck the life out of your girl, and you gonna be a murderer."

I look past Gina to the big bright eyes of Little Eden. He breaks my heart sitting

there next to a crazy mother who will turn him into a psychopath for sure.

“Nat,” I say. My voice has an ugly edge. “Come on, Nat.”

“Don’t talk to your girl like she a dog. She ain’t coming with you.”

“Good morning,” comes the driver’s bright voice over the intercom. “We are now approaching Denver. Denver Greyhound station. This bus terminates in Denver, so gather all your belongings.” He reads off a list of gates and further destinations. I hear “Dallas, gate four,” then stop listening.

The Denver station is almost a repeat of Salt Lake City. Natalie shrugs off any suggestions of breakfast, then lets Gina buy her eggs, bacon, and toast. But this time, I give up. When Natalie opens a pat of butter and spreads it on her toast, I pick up my backpack and walk out of the station. I have never seen that girl put butter on anything. She is totally under Gina’s spell, and I am starting to realize I cannot free her.

I have an hour to see Denver. I have to stick close to the station. I see a closed Chinese restaurant, a check-cashing place, an hourly motel called Blue Beard’s Bungalow, an hourly motel called the Mile High Club, several houses with slanted foundations and no-trespassing signs, and indications of my impending nervous breakdown or perhaps homicidal rampage.

Who am I kidding? I am definitely more suicidal than homicidal, and I hate myself for it.

When it is time to reboard, I pretend I’m traveling alone. I don’t even look for Nat. I take my backpack to my seat and sit down. It isn’t till three minutes before departure that I get frantic looking out the window to see if she is coming. When I see her approaching between Gina and Little Eden, anger replaces my panic. I pretend I am asleep, and don’t reopen my eyes until the bus starts moving.

I try to think of allies, other people who care whether me and Natalie stay together. My parents like her fine, but they are in Alexandria and we hardly ever see them. Her parents will stick by me. We’ve been together four years, and they’ve always taken us out to dinner every couple of months. I’ve cheerfully attended what seems like hundreds of cousins’ birthday parties and holiday dinners. But then doubts creep in. They hadn’t been happy when we announced our move to Portland. They hadn’t understood our urge—OK, my urge—to prove myself far away. And they don’t understand my music. They are the kind of people who always ask how well my CD is selling, not understanding that isn’t really the point. They don’t care if my songs are preserved, if I am able to grow in my song writing. They want all that conventional stuff for their daughter: marriage to a solid man who will support her financially and raise some grandchildren. This realization comes as kind of a shock to me because the motivations and desires of Nat’s parents have never been of real interest to me. And now I realize they might not be pushing for our reconciliation. When Natalie’s older sister married a radiologist in Minden, their parents could not have been happier.

There are my friends in Baton Rouge, guys I’ve been in bands with. But they only talk about girls in the crudest sense. None of them know Natalie that well.

She'd taken school pretty seriously and hadn't gone out to hear me play all that often, especially not after our first year together. Nat has some close girlfriends in Baton Rouge. They always talk up a storm, but I never paid much attention to them because mostly they seemed obsessed with the minutiae of their relationships. My presence seemed intrusive, their conversations too intimate for my ears. How do they feel about me? I suspect they are neutral, and if Nat seems happy they'd say keep him, unhappy, they'd say dump him. They probably wouldn't stop to take into account whether her unhappiness is my fault.

I feel my girlfriend slipping away with every mile, and not a damn thing I can do. How many times can a person beg and explain and implore his sick girlfriend while someone like Gina stands by insulting and humiliating him? There had been a part of me that didn't understand Nat ever since we arrived in Portland. That part was like a fungus on our relationship, growing in the damp of the Northwest. Now it is poison, and our lack of understanding is turning to dislike, and soon, probably, to hate. If only she wasn't sick! If she was plain evil, if I'd discovered that after four years she was simply bad, I could end the Greyhound ride. I could stop in Kansas City, get my guitar off the bus, and let her go. But how can I abandon Nat to Gina in her condition? I have a responsibility to get her home to her family.

My heart has grown a callous by Kansas City. I won't beg, I'll only look out for Natalie's physical well-being. This station has a Burger King, so I sit in the fast food booth with Natalie, Gina, and Little Eden, a view of dark and seedy downtown Kansas City outside the window.

"Who asked the white boy to join us?" Gina says, but she looks tired now and neither of us has much fight. Nat ignores me like I am just another person on the Greyhound.

Little Eden pushes his burger aside after a few feeble bites. "Does it hurt when they take the haint out?" he says in his whispering little voice.

"How should I know?" Gina asks. "I ain't never been unlucky enough to get a haint on me."

"So you're too good for haints?" I ask.

"Boy, I always been strong. It's the weak they go for. You better be careful, boy, 'cause I think a few be circling around you."

"No shit?" I ask sarcastically.

"Watch your mouth around my little boy!"

"OK," I say. "I give up. Tell me how you get rid of a haint."

"Ain't nothing I can do," she says, sticking three fries in her mouth, chasing it with chocolate milkshake. She is the only one really eating. "I ain't skilled in such matters. I only know where to go, get Little Eden some help."

"Where's that?"

"Lafayette. Why you think we riding this bus clear cross the country, white boy? For fun?"

"OK," I say. "OK. Let me get this straight. You're traveling all the way to Lafayette to get rid of Little Eden's haint."

“We tried people who said they could do it in Portland, but they weren’t no good.”

My head pounds. This lady is so crazy, so serious. “So what’s in Lafayette?”

Gina’s eyes narrow. “You just gonna mock me, white boy? You gonna listen to what I tell you, or you just gonna mock me?”

“I’m all ears.”

“A nun,” she says. “A nun is in Lafayette. We gonna see her.”

“A nun? Nuns are all over!”

“This one got special power. She black, but she just speak French. A *traiteur*, they call her. Means she treats people. She touch them, she pray, goodbye haint. Goodbye whatever—arthritis, sickness, whatever.”

“So you and Little Eden are riding all the way to Lafayette, then you’re going to find out where her convent is and just knock on the door and ask her to get rid of Little Eden’s haint?”

“She don’t live in no convent. She live in a trailer park.”

“Nuns don’t live in trailer parks!”

“This one does.”

I stare down into my fries, feeling terribly sad. What stupendous ignorance! The boy probably has a vitamin deficiency or something. All the money Gina spent on this bus trip, she could have taken the boy to a kick-ass doctor.

“I don’t want it to hurt,” Little Eden says. “I don’t want the haint to hurt me when it leaves my body.”

“Hurt you a lot more where it is,” Gina says.

“Nuns don’t hurt people,” I say firmly, catching Little Eden’s eye.

His brow unfurrows. “Nuns don’t hurt people,” he whispers to himself. “Nuns don’t hurt people.”

Natalie’s face looks even thinner than usual, with two charcoal half circles under her eyes and the cords in her neck sticking out. She rocks in the booth, just slightly. I hate to admit this, but my own girlfriend looks kind of creepy. If I believed in all that shit about haints, I might even think she has one.

Back on the bus, Natalie lets me sit by her, but she won’t talk. She doesn’t even talk to Gina across the aisle. Once during the night I take her hand. It lays cold and limp in mine, like a dead thing. It gives me a chill, and I drop her hand. Then I feel like a traitor. I wish we’d gotten married. If we were married, she couldn’t abandon me psychically and emotionally like this. And I couldn’t abandon her physically, which I realize I am maybe about to do. I give her ultimatums in my head. If you don’t get your ass into counseling as soon as we get back to Baton Rouge, if you don’t tell your Mama exactly what is up, if you won’t look me in the eye and say my name, I will have to leave. I don’t want to leave her. If we were married, all this would work out eventually. We’d be bound, till death do us part, and assuming we had normal life spans, that was a long time. Long enough to work anything out.

I sit in the dark by my spooky girlfriend and think of all the reasons I’d had for not getting married. What did we need a legal bond for when we knew we were

meant to be? Getting all our relatives together for a big event would be a giant hassle and a waste of money, but if we eloped, they'd be hurt. But most of all, marriage just sounded pretty uncool. Who wants to be called "husband"? It sounds so old and boring, almost as bad as "wife." And if I went touring with a band, did I want to tell the other guys I needed to find a pay phone to call my wife? I'd never cheat on Natalie—I couldn't live with myself—but if some hot girl on the road was coming on to me, I'd rather let her down with "I have a girlfriend" than "I'm married." Having a girlfriend, even if you intend to stay together forever, just doesn't sound as final. All those hot girls would come back to my shows every time I came through town thinking maybe I'd broken up with my girlfriend. It was all right to hope for that. But I wouldn't think so much of those girls if they were hoping for my divorce.

Nat had asked me once, when we were twenty-one, if we could get married. I'd put her off, saying let's wait till we're older. Maybe in a couple of years. Now here we are, a couple of years later, on a Greyhound bus, and I am about to lose her. She'd only asked to marry me once.

I don't know how long I'll wait in Baton Rouge once I get her home to her parents. Probably at least a month in order to see if she can be restored to her senses and if we can still love each other. What I will do in Baton Rouge for a month, fuck, that's like jumping back into a mountain of shit after spending twenty-three years climbing out! It isn't long enough to bother putting a band together. I could play solo acoustic shows at Chelsea's, M's, the Bayou, or the Spanish Moon, and if I'm lucky, get an opening slot at the Varsity. I know all the bar owners, all the booking agents. The thought of seeing all those people again, less than two months after leaving town, makes me want to kill myself. Seriously, give me a gun. When I played my farewell show two months ago at the Spanish Moon, I had this kind of elation thinking I will never walk into this building again. I will never stand on this stage. That elation was tinged with only the slightest bit of nostalgia. I was pumped up with anticipation of something new, something great. And I had almost got there.

Now, returning to Baton Rouge, broke in wallet and spirit, we face a world of grief. With Nat sick like this, she'll probably stay with her parents, and they probably won't greet me like a son-in-law. Despite living together for two and a-half years, I'll be on my own. I'll have to stay on friends' couches, unless I want to commit to getting an apartment of my own. The move to Portland had used up most of our cash, the bus ride back had exhausted the little remaining. Natalie's illness couldn't be less convenient.

We stop in a little town, maybe in Missouri. The driver doesn't announce it. Mostly, the bus sleeps. One alert person notices the stop and gets off to smoke. I see the driver call someone on a pay phone, and wonder about his three A.M. heartbreaks.

The town is very small, so small it doesn't even look seedy around the bus station. This could be our town! "Natalie," I whisper, gently shaking her shoulder.

“Nat, it’s our stop!”

“What?” she says, sounding normal, like she isn’t awake enough to remember her sickness. “Where are we?”

“I found us the perfect little town,” I whisper. “I know we’ll be happy here and things will be OK. I can just feel it. Please please please let’s just get off and live here.” I talk in this fast, urgent voice, desperate to get through to her.

She looks out the window, blinking. “What is this place?”

“Missouri, I think. Who cares? It will be perfect.”

“Where are you trying to make me live now?” she asks, her voice climbing with the question. “What are you trying to do to me?”

“Sssh,” I whisper. Passengers are waking up and turning around to look at us. “Natalie, I love you. I want to be with you forever. Take a chance with me. We got to solve this thing ourselves.”

“Take a chance,” she says bitterly. “Take a chance! I took a chance! Look where it got me! We’re in the middle of nowhere, and you want to live here?” Her voice is stronger than I’ve heard it in two months.

Across the aisle, Gina stirs. “You can’t shake off a haint, white boy,” she says, her voice gentle for once. “I done moved Little Eden three times. The haint ain’t never far behind.”

The driver is back on the bus. We are about to pull out of the station.

“Nat, Nat, please let’s get off here. Please.”

“Haven’t you been listening to me?” Her voice is piercing. “Don’t you listen to anything I say?”

The bus cranks up and we are on the road. I could picture me and Nat back in that town. If we’d gotten off, we’d be looking for a motel right now. We’d be walking toward a motel in the night. Soon we’d find a bed and we’d stretch our cramped legs and aching muscles. There’d be a bathtub full of hot water.

“You never ask what I want,” she says.

Now I am afraid to find out. “What do you want?”

“I want to be sitting in the Chimes with all my friends, ordering a drink.”

I’d expected something vicious aimed at me and got something plebeian. I didn’t know which was worse. “I want to be burning the Chimes down.” It just slipped out. I didn’t want to fight.

“You want to be unconventional. But there’s nothing behind it.”

“What do you mean!”

She sighs and ignores me. She rearranges the sweater she is using as a pillow. She balls it against the window, leans her head on it, and pretends to be instantly asleep.

I don’t want to let her get away with insulting me like that and then not explaining herself. Sick or not. But as I try to think what to say to her, Gina leans across the aisle. “Let it be,” she whispers.

I am so mad at Natalie that I want to find a seat of my own. But at the same time, I am acutely aware that our time together is limited. Soon we’ll split up, and I might

never see her again. This is unimaginable. Nat is the most familiar part of my life, the best thing that ever happened to me, my entire heart. I know every part of her body, and, until recently, I thought I knew her inside better than anybody. She is the one. So I stay where I am. I lean against her, put my arm around her and my head on her shoulder. When she tries to shake me off, I don't move. I am stronger than she is and determined to hold her. She gives up trying to free herself after a few minutes. Then her body shakes softly, and I know she is crying. We don't say a word. I fall asleep.

The bus drives into Texas the next day. The sun shines. Natalie and I have nothing to say to each other. Even Gina doesn't talk much. Little Eden asks Gina about his dog, whom he misses very much, and his cat, whom he misses less. She is short with him. We all look tired.

"I'm hungry," Little Eden moans as we pull into the Dallas station. We are all burnt out on Greyhound food. We buy Fritos and shortbread and hot cocoa from the vending machine and sit on the floor by our gate. The Dallas station is packed with people. We can't find two empty chairs together, let alone four. People sit in lines at every gate, afraid if they wander, they won't get a seat on the bus. There is a hostess at a little counter by the entrance door who gives out gate numbers to passengers. A hostess is an amenity I've never seen at Greyhound station. It was just like Dallas, posting a hostess. I'd played Dallas twice and the clubs were packed full of phonies.

"So you never wanted to leave Baton Rouge at all," I say to Natalie as we sit in line. "All that talk in college, and you just wanted to stay home?"

She shrugs. "You make it sound like I lied. I didn't know how it would be. Maybe if we'd just moved somewhere normal, like New Orleans."

"New Orleans is just down the road! It's hardly moving at all."

"OK. Maybe Atlanta." She doesn't look so much like she has a haint now. She looks like a grouchy girl who wants to get her way.

"Atlanta's not exactly the best town for my music."

"Your music," she kind of sneers. "I guess I'll be the one with a career if we want to live in more than one room and have some furniture."

I am stunned. She's always acted so supportive. And now this slap in the face! "You've always been OK with things," I say. "I thought you cared about music almost as much as me!" My voice trailed off. Of course she didn't care. She probably read one of those magazines that tell girls to learn about football to make their boyfriends love them. I don't care for sports. Why hadn't I realized?

"We're not in college anymore," she says. "I don't want to live like I am."

Pain in my gut. Now she wants all the stuff we'd rejected? What is she saying?

Gina coughs. "You all are tired," she says. "You all been on the bus too long for heavy-duty discussing?"

"Yeah," I say softly. I have this floating, detached feeling. A person can count on nothing. On no one.

Natalie retracts into herself and looks miserable. Little Eden starts to cry.

“What is it?” Gina asks, a bit roughly. We all follow Little Eden’s eyes across the station, where two boys and a girl play in the drinking fountain, splashing each other and shrieking with laughter. They are probably all within a year or two of Little Eden’s age. Gina puts her arm around him. Her face looks sad and tired and old. “You gonna be all right. You gonna be just like anyone, only a little more special.”

We get back on the bus and the miles fly by. I don’t care anymore how long I ride the bus. It could circle the globe thirty times, and I wouldn’t say a word. I’d resign myself to it like some minor circle of Hell: Nat and I barely loving each other, Gina insulting me, Little Eden crying, our asses killing from sitting, stations full of dirty toilets, and nothing to eat but shortbread and overcooked corn.

Instead, the bus stops in Shreveport, and everyone gets off. It is three A.M. The driver announces two separate gates for Baton Rouge and Lafayette. Our party is splitting. Gina and Little Eden are due to leave at four, me and Nat at four-twenty. Gina gets some coffee out of the machine. Little Eden has fallen asleep on the bus, and Gina has carried him off, wrapped in a blanket, and laid him at our feet on the floor of the station. Me and Gina and Nat sit in a row. “Lord, this coffee is scalding!” Gina cries. Then we are silent for a long time.

Natalie seems completely introverted, like she doesn’t even know where she is. But eventually she says to Gina, “Tell me about the nun.”

“The nun,” Gina says, remembering. “The nun. She’s a *traiteur*. She treats people.”

“Yes, I know,” says Natalie. “But how?”

“She knows secret prayers. Not from being a nun. From her people. She learn from her grandfather, I hear. It get passed down, the gift. It go from male to female to male to female. Her grandfather got old, he pass on the gift. Gets tiring, treating people. That’s what they say. Takes a lot of energy out of a body.”

“So she just prays?” Natalie asks. “That’s it?”

“She pray, and sometime she touch you, and sometime she tie a string around a tree and when you grow taller than that place on the tree, you outgrow your ailment. That for a child.”

“Do you have an appointment to see her?”

“Uh uh. People just show up. First come, first serve. Like riding the bus.”

“You think she’s going to fix Little Eden?”

“Honey, I done tried everything else. I gotta believe in something or I might as well drop dead. This nun gonna cure my boy. Ain’t no other way.”

We are all real quiet for a couple of minutes. I think Nat has gone away again, wherever she retired into her head these last months. But then she says to Gina, not looking at me, “I want to go with you.”

“What?!” I explode.

“Please,” she says. “Take me with you.”

“What are you talking about!” I cry. “You’re going home to your family.”

“I mean it, Gina. Take me with you.”

I am trembling. I feel like I've swallowed my heart and it has gone down my windpipe.

"You go home to your family, honey," Gina says. "Let them see you still breathing. Then you come on over to Lafayette and see the nun. Maybe your Mama take you herself. That the best way."

"No!" Nat says. "I can't go home like this! They'll make me see a psychologist for a year! They won't understand. They won't!"

"Christ, Nat, it's my responsibility to bring you home. There's no way you can go see this crazy nun!"

"The nun ain't crazy," Gina says in her dangerous voice, but I stupidly ignore her.

"Nat, you need a psychologist. You don't need a bunch of mumbo-jumbo bullshit." Most of all, I don't need to explain to her family that she's run off to Lafayette with some black voodoo lady and her possessed son.

"Now wait a minute, white boy. I been real patient with you."

"Come on," I say. "You know that's not the sort of thing for Natalie."

"It's fine for me, hmmm, white boy? 'Cause I'm black?"

"I don't know," I say. I am exhausted! "It's more like some traditional belief or something. Part of the culture. But it makes no sense for Nat."

"A traditional belief," she repeats slowly. "Look here, white boy, the nun's gonna fix up my boy and that's no lie." Angry tears well up in Gina's eyes. Little Eden has awakened, and he quietly sobs where he lies. "That nun can help your girl, too."

"I thought you just said you don't want to take her."

Gina looks at my miserable girlfriend and sighs. She looks back at me, the anger draining from her face. "Your girl need help. She ain't gonna get it from you. She want to come with me, I'll take her."

"Thank you," Nat whispers. She looks weird, so sick and pale.

"Nat," I say. "You got to go home to your family. You absolutely have to."

She shakes her head. "I can't go home like this."

"But you just said last night all you want is to be at the Chimes with your friends!"

"After I'm better," she says. "After the haint's off me, then I'll go to the Chimes."

The driver calls the bus to Lafayette.

Natalie turns to Gina, her eyes wide. Little Eden turns over on the blanket, his face looking away from them. "I don't want it to hurt," he whispers.

"Well," Gina says. "Well."

We are all very quiet for thirty seconds. But when Gina stands, I seize Nat's wrist. "You have to go with me," I say, my voice desperate, my fingers clutching.

"You're hurting me." She tries to pull away.

Gina puts a hand on my shoulder. "Listen," she says. "Listen carefully. This should only take a couple days. You gotta let your girl do what she need to do. You go back to Baton Rouge, we be along in a couple days. I bring her back myself. You

just sit tight in Baton Rouge, we be there in no time. Now let go her arm, say a nice goodbye, we see you in a couple days.”

I can't let go. Instead, my fingers hold tighter. “Ow,” Nat moans, twisting her wrist and making it worse. “Ow, Randy, stop!” She hasn't said my name for so many days. She's stopped remembering who I am, who we are.

“You let go of her.” Gina's dangerous voice again. “You hurting her, white boy. This is not the time to make a scene.”

Gina starts pulling at me, and Natalie is twisting and tugging and crying out, and next thing I know I'm being torn from both of them by a big, black Greyhound driver.

“What's going on here?” he demands. Now my wrists are held tightly behind my back.

“She's got to come with me. I'm taking her home to her family. She's sick.” I realize I am crying.

“This your wife?”

“My girlfriend.”

“You wanna go with him?” the driver asks Natalie. She shakes her head, not looking at me. “She don't wanna go with you. You going to Lafayette, miss?” She nods. “You go get on that bus.” She stands there like she is trying to get the guts to look me in the eye. But fails. Gina shakes her head at me in disgust.

“White boy,” she says, “you gotta learn to be a man.”

They pick up their stuff and head for the bus. Only sleepy Little Eden turns back and waves.

The driver holds my arms until Nat has disappeared onto the bus. “You gonna behave yourself?” he asks. I nod, crying too hard to answer.

After their bus drives away, I get my guitar out of the Baton Rouge-bound Greyhound. I sit in the Shreveport station for a long time. The sun comes up. There is a pay phone ten feet away, and several times, I begin to search my pockets for change. I keep thinking of my responsibility, of calling her parents. But what could I tell them?

In the end, I don't call at all.

I think of all those guys sitting in that vintage guitar store, guitars coming and going, years passing, and still sitting there, growing bitter with time.

I count my money. It doesn't take long.

West. It seems like the only direction now. I want to sleep, but I want to leave Louisiana more.

I get directions to the interstate. I walk to the on ramp, backpack on my back, guitar in my hand. I stick out my thumb. I'll be the first man I know to put this wreck behind me twice.