

Three Rivers

for Jerry

Virginia Webster

Long roads boil in hot sun. Everyone has seen that, the way horizons wrinkle and quiver. I never understood why that happens. I used to think maybe someday I'd meet a scientist-type who would explain to me wavelength distortions and optical illusions. I never have met a scientist. I just keep driving on roads in heat waves, while my car folds into the wrinkles.

I am alone today. I'm alone most days, though now I'm pretending to run away, otherwise known as going on a vacation. I've felt variations in aloneness. Sometimes aloneness is a nest, quiet, safe, comforting. Sometimes aloneness is a cancer, slow, hungry. Sometimes, like now, aloneness is a shadow, separate and attached at the same time, but painless.

I think I can feel my car as I drive. I can feel gasoline move through an artery and explode in pistons.

I'm driving to King's Canyon. I've rented a cabin there. I imagine that I'll be trying to "find myself." I'll look at the trees and the mountains and think about my insignificance compared to natural wonders. I'll think about the meaning of life, and I'll look into the night sky and think I'm nothing more than an atom in the toenail of some grocery clerk living in a dimension where galaxies are molecules.

Sometimes I'm too profound for words.

I wonder if people in Porterville think about these kinds of things. Porterville's not bad really, not if you can stand this kind of isolation. Given a choice of isolations, though, Porterville does not strike me as the hub of insight. This is a pit stop. I eat lunch and I fill up the car with regular. There are lots like me here, refueling.

People seem to think it's odd for a woman to travel alone. I'm not in a position to judge myself odd. I want to go to a cabin in the mountains, that's all.

I confess. I've just broken up. Is that the right phrase, "broken up?" It sounds so rigid, outdated by at least 20 years. John Travolta and Olivia Newton John break up. What is it that I do? What I'm doing is more like an escape act. I wonder why it is that when you split from your lover it's breaking up. When you split from yourself it's breaking down. Which am I doing? Running away from him or from myself? I know what I'm running away from is the kind of aloneness that's a shadow. So the only way I can get away from it is by changing the direction of the light.

Breaking up is actually a pretty good word to use for David. It suggests rigidity and brittleness. That's what he was like. He was spartan. The walls in his house were completely empty. There was nothing extraneous in his life. He possessed only the basics: a desk job at AT&T, a couch, a TV with VCR, a microwave oven (no stove) and a waterbed. Did I leave out myself? Of course. I too was one of the basics in his life. I was what we mutually referred to as "copulatory relief," CR for short. He would only see me on Friday nights, his sex night. He said he was a writer and he had to keep his weekends free for writing the script that would make it big. When we met he was working on a movie about a scientist who had discovered a way to make dogs pee gasoline. The economic implications were enormous, of course. David said the script was really an attack on oil companies. Really, it was his philosophy of life. David only thinks in terms of commodities. That's what he was making me do once a week — pee gasoline.

I'd come over to his house about 6 p.m. At 7 we'd go to the Sizzler. It was always the Sizzler. We'd both have steak and malibu chicken except that he'd have fries and I'd have a baked potato. Then we would rent a movie and go back to his house and sit on his Herculon couch while watching the latest acquisition from Video King. Then we'd go to bed. His moves were always the same. I would sometimes feel like a 45 rpm record. Every time his stylus would touch me it would follow the same grooves and I'd make same sounds. Like a top 40 hit, at first he couldn't hear enough of me, and he'd play me over and over again, and my sounds were full and clear. But the stylus was getting worn and my grooves were getting tired. I could hear the static, like being married.

There was one extraneous item in David's house. It was a plant. A former CR in his life had given it to him when I met him. He never watered it. I could see the stages of dying every week when I came over and saw that plant. I think he threw it away when it died.

I loved David. I'm not sure why. He used to tell me I had nice breasts.

It's hot today. I should have left earlier. It's noon now, 100° at least. I am compulsively watching the temperature gauge on my car. I imagine what it would be like getting stuck out here on this desolate road. All I can think of are vultures.

At 2:00 I reach the entrance to Sequoia National Park. If possible, it's even hotter here. I hear the rangers saying it was a record high today, 107° in the shade at Three Rivers, just outside the park. Right now all I can think about is the sticky air evaporating from my face, the salt taste seeping into my mouth. I've been fantasizing about cool mountain air, redwoods, clear streams, the whole John Muir package. Instead I feel like I'm paying the entrance fee into some Inferno. A mother with her family is paying in the car in front of me. She's taking forever. What is she talking about?

"How far to the Giant Grove?" I hear her ask. Not satisfied with the answer, she asks where the nearest open campground is. The ranger points and waves his arms. Is he giving her directions? There's only one road for God's sake. How complicated can directions be? I feel beads of sweat trickling down between my breasts. I don't want to look at the temperature gauge on my car. I've looked at it a thousand times already. But, of course, I do look. The car has been idling too long. The gauge is creeping up, slow, slow, moving. I'm holding my breath, wanting to move. When I finally get through the entrance gate the gauge is three quarters of the way to meltdown. I stop looking, thinking it's my eyes, the force of my pessimism pushing the needle higher. Half a mile up the hill I can't ignore it. My car is overheating.

I pull over to the side of the road, turn off the engine and open the hood. Obviously a hose has exploded. The engine is saturated, steam rises from the crevices.

I console myself that it could be worse. The ranger station is only a quarter of a mile back and my car can coast down the hill. After I tell the ranger what happened, he calls the auto club for me. I wait.

Now I'm just passing time, agonizing over the circles of the second hand on the clock above the ranger's desk. I'm writing in my journal, I'm reading Anais Nin. I'm listening to my walk-man. The ranger explains to me that it's the Memorial Day weekend and there's only two tow-trucks for the entire park. Because of the heat, no doubt, there are seventeen calls in front of mine. More waiting. One of the ranger's friends comes into the station. They make jokes about the weather.

"You'll never guess what Larry saw today," the friend asserts joyously.

"No. Tell me."

"I can't believe it, but he saw a, are you ready? He saw a Western Meadowlark!"

"My God, where?"

"Just outside Grant Grove."

They shake their heads in disbelief and awe as though they've played some special part in the Second Coming. I'm shaking my head in disbelief as well. What must it be like to be so utterly affected by something that leaves other people, like me, so utterly bored?

I look at my watch. It's 5:00. The ranger is taking down the flag outside. I'm not going to be able to stay here much longer. When he comes back in he tells me the tow-truck is outside. The driver tells me not to worry, that it's only a broken hose. The gas stations are open until six o'clock and a hose shouldn't be hard to find. I crawl into the dingy cab, sandwiched between the driver and his helper. I can tell they've had a long day. We are like cartoned animals in here, our body odors mingling and there's nothing

offensive in the exchange, simply because no one cares. A Virgin Mary is affixed to the dashboard. Her troubled face catches the undulating shadow of a crucifix swinging above her head.

They take me into Three Rivers and deposit me at a Mobil gas station. By now my mind is numb. I'm just going through motions, wanting my ordeal to be over. I wish I had never taken this trip. I feel as though my hands are being slapped for trying to get away, for trying to forget. I'd rather be anywhere than here, signing AAA forms and wondering where in the world I'm going to spend the night. I know there's no way I'm going to make it to King's Canyon tonight. The sun is puffing out its last spasms of heat as it hovers over the mountains.

I'm afraid of driving in the dark.



"Where are you from?" was the first thing he said to me. He was bent under the hood of my car, releasing the clamps on the exploded hose. I was resting my head on my hands propped against the left fender, watching him.

"Los Angeles," I answered, not expecting any significant social discourse with this man. He lifted his head to look at me. He was testing me with his eyes, trying to figure me out, I could sense that.

"Are you up here by yourself?" he continued prying.

I responded with a terse, yes. It wasn't that I found him unattractive. I was mostly struck by a sense of the utterly unexpected, like a Western Meadowlark. I was abrupt only because I was off guard. My hair was stringy from perspiration, my face strained from the long drive. I could feel wet spots beneath my arms. My most unappealing T-shirt quietly stated, "Life is hard, then you die." In short, I was not out to catch a man. He must have known that, he must enjoy coming in for surprise attacks.

"What's your name?" he continued.

"Veronica."

I began sniffing him like a dog.

"My name is Tom."

My battle shields went up. It's not that I'm a man-hater, it's not that sex is always a war. It's just that sometimes it seems that way. Whatever it is I brace myself for it by encasing myself in a shell. I deflect arrows with my liberated uninhibited sexual openness. I'm easy — and that makes me hard.

So I smiled at him. We exchanged John Donne eyebeams. He wasn't my type really. He was one of those guys that seemed to have gotten lost somewhere in the sixties and never came out. He had brown hair and a full beard that dropped onto his chest. But his

body was lean, a long smooth muscle. I stared at his crotch. I thought he understood.

I didn't expect to like him. I didn't want to like him. I wanted to fuck him. And then I wanted to leave him. There was nothing to him except the smell of convenience. I needed a place to stay for the night. I was nursing the wound David had wielded, I wanted to punish David. I was lonely. And here he was, the opportunity, a raw invitation smiling at me.

He continued the ritual. He asked me what I did. I hate these introductory amenities. I should carry around a tip sheet. The dialogue is always the same, "What do you do?" "I go to school." "What do you study?" "I study English." "What are you going to do with it, be a teacher?" Normally I'm too tired to explain myself, and not wanting to seem totally without direction, I usually respond with a yes to end the tedious line of conversation. But now I felt especially annoyed at being asked if I were going to be a teacher.

"No," I responded, "I'm a free-spirit really. Which means I don't know what I'm going to do with an English degree, let alone my life. My career is not how I make money." I knew I sounded defensive.

His eyes dropped away from mine and focused on the new hose he was clamping into place. "I'm a drifter too," was all he said.

His arrow had slipped in. But it was so quick and so clean that I didn't even know I had been wounded.

"I like to write," I ventured, trying to remove the edge of defensiveness.

"Really? What do you write?"

I hesitated. Writing, like everything else, best serves itself as a mask for me. I tell people I write so they can't tell that I do nothing at all.

"Poetry, mostly," I said, hoping I sounded sufficiently lofty.

"What about?" He seemed interested. A gas station attendant in Three Rivers, California, fixing a rubber hose, seemed interested in poetry.

"Death," I said.

He gathered his tools, wiped his hands on a rag and closed the hood of my car. "I don't meet many women like you here," he said.

We looked at each other, still testing. Still uncertain.

"That will be thirteen-fifty," he said. I gave him a credit card and he went into the office. I watched him in there. I noticed piles of dead mosquitos in the window sills. Something told me I had lost him, though I didn't quite understand why. He came out with my receipt and handed it to me. We were silent, waiting, hesitant. I

knew it was a mistake, expecting sex from him, thinking he was interested. I dropped my shields again. I was ready to make my retreat. Thanks was all I said and I opened the car door, ready to slip away.

"I get off work now." I imagined him as a man throwing his last chip on the table. He couldn't seem to tell that I'd do anything he wanted me to. The door of my car was still open. "It's been hot as hell today, and I've got a swimming hole behind my house. Would you like to come over?"

The man was a master at catching me off guard, an artist really. The war was still on. "I didn't bring anything to swim in," I coyly dissented.

"You've got shorts, don't you?" He was playing the game.

"Yeah. I guess so." I conceded. "Okay, I'll come."

There was a distinct look of surprise on his face.

"What's the matter," I asked. "You didn't think I would say yes?"

"No. No. I didn't think that at all." Clearly he had. Counterattack successful.

He said he walked to work, his house was just down the road. He got into my car and pointed north.

As I am driving I am thinking how glad I am that I've found a place to sleep tonight.

His house seemed lived-in. Which is not a euphemistic way of saying decrepit at all. There were no pretensions, yet it certainly did not emulate David's spartan domicile. The walls were paneled with wood, the furniture was old but well-kept. Wood carvings were scattered around the room.

"What do you think?" he asked, holding up a half-finished carving that was set on the kitchen table. What he had done so far showed intricately etched designs, perfect geometry. I hadn't imagined wood could ever be molded into those shapes.

"It's beautiful," I told him. I was sincere. He smiled and pointed to the array of carvings and wood sculptures in the room.

"I made them all," he said. "Maybe it's something like writing poetry."

My only response was a smile. Vulnerable. Guarded.

"Do you want a hooter?" he asked.

My hackles raised. "What's that," I demanded.

He looked at me incredulous. "Where are you really from?" he asked. "You don't know what a hooter is?"

"No." I guessed I should have been embarrassed.

"You know, grass, weed, marijuana."

"Oh!" I said in a drawn out tone, feeling stupid. "Sorry that I didn't understand. The word hooter isn't used too frequently where I come from."

"You need an education," he said. "Who knows what else you've missed out on in L.A."

"I've missed out on swimming holes," I said. "You're the first person who has ever asked me to a swimming hole."

"And the first person to give you a hooter," he said as he passed me the joint.

"Only by name," I said as I accepted.

I found myself slipping into a state of complacency for a moment. I wondered what it would be like living in a town like this, living with a man like this. Unfamiliarity scared me. He was unfamiliar, a different breed. I couldn't let down my guard until I had figured his angle. I was waiting for his move, wishing we could just couple like beasts without ritual.

"The bathroom is in there," he said, pointing through the bedroom, "if you'd like to change."

I grabbed my shorts and followed his direction. The first thing I noticed in there were perfume bottles and makeup. Next to the mirror was a woman's necklace. I didn't feel jealous. After all I had no intentions of staying with this man, of feeling anything for him beyond the limitations of tonight. I couldn't care less about another woman. What I felt was more like confusion and a sense of violating someone else's space. I didn't belong here. There were signals.

I put on my shorts. In the mirror I saw him in the bedroom outside, taking off his shirt. His back was brown and hard. I turned away.

When I came out I asked him quite directly, "So do you live with someone?" The question didn't surprise him. He knew what was in the bathroom.

"Her name is Marilyn," he said. "She lives here sometimes. But she's married to some guy in Reno. She's with him now. She left about a week ago. She'll be back soon, though. She always comes back. This is where she stays when she can't live there." I understood. I wished I hadn't asked. This wasn't a part of my life.

He took me outside where I expected to find the infamous swimming hole. What he called his yard was no more his yard than the swimming hole was a swimming hole. Trees grew all around a dirt path that led to the back, insects buzzed furiously, vines grew on trellis's and lizards scattered where we walked. He showed me a pail with swarms of baby fish in it.

"What are those," I asked.

"Minnows," he said. "I use them for bait."

The swimming hole was not a hole but a river, undoubtedly one of the three rivers the town was named for. Just up the river I could see a small set of rapids. He led me to a bridge where the water

flowed smoothly. He had tied a long thick rope to the bridge. He grabbed onto the rope, stepped back and took a flying lunge into the river. The rope swung in a loping arc and his bulging arms strained to hold him. He gracefully skirted the water and dropped back onto the bank. "You try it," prodding playfully. Who was this man I was with, smoking hooters along the edge of a river, watching swallows nest along the bridge, swinging from a rope into a "swimming hole?" When he finally convinced me to swing on the rope I took a hold of it and ran out into the river raising my legs. I had no idea my body would weigh so much and I couldn't hold on long enough to complete the circle. I let go and crashed into the water, closing my eyes as hard as I could, bracing myself for the shock, expecting my back to snap on an immersed rock. But I splashed safely and emerged to see him laughing at me. He wasn't making fun of me. He knew I was safe. I swam closer to shore and he came into the water. We swam together, had a water fight, laughing, splashing each other like dolphins.

I had never swum in a river before. I had never felt the strong tug of a river current. As we swam together I reveled in the pull, imagining that the water on my skin was pulling me through time. He was treading water further down. I relinquished myself to the pull while he resisted, waiting. And I let the river pull me to him.

We swam to the shore, rose out of the water, looked at each other. My T-shirt was clinging to me like a grape peel. My nipples were hard points. I was wondering what he was thinking, wondering if I should be making something happen. We sat down. The sun was gone now; light was grey slate. He lit a cigarette and offered me one. I said no. He hadn't touched me yet, not with his hands. A swallow was frantically searching for his nest. Quiet.

He found his way in. He knew he was inside.

"What do you think of zipless fucks?" I asked softly, knowing he wouldn't understand. I just needed to find my way in.

He looked at me strangely. "What in hell are those?"

I laughed. "You haven't read Erica Jong."

"Never heard of her," he replied. "I don't read much."

"A zipless fuck is a one-night stand, only ideally it's purer, no names, no connections, no ties, just two bodies needing each other." Now he was the one off guard. He looked away. "So they've got a name for it," he reflected. "Sometimes I need them. Winters get long up here."

"I feel like it's always winter where I live," I said. "Someday I want to write a book about it, living in a winter where there doesn't seem to be a spring. It seems the best I can hope for to keep me warm is an occasional piece of wood. And even that burns up before I've felt the warmth."

He seemed to understand. "I usually pick up girls in Visalia," he said. "I always tell myself there's something else there before I take her home. But there never is. Then I start feeling that it's my fault. It's just that sometimes there's an urge, and then that's the only thing I seem to care about." A car rumbled on the bridge. "I'd like to read your book when you've written it. I dream of things like that too, opening a wood shop, people paying me to do carvings for them. Sometimes I hate being a shade-tree mechanic; it's like the feeling of taking home a girl from Visalia. Every time I do it I wish I hadn't but I have to do it to keep alive." Another long pause. I was treading somewhere in the silence. I stared at the red ember of his cigarette, not sure where else to look.

"I wish we had more time," he said.

"We have tonight," I suggested.

He smiled slightly, still not looking at me. He took the last draw from his cigarette, then pushed the butt into the sand, pounding the small white stub long after the ember had smothered. "You know, those girls from Visalia," he said, "there's something about them. Somehow I never care when they leave." Finally he turned to look at me. "They're not like you. That's not why you're here."

"Why am I here?" It was all I could think to ask. I couldn't tell if his answer was a question or a statement.

"Because you want to be," was all he said.

As I walk out the door I wonder where I'm going to spend the night. It's so damn dark in the mountains. He seems to understand. He tells me there's an inexpensive motel about a mile down the road. He tells me to ask for Maggie and tell her that he sent me. I don't entirely understand what's happened here. My head is telling me I've been rejected. I wouldn't have said no to him if he had asked. I could imagine his sleek brown body moving like a piston, tiny explosions in my body.

We aren't saying much to each other. He opens my car door. I get inside. He closes the door. There is a shield of metal between us now. I roll down my window.

"Thanks for fixing my car," I tell him. "Knowing this wreck I probably won't get very far though." I'm trying to ease the tension.

"I hope you don't," he says with some sincerity. "I should have jimmied your car when I had the chance. Otherwise, I'll never see you again."

I couldn't find anything to say.

"We could use an English major up here," he says, looking as though he wishes what he is saying were true.

I start the engine and put the car into reverse.

"I'll send out resumes."

My foot eases off the brake. As the car begins to roll away he bends down and kisses me. He pulls away and walks into his house.

I am driving in the night, feeling pistons.