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J O C A R S O N

STORIES  
I AIN'T TOLD  
NOBODY YET

SELECTIONS FROM THE  
PEOPLE PIECES

—JO CARSON—

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP — 1991

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*For Pierce*

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## PREFACE

WHAT FOLLOWS are monologues and dialogues collected from east Tennessee and the Appalachian region. They are not exclusive to the region. I made a woman angry once: she swore I got them from east Texas and just said east Tennessee. She was from east Texas.

The pieces all come from people. I never sat at my desk and made them up. I heard the heart of each of them somewhere. A grocery store line. A beauty shop. The emergency room. A neighbor across her clothesline to another neighbor. I am an eavesdropper and I practiced being invisible to get them. My aunt introduced me for a while saying, "Be careful what you say; she writes things down." I asked her not to say it. Blew my cover.

I did sit at my desk to reconstruct what I heard, so it was not that I hauled out notebooks on the spot and copied down people's words. The pieces are distillations. Some of these conversations took longer than others. Some took longer to write than others; one or two took years.

My intent has been to remain true to the speaker's thoughts and rhythms of speech and anything else that can be kept somehow in chosen words. When there is a reference to another person, I have changed names. The layout on the page has to do with how the pieces should sound.

I have used these pieces in performance for several years. Doing them always seems to call up other stories. "You need to meet my cousin, he's got this dog. . . ." It's the thing I love the best about them. I hope it holds true for print.

# PROLOGUE

# 1

Willis Comfort did not outlive  
as many enemies as he hoped to.  
I know because I was one of 'em.  
I do not plan to do to his grave  
what he swore he'd do to mine.

Grace or dying, one got Willis;  
I hope it was the grace.  
See, grace don't always come  
on the wings of a dove  
or as a thief in the night  
or however it's supposed to.  
Sometimes it comes like a two-by-four  
to the side of the head  
and folks don't live through it.

What can be said of Willis  
can be said of everybody:  
he made it through this world  
the best way he knew how.

# **NEIGHBORS AND KIN**

It's gettin' to where  
you can't give a person nothin' anymore  
and it's too damn bad.

Now, my neighbor  
could look the devil in the eye  
and say no thanks he didn't want to go to hell,  
while at the same time  
tryin' to slip Jesus Christ a couple of dollar bills  
for the free gift of salvation.

He's a hard man  
and he's about to drive me crazy.  
Fifty cents he puts in my mailbox,  
or a dollar or somethin',  
and all I did was give his wife  
a couple of tomatoes  
and a mess of old string beans.

And they ain't rich.

Then, yesterday, I picked a half a bushel  
of them little ol' zucchini squash  
and I carried over five or six  
and put them on his porch  
with a note that said,  
"These are a present."  
Present was underlined.  
And today,  
there's a dollar in my mailbox.

The man don't understand  
he's doin' a favor  
when he takes and eats them damn zucchini,  
and when he pays me for 'em,  
when he pays me for 'em  
it's me ends up beholden to him.

### 3

I spent the first years of my life  
sittin' on what we called splinter benches  
'cause we were too poor for store-bought furniture.  
You scooted, you got splinters.  
My mama used to cry  
'cause she wanted a bed with a real mattress  
for Grandma Lynn to die on.  
Turned out Grandma Lynn didn't need it.  
She died mid-sentence at the women's circle.  
But the first money I ever earned  
I got Mama a store-bought mattress.  
Daddy bought her two straight-back chairs  
so she and him could sit proper at the table.  
It was her birthday.  
I never seen anybody since  
made so happy by a gift.

When Daddy finally found regular work  
first thing they did was ride down to McEnniss's  
and choose a houseful of fancy stuffed furniture.  
Bought it on time, had it delivered, and paid for years.  
The day it came, Mama and I stood out back  
bustin' the old stuff with an ax.  
Mama said if they couldn't pay for their bed  
she'd rather sleep on the floor than have that one back.  
We burnt furniture for kindling all that winter.  
Mama'd say, "Here goes the table, Charlie!"  
and she and Daddy'd laugh and raise their coffee cups  
to toast their new prosperity.

Turns out we burnt what could have been

my fortune in antiques. My wife collects 'em.  
She likes what she calls primitive;  
it's the very stuff my mama didn't like,  
and now I'm supposed to fix it so it don't ruin clothes  
instead of bust it up.  
I don't mind, might as well be this as something else,  
but if I do get to heaven, if I do get to meet my mama  
again,  
I don't know how in this world or that one  
I'm gonna explain why I still got splinters in my seat.

Now, George is sick,  
there ain't no question,  
an' I've mentioned  
for a year or so  
about goin' to a doctor  
an' he'd say  
"Nooo, no, no."  
But I'm gonna make 'im find one now.  
It's really bad.  
I mean,  
George has got so sick  
he don't even like  
goin' to funerals anymore.

There was a story about my daddy's daddy  
who bought a horse, a long-legged red mare  
come from kin at Nashville who owed a favor,  
and he worked and trained that horse to run.

Daddy tells of bets going up at the sight of that mare  
and then money already changing hands  
as Granddaddy come out of the saddle after a race  
and give the mare to him to cool her off.  
And tells about the two of 'em riding home,  
a paper sack stuffed with winnings  
when there wasn't room for it all in their pockets.

Daddy tells this story too:  
the afternoon the red mare ran and won again  
and Granddaddy climbed off her back and sold her  
and they walked the six miles home to dinner  
weeping, both of them, my daddy begging to know why.

The old man said horse-racing was the devil's work.  
Said it had to be. Said they'd been having too much fun.

## 6

It was a Saturday and my mother was cooking.  
She always cooked on Saturday  
for us and for her bachelor brother  
who came by on Sunday afternoon  
and got his casseroles for the week.  
None of them used tuna fish, mushrooms, peas . . .  
there was a list of things he wouldn't eat.  
We were not allowed to be so picky.

By Sunday they'd be frozen.  
All he had to do was keep them frozen  
and put them in the oven one at a time.  
His were labeled, he knew what he was going to eat.  
For herself, she looked into the frozen layers  
and tried to remember.  
I don't know why she did it.  
He was perfectly capable of doing  
anything else he set his mind to.  
He could have learned to cook.

This Saturday  
she was up to her elbows again in family and food.  
I heard her in the kitchen. "No," she said.  
After a moment: "I'm honored, but no thanks."  
Another moment: "No, thank you, no, no, no."  
I asked who she was talking to. She said,  
"I'm practicing my speech for the circle,  
they are planning to ask me to be president."

I thought she was very silly practicing  
her public speaking with a series of emphatic no's

as she stacked casseroles in her freezer.

“No!” to the macaroni and cheese and tomatoes.

“No!” to the broccoli in concentrated celery soup.

“No. No. No.”

It was twenty years before I understood  
she was trying to learn how to say it.

It's not me  
that's gonna stand up and say  
Henry can't cook . . .

and you can look at Henry  
and know he don't suffer  
for the lack of food

. . . but I swear Henry don't cook  
like nobody I ever knowed  
had to eat his own.

You'd think he had a crow to pick,  
put him some beans in a little pot  
and cooks the fire out of 'em—  
one speed, and it high,  
and I swear to you  
he don't call 'em done  
until they start to smoke.

And he mashes up his scrambled eggs.  
You ever heard of that before?

Henry's coffee gets boiled  
till it grows little devils in it.  
Now, I've been polite and drunk it  
without sayin' anything,  
but he don't keep no milk or sugar or nothin'  
to cut the taste.

But that's not the worst.

The worst is that Henry thinks he makes cornbread.  
It's what he calls it,  
and to hear him talk,  
you'd think he got the recipe from Chef Boy-ar-dee or  
somebody.  
Now, anybody's got a skillet and some sense  
can cook up cornbread,  
and him carryin' on about his bein' so good . . .  
Henry don't use bacon grease or buttermilk,  
and that cornbread ain't got a prayer.  
Anybody knows that.

Henry's dogs won't eat what's left over,  
and dogs will eat good cornbread.

So I made up some right,  
crunchy like it's supposed to be,  
but not dry,  
and I buttered it,  
and I went over and invited Henry to come eat a piece,  
just to know what good tastes like,  
and you know, he wouldn't do it.  
Said he just ate a piece of his own cornbread.  
Said he wasn't hungry.  
And I know better 'cause it was then  
I saw what I saw in the bowls  
where the dogs wouldn't eat it.  
Henry is a liar!  
But it ain't gonna be me  
that says he can't cook.

How's Mama?

Who?

Mama.

Dead, Grandmother, gone more than forty years.

Well, tell me about Ruby.  
She still a-runnin' that boardin' house?

I think the boarding house burnt down.

And Ruby died in the fire?

Died in Florida. Playing bridge.

And wanted to be buried with her bridge cards  
and that boy of hers—what's his name?

Ben.

—he wouldn't do it,  
said nobody made it into heaven yet with cards in their hand.  
I said the Lord might like bridge once he learned to play it.

I heard you gave her a deck. I heard you walked to a five and ten cent store  
during the funeral service and bought a pack of Bicycle cards and put them  
in the coffin.

What I should of give her was a push.  
There wasn't no need of her goin' off to Florida.

Except to play bridge after Ben got religion.

When you reckon Paul'll get here?

Grandmother, Paul's gone too.

Gone huntin'. Him and Bennett and Jess.  
We been waitin' a right smart time.

We're waiting for Jean.

Jean who?

Your daughter. She went into Kroger's to get milk.

I told Paul to cook his squirrels where he shot 'em  
'cause I didn't want to see 'em without their hide on.

You mean he died too, don't you.

And Bennett and Jess.

And Velma and Ellen and Lawrence and Thomas.  
Who do I know that ain't already dead?

My brother Estes  
and his cousin Ray  
left here for California  
the minute the two of them together  
had enough money to buy a car.

They were leaving the god-forsaken mountains.

They were gonna make some money,  
gonna find them California wives.  
Well, they done right well,  
both of them.  
I gotta admit that.

But I got a phone call from Estes  
just two days ago.  
He's pushing into his fifties now,  
and you know,  
he wants to bring his California wife  
and come back home.

All this time, he's called me  
his hick sister,  
I knew my chance was coming,  
'cause the mountains speak the loudest  
to a person in his middle years,  
and no matter where he is  
or what he's done,  
he begins to think of them as home.

You know what I told Estes?

I told him to come on back and try it,  
but not to get his hopes too high  
'cause he don't talk right anymore.

A lady who lives there close to me  
called me up the other day—  
she'd had new carpet laid  
and wanted me to come and  
drink a cup of coffee and admire.

Now, I can do that for a person.  
I hung wallpaper by myself one time  
and come near to inviting a perfect stranger  
in to see it. . . .

Well, I got to the door,  
and she said, "Now you be careful  
how you wipe your feet,"  
and I was careful,  
but the grass was still a little wet  
from rain that morning,  
and she asked did I mind too much  
pulling off my shoes?

Well, I did that too,  
and I stepped into the living room,  
and that brand-new carpet was white. Bleach white.

And we drunk our cups of coffee in the kitchen.  
The nicest thing I could think to say  
was that it looked like snow nobody stepped on yet.

And I thought about how  
there'll be no children  
carryin' in chunks of chocolate cake

to watch TV,  
no dog rollin' around to play  
on the living room carpet,  
no runnin' in that way  
from sittin' on the front porch of an evening  
to answer the phone,  
nobody comin' in the front door  
from workin' in the garden  
or gettin' the mail  
or carryin' through a handful  
of cut flowers.

“It makes the room look really clean,” I told her.

“That’s what I like the best,” she said,  
“ ’course I’ll have to be so careful,  
it being white and all.”

## 11

You know the other day we went over at George's get some eggs?

No, we went over George's get some beans.  
George ain't got eggs.

No, we got beans up at Lucille's.

We took tomatoes to Lucille.

We took tomatoes to Wally.

Where'd we get the beans?

Lucille's.

I swear we took tomatoes.

Well, we didn't.

Now, Wally's got a garden.  
Why we carryin' tomatoes up to him?

His ain't come in yet.

Lester's has; Lester should'a give him some.

Lester's so tight you couldn't pry tomatoes out of him.

He give George's boy a little puppy.

It was a stray and it turned around and bit him.

Who?

Lester.

Well, at least it wasn't George's little boy.

What'd we get at George's?

I guess we didn't go to George's.

Oh. Maybe that's why we ain't got no eggs.

Law, you know who's living  
down in Jack's old house?

Lucy.

And Jack  
and his family  
moved down where  
George used to live  
before he moved out to the country.

Well, George broke his leg  
and come back  
and moved in with his cousins  
right next door  
to where I used to live  
when you all had the house across the street.

Ritchies live there now,  
where you lived.

Well, the people who lived  
on the other side—  
moved in after you left, I think—  
they live in my old house now.  
Has more yard.

Well anyway,  
that house next door,  
the one Lucy moved out of into Jack's old place . . .  
Well, George ain't getting along too good  
with his cousins right now,  
and he's thinking about moving in.

You know Lou Beal?  
Lives out close to you.

Yeah, tall woman.

Now I never thought of her as tall.

She's taller than me.

Maybe, but she's—you know—fat.

Maybe she used to be and lost it all  
before I knew her.

Yeah. Well, her husband . . .

I didn't know she was married.

I guess he's her ex. . . .

Never mentions him.

She has children, don't she?

Not out where I live.

Well, they must be with her husband.  
Well, anyway, her husband said . . .  
I reckon they must be gettin' back together. . . .

What'd he say?

They're fixin' to move to Indiana.

She come to see your mother  
said she knew your mother  
was laying in the bed six weeks  
but she hadn't felt up to  
walking through the Morelock's yard.

Said her liver don't work  
her bladder leaks  
her hair is falling out  
and her heart's half dead

so I asked her

don't it stink?

About them whiskey boys:

Jim Beam will lie flat out  
and George Dickle'll tell you  
you can dance.  
Don't believe either of them.  
You can trust Ezra Brooks to put you under.  
Evan Williams will remind you in the mornin'  
what you done that night.  
And Jack Daniels,  
Lord, that devil Jack Daniels . . .  
make you wish for things  
you never even thought about before.

# **OBSERVATIONS**

Mountain people  
can't read,  
can't write,  
don't wear shoes,  
don't have teeth,  
don't use soap,  
and don't talk plain.  
They beat their kids,  
beat their friends,  
beat their neighbors,  
and beat their dogs.  
They live on cow peas,  
fatback and twenty acres  
straight up and down.  
They don't have money.  
They do have fleas,  
overalls,  
tobacco patches,  
shacks,  
shotguns,  
foodstamps,  
liquor stills,  
and at least six junk cars in the front yard.  
Right?  
Well, let me tell you:  
I am from here,  
I'm not like that  
and I am damned tired of being told I am.

There are some things I want to know about,  
I want to know what happened to the trees.  
There used to be big trees,  
big enough you could hollow you a room inside  
and live inside a living tree  
without a whit of difference to the tree.  
They were everywhere.  
Them trees was big enough  
you could of made two floors  
and carved a staircase up  
and slept inside the middle of a tree  
if you had a mind to work like that.  
It wouldn't hurt the tree.

Them trees are gone,  
but trees don't die for just two hundred years.  
Old trees move slow.  
Each spring is one more morning  
and goes a thousand years  
before a tree begins to look at getting old.  
Them trees are gone.

These here, these little ones  
they're good to climb  
'cause you can get your arms and legs around  
and shinney up the children of old trees.  
But this place is not a forest.  
It's bramble breaks and laurel hells.  
It's good to have for hunting in.

It used to be the lower limbs and branches

of the trees stood above the ground  
at eight or ten men's height,  
and in the forest was the only place  
where you could see along the ground.

You can always tell a tourist town.  
Everybody wears blue jeans,  
men and women,  
fancy expensive ones—  
with stitching on the sides—  
or made to look like  
clothes that used to work the land  
but don't in tourist towns.

Free spirits in blue jeans  
drive small cars  
with bicycle racks  
or ski racks  
or surfboard racks  
or luggage racks  
or fancy pick-up trucks  
and park them in rows.  
(The line of license tags reads like  
a recitation of the fifty states.)  
They seek to buy the Promised Land  
on the slopes,  
on the surf,  
in the sun,  
in the shops,  
in the bars,  
or in some decorated tin cup  
offered by the locals  
(also in blue jeans)  
who used to think  
the Promised Land might really come  
when, at last,

the cars from fifty states  
filled up the parking lots.

One day  
I'm gonna write a letter  
to those folks in Washington.  
You know what I'm gonna say?  
I'm gonna say,  
"We don't need no more roads."

We got more roads now  
than we fill up potholes on . . .  
and ever'where you look,  
there's some new one goin' in.

What I'm gonna tell those folks up there is this:  
There's roads enough right now  
that people wants to live on big ones can,  
and people wants to live on little ones can do that too.  
More big ones is gonna get more people,  
more little ones is gonna get more people,  
and we don't need no more people.

Most of all,  
we don't need no more new roads.

It's changing here.  
I know it.  
Everywhere you look  
somebody's putting in  
a new road,  
a new house,  
a new business,  
a new something-or-another,  
and I know we're growing,  
we need some of that . . .  
but we're changing  
the beauty out of things.

It's not like  
you can't tear down  
a mountain.  
Anymore, you can  
and people do.  
So what's one mountain,  
more or less?  
Level off the tops,  
we might have something to farm.

I never thought much about progress  
until now,  
and I certainly never thought of myself  
as against it,  
but it's turning out I am against it.  
And it's not because progress is bad.

It's because progress—

the way we're doing it—  
is so ugly.  
A mountain is beautiful.

I'm young  
I know that,  
and probably rash,  
but I swear  
I hope I die  
before the only thing that's left  
that takes your breath away  
around here  
is the smell.

The first time I sat in a restaurant  
where blacks were not served  
Martin Luther King was still alive.  
I knew I would not be served;  
I knew it would be me who served  
time in jail. I had taken a shower  
and eaten my lunch in preparation.  
When I came to consciousness  
I had vomited my lunch,  
I had been beaten and handcuffed  
to the bars of a cell in the city jail.  
I stayed in that position for a week.  
I had a wound on my head  
that needed medical attention.  
It was not the last time I sat  
where blacks were not served.  
I did it until I was sentenced  
to the federal pen or the U.S. Army,  
my choice, and I served in Vietnam.

M.L.K. was murdered twenty years ago.  
My daughter is almost the age I was  
and we were sitting in a restaurant  
where blacks are not served.  
There was no sign that said white only,  
there was a waitress who behaved  
as though she could not see us.  
“We’re color blind in America,”  
my daughter said and we walked out.

Black people already know this story

and who else do I think might listen—  
the woman who refused to see us?  
the couple who came in after we did  
who were served when we were not?  
This story is not newsworthy, nobody  
needed stitches, but this is the same story  
as the one that cracked my head open.  
The only thing that changed is the law.

I want to know when you get to be from a place,  
five years, ten, twenty?  
What about when you find a place you love?

“But honey, where are you from?”

It is a discriminatory question,  
and it turns up everywhere  
including job applications.

I am from three states  
and six different cities.

I am from Interstate 40.

I am from the neighborhoods  
where people moved every other year.

I am from the work my father did.

I am from the things I hang on my wall  
and the bed I get out of in the morning.

I am from that suspicious minority  
that doesn't have roots like trees.

I have lived here eight years,  
and the mountain I see when I wake up is imprinted—  
like a duck, I know my mother when I see her.

Can you earn being from a place?

I work, I vote, I help my neighbors, I pay taxes.  
Can I pledge allegiance?

People would do better to ask  
where are you from of Eastman  
or Nuclear Fuels Services  
or the waste management company  
that left the toxic dump in Bumpass Cove.

And if the identity is so precious  
they should ask it of Kroger  
and K-Mart and Long John Silver's.  
But it never goes that far.

It just goes to the property boundary  
when my neighbor steps back a step and says,  
"Oh. You're not from here are you?"

# **RELATIONSHIPS**

Either of them young'uns married?

Nope.

Well, they're old enough ain't they?

How old you figure's old enough, old man?

Well, reckon you're right. A girl ought  
to wait a while before she goes  
gettin' herself married. . . .  
Takin' on a man and a family,  
it ain't easy,  
and she don't want to tie herself down  
too soon, now does she. . . ?

If you're askin' me a girl ain't never old enough to marry.

I had a beautiful wife—

    compared to what he's got.

The woman had her faults—

    if you know what I mean—

but they weren't nothing to the faults his woman's got.

The truth is this:

I couldn't live with my wife,  
but I wouldn't have tried  
to live with his.

You know,  
all along I've been back here  
playing second fiddle.  
Like I thought I was supposed to.  
And twenty years goes by.

And I turn around.  
And find the first chair sittin' empty.  
Has been all along.  
Got cobwebs in it  
old enough to petrify.

First chair's out  
on permanent coffee break  
except he don't know how  
to brew his own.

He's plannin' on findin'  
somebody else to do it.

I'm gonna buy me  
a new set of strings for this old fiddle  
and sit down in the first chair for a while.

I expect we find out  
who can carry a tune in a bucket  
and who can't.

Forty years we courted . . .

Thirty-nine.

Now, my mother didn't like Jack . . .

. . . and Amy wouldn't marry . . .

. . . well, I couldn't without her consent  
and her so close to dyin'.

It took her thirty-nine years  
and she died of old age.

But we always thought,  
and you too . . .

. . . that she was on the edge.  
She always said . . .

She thought Jack would leave me.  
Well, twenty years proved her wrong.

Yeah, and the second twenty proved her stubborn.

She worried, Jack.

Ah, I know.

Like to of killed me.

But we endured.

We did that and we've done more.

We've loved each other for forty years.

Well, three days ago, my mother died

and we're announcin' our intent. . .

. . . to marry.

So long a waitin' makes the moment awful sweet, Amy.

That it does.

I threw my mother-in-law out.  
She made me mad  
trying to tell me things  
ain't none of her business.  
I told my wife—  
we been married four weeks—  
I told my wife  
to tell her  
I'd had enough  
and I didn't wanna see that woman again.

And you know what she did,  
my mother-in-law?  
She said  
she's gonna tell her old man  
to come and take the car back.  
And I told my wife  
to just let her.  
Damn car don't start anyhow.  
Have to jump it off  
ever' time you want to go somewhere,  
and it with a new battery.  
I had to put a alternator in it  
just this morning,  
and it still don't start.  
And I got forty dollars in new used tires on it.

Well, she did call him  
and I called him and asked him  
if he's gonna try to come and get it,  
and he said he wouldn't,

but I told my wife to just let him.  
He ain't gettin'  
the battery  
or the tires  
or the alternator  
and he's gonna have a hell of a time  
draggin' that car  
out of the parkin' lot.

My daughter got divorced  
and she and her little boy  
has moved back in with me.  
For the time being.

And everything she goes to do,  
she's got a book.

Gonna cook something,  
she looks up in the book  
to see what she wants  
and then when we ain't got it,  
she's got to run out to the grocery store.

"I'll just be gone a minute, Mama, you keep Chip."

Now, we got hamburger meat  
and we got beans  
and all the rest of the stuff  
you put up from a garden,  
and there's been many a soul  
to make it through this world  
without ever tastin' veal scallopini.  
I could have done without it.

And she made herself a dress.  
First she read the book of sewing machine directions,  
then she's got this other book  
that tells her how to make things.

Took two days for something

that might of taken me two hours.  
I said that.

“But I did it right,” she says.

Then Chip put a towel down the flush commode,  
and she read *The Reader’s Digest Fix-it Book*  
while the damn thing flooded up the bathroom.

“I didn’t know how,” she said.

You see, that book  
don’t tell about straightening out a coat hanger  
and fishing something out.

“Not everything’s got a book written about it,” I told her.

“I know that, Mama, there wasn’t a book written about my  
marriage.

I might not be here if there had a’ been.”

Now what am I supposed to say to that?

I cannot remember all the times he hit me.  
I might could count black eyes,  
how many times I said I ran into doors  
or fell down or stepped into the path  
of any flying object except his fist.  
Once I got a black eye playing softball.  
The rest were him. Seven, eight.  
I can name what of me he broke:  
my nose, my arm, and four ribs  
in the course of six years' marriage.  
The ribs were after I said divorce  
and in spite of a peace bond.  
I spent the night in the hospital.  
He did not even spend a night in jail.  
The sheriff I helped elect does not  
apply the law to family business.  
He always swore he never meant to do it.  
I do believe he never planned.  
It was always just the day,  
the way I looked at him afraid.  
Maybe the first time he did not mean to do it,  
maybe the broken ribs were for good luck.

I want to post this in ladies' rooms,  
write it on the tags of women's underwear,  
write it on coupons to go in Tampax packages,  
because my ex-husband will want to marry again  
and there is no tattoo where he can't see it  
to tell the next woman who might fall in love with him.  
After six months, maybe a year,  
he will start with a slap you can brush off.

Leave when he slaps you.  
When he begins to call you cunt and whore  
and threatens to kill you if you try to go  
it will almost be like teasing but it is not.  
Keep two sets of car keys for yourself.  
Take your children with you when you go.  
If he is throwing things, he is drinking.  
If he is drunk enough he cannot catch you.  
A punch in the breast hurts worse than a punch in the jaw.  
A hit with an object does more damage than a hit with a fist  
unless he is so drunk he picks up a broom instead of a poker.  
If you pick up the poker, he will try to get it.  
If he gets it, he will hit you with it.  
He probably will not kill you because you will pass out,  
and then, he is all the sudden sorry and he stops.  
When he says he will not hit you again  
as he drives you to the hospital,  
both of you in tears and you in pain,  
you have stayed much too long already.  
Tell the people at the hospital the truth  
no matter how much you think you love him.  
Do not say you fell down stairs  
no matter how much he swears he loves you.  
He does love you, he loves you hurt and he will hit you  
again.

# WORK

This is the only junkyard in this county.  
Ain't it beautiful?

I spend ever' Friday and Saturday night  
goin' to auctions to get this.  
I buy careful:  
money don't grow on trees around here,  
and I got just about everything  
a body needs.

I specialize in hubcaps  
but I got good stuff,  
wire and clothes and locks and coffee cups  
and tools and pots and furniture.  
You name it, I got it or I'll get it,  
and I'll sell it to you at the salvage price.  
See, it don't matter to nothin'  
but the angle of a person's nose  
whether somethin's been used before or not.

I run a kind of service too.  
You tell me what you want  
and if it ain't here already,  
I'll keep an eye out. No extra charge.

Don't talk to me about no options; I'm poor.  
. . . them talking about choosin' one "lifestyle" or  
another. . .

I get to choose  
between pinto beans or navy beans at the grocery store,  
between rats or roaches where I live,  
between the used coats at the Salvation Army.

I get to choose  
whether me and my kids are going to be hungry  
or I'm gonna get food stamps.

I get to choose  
the work I'm goin' to do,  
whose john I'm gonna wash which day of the week.

That's the choosin' I get to do  
'cause I ain't learned in schools  
and now I got four young'uns.

But I am educated.  
I know when somebody's talkin' trash  
ain't worth feedin' to hogs.

I've worked this place  
over and over again,  
year in, year out  
tryin' to grow a livin' on it.  
And I do. Used to be a decent livin'.  
Not anymore but I'm still a-livin' on it.  
This patch of ground  
or this fellow one is tired out.

I could make more money  
takin' up tithes at the poorhouse.

My son, he got himself a job  
at that plant that makes the rubber gloves.  
If he'd ever quit for long enough  
we might could get this place goin' again.

I asked him would he think on that.  
He said there's easier ways  
of breakin' your back than scratchin' in dirt.

Oh my good Lord, I am not a young man anymore.  
I have spent my life at work  
I felt might help to keep things whole.  
It tears my soul when I see  
the earth spoiled for money,  
for some small increment of time,  
or because it doesn't fit a plan . . .  
some tom-fool set of words on paper  
conceived behind desks in offices with no windows.  
Behind a desk, there are no fish in water.  
There are numbers, and percentages die  
with certain concentrations of heavy metals  
or changes in temperature, not fish.  
There are no pictures of floating dead on office walls  
and references to the food chain might as well mean  
another billion whoppers passed through the golden arches.

I write and no one reads  
or worse, someone does read  
and the scientific language numbs the brain.  
I say some fish by the Latin name  
“contains five times federally accepted standards  
of mercury contamination in its muscle tissue.”  
Who gives a damn? I cannot say  
eating that fish contributes to your death.

I have not helped to keep things whole.  
I have done my work, I have loved the earth,  
but I didn't start shouting soon enough  
or loud enough and now all shouts are muffled  
by the volumes of paper the likes of me produce,

or else there are no ears.

Who gives a damn? Me. I do.  
I used to think I knew some answers or could find them. . . .  
I had some ways, some knowledge,  
and a saving grace, the scientific method.

It may be the ultimate in cruelty jokes—remember them?—  
to write what could be without exaggeration  
the beginning to the end of life  
in some small creek, not to mention some small planet,  
and to watch some bureaucrat tear the research up  
and say, “Get me some other figures;  
that set doesn’t fit the plan.”

I used to work down  
the dye section,  
hey, hey. . . .  
They paid me good too.  
A hundred and fifty's a awful lot  
to carry home with you  
every week  
thirty years ago.  
But I quit.  
I'd come back home from Detroit  
to take that job  
and I quit.  
They told me I was crazy  
'cause I couldn't make  
that much money anywhere else  
and they were right about that,  
but let me tell you,  
it wasn't crazy,  
it was scared.

I used to wake up  
middle of the night  
and whatever side I'd been sleepin' on  
I couldn't feel it,  
couldn't move,  
and I'd think it's just me  
and wait for a while  
and the feelin'd come back.  
But one afternoon  
down at the plant,  
this boy—

he worked on line,  
now I didn't work on line—  
but this boy froze up.  
His arms locked up  
in front of him  
and it's a week  
before he got the feelin' back.

And I got to thinkin'  
maybe it wasn't just me  
feelin' so funny of an evening  
and I quit.

Now, I'm telling you the truth,  
I'm seventy-four years old  
and it's been thirty year  
since I worked down there,  
but you know somethin' . . .  
of them that stayed  
and a lot of 'em was younger than me  
but of them that stayed  
there ain't one alive today  
to tell about it.

Right after I left  
I thought,  
Lord, you're crazy, Lee,  
leaving a job  
pays so good.  
And I went down  
to Florida

bummin' around awhile  
'cause I couldn't find work.  
But I'm alive,  
I am alive,  
and I feel awful funny sometimes  
about them that ain't.

I've been at that job  
four year  
and if I stay twenty more,  
I can retire okay.  
And it ain't too bad for line work.  
It's heavy though,  
lifting sheet pieces  
and hookin' 'em up.  
I already hurt my back some,  
and the edges are too sharp.  
I'll lose a finger or two  
before it's over,  
I know I will.  
I just hope  
I don't lose  
no arms or legs or nothing'd  
disable me.

A finger's nothing,  
my dad lost parts of three of his  
on a job,  
but a hand or a arm . . .  
I hope that don't happen to me.  
I'm kinda attached to them, you know.

Just have to step careful, I reckon.

Come times sometimes,  
I look back.  
I reckon everybody does.  
I realized  
I never really made  
any big decisions.  
Not basic ones,  
not for myself.  
I never asked myself  
whether or not  
I really wanted  
to stay with this.  
I just assumed I did.  
I might have thought of that  
some thirty years ago.  
Instead, I made the hundred million  
little decisions,  
the time consumers,  
the ones that lead to glasses  
and to headaches:  
Can I pay an extra hand?  
What do I plant where this year?  
Who do I try to sell it to?

All those.

Well, I sit here  
and I dream  
what would have happened  
if I'd turned  
some little one

of those decisions around,  
where I might be  
and what I might be doing.  
But I'm not.

And then I think  
I grew up here,  
I have lived here,  
worked here,  
and I have made  
all my decisions  
about here and for here,  
and in those many moments  
I have kept my family together  
and in health,  
I have lived in harmony and good union  
with my friends and neighbors  
and I have kept  
a piece of earth  
in working order.  
I am proud of that.

Twenty-one years,  
long enough to grow one of two children  
to the age of her majority,  
I scheduled the machines, the space  
and the people on the floor for Kingsport Press,  
and when they terminated me  
they sent a man who had been there  
two and a half months  
to thank me for my years of service.  
All I could think to say was  
I resent this.  
Now, I can think of plenty more.

I was terminated because I earned too much.  
They will re-name my job—  
they cannot do without it—  
and pay some new man less to do it.  
It is a complicated responsibility  
and for a while, he will lose them more money  
than I cost. But not for long enough.  
The valuable employee awards I got—  
the last one was last year—  
have turned into a bad joke.

Now, I get the opportunity to clean out my office.

I get severance pay if I sign a form that says I will not sue.

I get what I contributed to my retirement, no more.

I get to write a resume.

I have never felt so faceless or so used.

For the next person who pats me on the back  
to say a rotten deal, a crying shame,  
or some other easy whitewash  
that does not say what happened  
I have some new words: try injustice,  
say abuse out loud.

And to those who will not look at me  
because somehow fired and failed  
are too close together,  
bend over this barrel, friend,  
your turn is likely to be next.

And for all who've never thought to ask it,  
a question I never thought to ask till now:  
who decided money is more valuable than people,  
and why did all the rest of us agree to work that way?

I worked there as a secretary.  
I wasn't there when they lost uranium—  
that was when they hit the news—  
but I had friends who felt like  
it was a sloppy operation even then.  
There were days when you went outside  
and something in the air would make  
the nylon hose melt off your legs.  
You'd step out and seconds later  
you'd be wearing holes with webs between 'em.  
They kept hose for us free.  
There were days I lost two pair.  
Somehow the two pair days put me over a line  
I hadn't really thought about at one pair.  
I took up driving forty miles each way  
to another job. I don't know yet  
what it was that ate the hose but I guess  
there's good news. Friends who work there  
say it doesn't happen often anymore.

I have a direct mail business which means  
I stuff a lot of envelopes.

And the mornings fifteen thousand pieces  
looks like several thousand more than I can do

I start naming  
the people I don't work for by doing this.

Rod Wilson and I stuff a flyer in an envelope  
Jeffery Honeycutt and I stuff another one.

Ed Boswell, Joe Gregory, Tom Cook, Warren Jones.  
It don't just help me do the work.

Naming those boys gets it done.

# **WE SAY OF OURSELVES**

I want to tell,  
a person can't help if they're not so pretty as the next.

All of us are given different things  
and the gift God give to some of us  
ain't always lookin'  
like we just come out of a beauty shop.

Now, I don't mind.  
I got what I want.

But I always told my mother  
that teasing me about always lookin' so awful  
was goin' to make me mean. . . .  
And it did.

The day I married, my mother  
had one piece of wedding advice:  
“Don’t make good potato salad,”  
she told me, “it’s too hard to make  
and you’ll have to take something  
every time you get invited somewhere.  
Just cook up beans; people eat them too.”

My mother was good at potato salad  
and part of the memories of my childhood  
have to do with endless batches made  
for family get-togethers, church picnics,  
Civitan suppers, Democratic party fund raisers,  
whatever event called for potato salad.  
I’d peel the hard-boiled eggs.  
My mother would pack  
her big red plastic picnic bowl  
high with yellow potato salad  
(she used mustard),  
and it would sit proud on endless tables  
and come home empty.

What my mother might and could have said is:  
Choose carefully what you get good at  
'cause you'll spend the rest of your life doing it.  
But I didn't hear that.  
I was young and anxious to please  
and I knew her potato salad secrets.

And the thousand other duties  
given to daughters by mothers,

and sometimes I envy those women  
who get by with pots of beans.

I was born three months before I's due,  
then I turned around  
and got pneumonia  
and then when I was nine,  
I had leukemia.  
I did.  
I fell off'en a horse  
and broke my neck  
and lived.  
And I went to war.  
And since then,  
I've wrecked two cars  
and walked away,  
clipped the wings off an airplane  
landin' it,  
and run out of a house afire.  
I wiped out on a motorcycle  
doin' about a hundred.

I been married full four times,  
middle two liked to 'a killed me.

The fourth one's doin' alright so far,  
except she keeps a-tellin' me  
to be careful,  
that I'm gettin' old.

Ain't no hell on earth  
like small town lonely  
where every person  
knows where you've been  
and what's happened to you,  
and every one of them  
made their decision  
once or twice  
about whether you was right  
or wrong  
in what's gone past.  
And everybody but you  
knows how their mind's made up.

The most you ever get  
from any of them  
is the time of day.  
It's just that  
some folks smile when you ask them,  
and some don't.

Broke  
is not sissy-footing around  
saying, "I can't, I'm broke,"  
holding a twenty-dollar bill in your pocket,  
or  
hollering about being  
down to the wire  
with a dollar or two in the checking  
and a whole wad's not been touched  
in the savings.

That's poor-mouthing.

Broke  
is out of all liquid assets  
including the ones in the pop-tops.  
Broke  
is cruising the house  
looking for something to sell.

Broke  
is when I hock  
my daddy's rifle.  
You can ask me  
where's the gun,  
and if it's down at Bud's,  
you know the times are bad.

Really broke:  
Hock money's run out and no more credit at the bar.  
I sell whatever I'm driving.

Broke and in trouble with the law:  
I put the red truck up  
and borrow money against the title.

Never got down no worse than that.

Used to be just fine with me  
to go out huntin'  
till last year my husband came home  
with a little eight-point buck.  
He was so pleased.  
“Big enough to mount,” he said.  
And he took the head along to the taxidermist.

Well, I cooked that deer,  
roasts and stews,  
and we had company in  
'cause Lowell was the only one around  
that got a kill that season,  
and there was all the huntin' talk around the table,  
who got what,  
who lost what,  
and who's gonna get what all next year. . .  
you know them kind of stories . . .  
and me just laughin' right along,  
laughin' and cookin' and eatin' right up to the afternoon  
Lowell brought the head back home.

He hung it over my piano,  
and I swear it is the saddest thing I ever saw,  
so dead and out of place.  
I told Lowell then  
that I couldn't stop him killin' one again  
but not to bring it home  
'cause I won't cook it  
and I won't eat it  
and I don't want no part

of the death of another deer.

I look at that head  
every time I sit down at my piano.  
And I'll tell you—  
it's just about taken up my happy songs.

Every time I get a little headache  
my daughter tells me  
I shouldn't take these BC powders. . . .  
She says, "Mama, you know  
how that does your stomach."  
And of course I know how that does my stomach.  
It gets my little ulcer all in a fit.

And then my daughter says,  
"Mama, you shouldn't drink that milk,  
you know it gives you headaches. . . ."  
And of course I know that too  
but I have to do somethin'  
for the little ulcer  
'cause the BC's are so hard on it  
and the milk does get down in there  
and coats my stomach.

But then I am allergic to the milk.  
Gives me headaches.

And then I do have to go  
and take another BC powder.

And then my daughter starts in about  
"It's a vicious circle,"  
and "You're chasing your own tail,"  
that kind of thing. . . .

What she don't understand  
is that a person does

what they have to do.

And all that hecklin'  
don't help high blood pressure  
the least little bit.

Aw, lemme tell you,  
this bachelor stuff,  
it's great.  
Out from under Mama.

I'm just about moved in  
my new place.  
Would'a been sooner  
except there was some water standin' in it  
and all my junk would'a got wet.

It don't matter to me if they fade some, where do I load 'em in?

Now, Mama's good,  
she'd fix your food,  
but she always has to know where you been.  
"Where you been, it's twelve-thirty, where you been?"  
Mama has to know.

Where do I put the money in this thing?

"You been drinkin', you drinkin' licker?"  
She wants to know.  
Of course, I been drinkin',  
don't everybody?  
A few beers after work to start,  
and you know how it goes. . . .

This machine still don't start. Where's the button? Oh.

No more "Go comb your hair."

No more “Go change your clothes.”  
No more askin’ where I been.  
No more “Bring down your dirty laundry” either,  
I do my own.

Hey, where’s the soap? Don’t they put the soap in these machines?

Well, it don’t matter  
’cause I’m gonna throw away  
all them old sewed-up things anyhow.  
I’m working now.  
I can buy ’em new.  
Ass-patched blue jeans ain’t gonna be my style no more.

I ain't had no night,  
ain't had no day,  
ain't had no two weeks, either.

Hell, I ain't had no month when you come to it.

The dog choked,  
the car wrecked,  
the old man died  
(course, we'd been expectin' that),  
and now,  
I got a broke toe  
come from where  
I dropped a skillet on my foot.

Ain't had no month to speak of,  
that's the truth.

If the next one don't get better,  
ain't likely gonna be no me  
to speak about it.

Amen.

I lived off old 42,  
up Cook's Holler,  
through the gap  
and down Limestone Creek a ways. . .  
where it forks, you take the red side,  
cross the bridge  
and run a mile or two  
along the foot of that little hill  
where they didn't build  
the road across 'cause of who owned the property.  
It used to be a yellow house.

Now, would that have been the way  
you'd 'a got to Christiansburg  
if you had to go?

Honey, you drive  
two weeks to yesterday out 58  
turn up the creek at Richmond's Bend,  
turn down two miles in at the fork,  
turn left at the blue and black Buick,  
and come to the end of the road.  
12 miles from where you're sitting.  
Step on it  
and we'll wait dinner for you.

My brother died sitting  
at the dinner table.  
He had to be surprised.  
I know he hadn't planned  
for mortality right then.

He wasn't much for plans.  
He liked making deals.  
Jewels, pocket watches,  
a knife if it was old,  
and wives, three in all.  
He'd dig in his pocket  
for change to buy a coke  
and bring out diamonds  
every time and show 'em,  
tell how he just got back  
from "a buyin' trip."  
Mexico, he'd say, Peru.  
I never did believe him.  
He went to Las Vegas  
getting married and divorced.

Neither of us ever had  
much luck with women.

I'd say he got the diamonds  
at the same flea markets  
he got the wives, the watches  
and a pocketknife he swore  
belonged to Jesse James.

His latest woman called me  
when he died, said somebody  
had to come to sign stuff,  
said he had not left a will  
and asked when the time came  
to divide the property,  
could I find it in my heart  
to speak for her?  
Said they'd planned to marry.  
Said his ex-wives had  
already hired lawyers.

I told her to hold her horses,  
I wasn't adjusted to him being dead.

When I got in at the airport  
nobody was there to get me,  
nobody was at the house,  
the girlfriend's stuff was gone  
and I couldn't find no diamonds.  
I had to call up funeral homes  
to find out where his body was.  
The only folks who came to the buryin'  
were all the ex-wives's lawyers.

I watched the first sunrise  
I remember seeing last week.  
I am thirty-five.

I'm up at sunrise, I have  
a job that ruins my wrists  
and two children.  
By sunrise, I am already busy.

Once, I sat awake for  
a month of sunrises  
that began with a call  
from the youngest: Mama . . .  
The child got so sick  
he would not open his eyes.  
His room faced west,  
I watched—I counted—sunsets.

He is thirteen now  
and mows for spending money.

So, Saturday, my husband and I  
left the house before dawn.  
It was my birthday, my choice,  
my present, we went fishing.

I love fishing.

The pain was in my wrists  
but casting a fishing line  
is not the same as

dis-assembling chickens—  
that's their word for it—  
on a factory line. My job.

There we sat, me shivering,  
in the dark with the crickets  
and a rim of bright pink  
lit the mountains so quickly  
I didn't notice it coming.  
It looked like an accident.  
What's that? I asked.  
This sounds so foolish now.  
That light. "The dawn,"  
my husband said and laughed.  
I wept, I couldn't stop myself,  
I don't ever remember seeing  
a sunrise before.

"Happens every morning,  
where on earth you been?" he asked.

Cutting up chickens.  
Raising children.

When I die, I want to lay here  
next to Mama and whisper  
how sorry I am you took her.

Next to Mama?  
Why should you be next to her?

There's lots of space.  
You can be next to daddy.  
Or over next to Hubert.  
That's the prettiest view.

I'm the one took care of Mama.

You took her to the hospital.

I saw how sick she was.

She didn't want to go to the hospital.

Her life was made up  
of things she do not want to do

Now I'm not saying the hospital  
was what killed her but

and sometimes mine is too.

I did know any wish could be her last  
and she did not wish to go to the hospital.

She asked me to move her,  
said you were a'smothering her,

said she couldn't get no rest  
but what you woke her up  
to make sure she wasn't dead.

She was delirious!

Either way, she needed more help than she was getting.

I want her to know I tried to keep her  
and I am sorry. . .

Oh, hush.  
Mama don't want to hear that  
any more than I do.

I want to lay next to her so I can say it.

You better plan to wait awhile  
cause I'll make sure you have to shout  
from over next to Hubert  
if you die first.

I am asking you to come back home  
before you lose the chance of seein' me alive.  
You already missed your daddy.  
You missed your uncle Howard.  
You missed Luciel.  
I kept them and I buried them.  
You showed up for the funerals.  
Funerals are the easy part.

You even missed that dog you left.  
I dug him a hole and put him in it.  
It was a Sunday morning, but dead animals  
don't wait no better than dead people.

My mama used to say she could feel herself  
runnin' short of the breath of life. So can I.  
And I am blessed tired of buryin' things I love.  
Somebody else can do that job to me.  
You'll be back here then; you come for funerals.

I'd rather you come back now and got my stories.  
I've got whole lives of stories that belong to you.  
I could fill you up with stories,  
stories I ain't told nobody yet,  
stories with your name, your blood in them.  
Ain't nobody gonna hear them if you don't  
and you ain't gonna hear them unless you get back home.

When I am dead, it will not matter  
how hard you press your ear to the ground.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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