

Judith Goode

## Around Robin Hood's Barn

My therapist wants me to feel my feelings. I have a CD of bird songs and I'm listening to those and sitting in my upholstered rocking chair. So I'm rocking back and forth and listening to bird songs. I free-associate in accompaniment to the bird songs, remembering all the times I heard bird songs. When I was a child, a song sparrow trilled in the tree outside my bedroom window. We were living in the country then. When we moved to the city, the bird songs were house sparrows, chirping on the sidewalks and in the park. Summers we went to the lake and birds were plentiful, a loon with its crazy call scaring us in the night.

Evenings I'd sit alone by the water with my drink. That was how summers were at the lake, swimming both morning and afternoon with lunch and a snooze in the middle. I was the only one who drank. The rest of the family wasn't as interested in booze as I was. I broiled fish, and steamed vegetables and potatoes for them, produce bought at the fruit stand on the main road and grown locally. The fish came from the lake via the local fishermen. I cooked and drank, then washed up and drank.

In the evening, the yellow crowned night heron came out to feed at the edge of the water and sometimes a great blue heron showed up, too. I sat still and watched them, occasionally lifting the glass to my lips. Water birds have an aura of the mysterious for me, perhaps because they're mostly silent. I've never heard a great blue make a

sound, although if you wait long enough, the yellow crowned night heron will give a hoarse croak like a rusty wheel turning.

There's a creek where we catch blue claw crabs by throwing a line with a raw fish head on the end into the water and waiting for the crab to bite. It's like lake fishing but more exciting because the crab looks so big at the end of the line. When we pull the line in and shove the crab into the pail, the crab looks smaller. It was an illusion that made the crab big in the water but small on land because water can magnify the size of something.

It's hard doing what my therapist asked me to do. It's hard for me to feel my feelings. I've been in a padded cell since breaking up with my boyfriend. I did it because my parents told me that the relationship was making me sick. I think they had it backward and that breaking up was making me sick. My parents can be convincing and they're very sure of themselves.

It took me a year to make the break. My boyfriend didn't believe that I was breaking up with him and I didn't believe it either. The last time I saw my boyfriend was at his uncle's house in Kent, Connecticut, in the country, inland from the lake. He was carrying the pail of milk we'd just gotten from the farm and the milk sloshed as the pail bumped against his leg. It sloshed but it didn't spill. I told him as we were walking across the field that separates his uncle's house from the farm. It was early evening and the birds were singing their last songs of the day. Swallows were circling and swooping. Something you don't believe in takes a long time to tell. You go round robin hood's barn, as my mother says.

My mother has been married to my father for about forty years. She knows about marriage but I'm not sure what she knows about love. When I told her that I was having trouble breaking off the relationship, she said, just persevere. The birds are saying farewell for the evening. When it gets dark, only the owls and that scary loon will call. The screech owl sounds like a woman crying hysterically. That's how my mother describes it. She paints a

picture with her words. It's a descending scale using high notes at the beginning. The first few notes are what startle you.

It happens every time. I'm sitting quietly on the edge of my bed and suddenly there's a horrendous sound: the screech owl. I imagine situations in which I might be a woman crying hysterically, like now, today, with blood on my hands, so to speak. Ending a relationship where there's love on both sides causes bloodshed. I imagine a heart-shaped figure on paper, bleeding red ink.

I have a friend who can change her tampon when she's sitting in the passenger side of the car. Presumably, her boyfriend is driving. She's adept at pulling out the bloody tampon and inserting the fresh one. She doesn't mind the sight of blood as I do. I struggle through my periods because I'm so phobic about blood. All this is new since the breakup. Things that used to be easy for me are now hard. I live alone in an upstairs apartment. At noon and five o'clock I can smell my neighbor's meal cooking, and often I'm able to identify what the meal is. Today she fried a hamburger for lunch. I'm becoming a vegetarian. I eat fruit and nuts for lunch and eggs for dinner. I've gotten into the habit of skipping breakfast, which I know is unhealthy. But breaking up a good relationship is also unhealthy. Friends tell me that I let my parents run my life. I think they're right but I don't know the cure for this behavior. It means creating a new reality separate from your family. It's not enough to live on your own. You have to cut ties or at least loosen them.

As my therapist says, when my parents tell me to jump, I ask, "How high?" Some platitudes are useful. You can learn valuable things from them. For example, I'm almost twenty-five and still I'm in the thrall of my parents. My boyfriend loved me as I was but my parents expect new achievements from me every year. It wasn't enough that I was named scholar of the year when I was a sophomore in college and that afterward I won a Fulbright scholarship to study French at the Sorbonne in Paris. They expected me to win a Woodrow Wilson fellowship for

my doctoral studies, which I didn't do. I have ambition but only up to a point. My boyfriend and I were similar in this regard. We were excellent students at college but not stars.

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My boyfriend's family is Norwegian by origin. Like many Scandinavians they brood. My boyfriend's uncle is a case in point, as is his father. Both are silent for long periods of time when in the company of others. They are brooding. When we visited the uncle, he came out of his mood long enough to go into a harangue about the times we live in. He was also puritanical and was infuriated when he found my diaphragm on the bathroom basin, where I forgot it. I think the uncle knew we had sex but didn't want to be reminded of it. In the uncle's cluttered living room was an old out of tune piano. I played a Bach prelude on it. I couldn't remember the fugue.

When I stayed over at my boyfriend's house, I shared a bedroom with his younger sister. She wore her blond hair in a miniature ponytail that curled over at the end. Afternoons were long and quiet. I remember helping his mother in the kitchen. Their appliances were old and the refrigerator had a motor that sounded like the outboard motor on a boat.

My boyfriend's family is working class: his father is a machinist and his mother is a nurse. My family is middle class. My parents are both college professors. My mother says there are statistics proving that marriages between people of similar backgrounds have a better chance of lasting than marriages of people who have different backgrounds. No doubt she has a point. But it's a point proving her argument, which is that my boyfriend and I aren't suited to each other. This reasoning was guaranteed to make her feel better about interfering.

After I succeeded in breaking up with him, my boyfriend began dating one of my best friends at college. To me, this showed that he had a strong survival instinct. I, by contrast, haven't seriously dated anyone in these four years since college. A date here and there but nothing of importance. And to myself, I still call him "my boyfriend," as if things were the same as always and there were no rupture between us.

I stopped talking to that friend when she and my boyfriend were dating, as a form of silent protest, I suppose – silent because I never explained myself to her. I'd guess that she needed no explanation. If I'd been in her place I wouldn't have dated my friend's ex-boyfriend. But a case could be made that it was what people call a "mercy fuck." That's certainly possible. It lasted only a month or two. And whereas I dropped out of school after my junior year, my boyfriend graduated with our class. I went back after they'd graduated and lived like a recluse in a room at one of the professor's houses. I walked across a field, often snow covered, to get to my classes.

Just down the hall from me lived the professor's mentally retarded daughter. She would turn on the radio after she came home from work and stamp around in her room – what she called "dancing." I, who had developed phobias, had one of meeting up with her in the kitchen, which I was privileged to use by my arrangement with the professor and his wife. He was a humble man with a doctorate in chemistry. His wife wore her grayish-blond hair piled on top of her head and she liked to chat, something that I wasn't very good at. I did better in serious conversations about ideas, for example. Chatting was not my strong point. And I was fast becoming a hermit like my boyfriend's uncle. The one thing that I was good at was school. I'm now in graduate school in the Midwest, where they offer a program that suits my academic goals.

I live in a pleasant apartment with a large kitchen and a relatively large bathroom. There are a living room, a dining room, a bedroom, the kitchen, and the bathroom. My downstairs neighbor and I have the only two apartments in the house, which dates back to early in the twentieth century. It's brown brick and badly needs a paint

job in the hallways. My apartment was newly painted when I moved in, including the wood floors. These I requested to be painted white.

Not long ago I threw a party for a friend and her boyfriend, who had just gotten engaged. I wore a black sheath and had bottles of champagne on ice in my tub. The friend is a light-skinned African-American with a sharp tongue. The fiancé is white. I had a letter from my other good friend from college in which she wrote that my boyfriend is married, also to a light-skinned African-American from our college class. He works as a film editor and I don't know what she does. They have one child and another on the way. She, I remember, is a compulsive talker while he is full of silences. I can't imagine them together.

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This past summer I went to the lake with my parents. My mother and I got into the habit of having a late-night beer together in the kitchen. On one of those nights, my mother mentioned my boyfriend and said that I was "well out of it." That was a conversation stopper for me. I said goodnight and went to bed. I couldn't sleep, however. They say that grief makes you sleepless, and I think I'm still grieving over my boyfriend. Our life together is as real today as it was when we were a couple.

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I admit that I drink too much alcohol. That started after the breakup. I haven't had the courage to stop yet. I always put the "yet" in as a kind of place holder so I can go back to it and rewrite the sentence with "I don't

drink.” I need to get a grip on my life. For graduate school, I came as far as I could from the familiar territory in which my boyfriend and I lived. This was the East coast. Our college was small and eastern with the reputation of being liberal. So here I am in the Midwest trying to start my life over again. I’ve done that so many times in so many different ways that it’s sickening to think about. I’ve begun to see myself as a failure – a failure in life though not in school. It’s easy to convince yourself that you’re doing okay if you do well at something, even if it’s just one thing, like school. But I’ve progressed beyond that point so that I have to consider the big picture of my life, which isn’t good. My life is tilted heavily on behalf of school over other activities. This in itself is not healthy.

A couple of men in my classes have made advances toward me. These I rebuffed early and definitively. I notice a new phobia in myself, that of the opposite sex. I’m a maiden graduate student with a destination of a maiden lady becoming ever more real. My students in the classes I teach treat me as you would an eccentric. They avoid jarring me with information I don’t want to learn such as why they’re late with their term paper. They speak softly in class and even more so when they speak to me after class. I think I must come across as a fragile eccentric. I probably have become that. It’s what happens when you reject life as I have. Books are okay; life is debatable.

The friends I gave the party for ask me regularly if they can fix me up with one of their friends. I overcame my phobia for the opposite sex long enough to go out with the friend they insisted on introducing me to. He was an autodidact and amusing, but rather full of himself. He wanted to tell me about the short story he’d written in which he confuses himself with a Christmas tree. He seemed to think that the thesis of the story was readily accessible and couldn’t understand why I found it laughable. He also turned out to be impotent, which made for an embarrassing moment because of course I was asking myself what possessed me for dating this creep. It was the first and last time I gave in to my friends when they said, “Oh, we want to introduce you to so and so because he’s your type...”

After all, what is my type except perfect, as my boyfriend was? I realize that I'm glorifying him by saying so but it's true, at least in my view of what I want in a man. He was sensitive in the extreme but without being effete. He was well read. He was attractive in a little boy way, by which I mean that he looked younger than he was. He was serious without being self-serious. In fact, he could be funny at the same time as he was serious. This, I believe, is essential. We academics have to be able to laugh at ourselves or else we're in danger of becoming pompous.

Last summer at the lake, my father said something unexpected to me. He asked if I missed my boyfriend. I said that of course I did. I wonder if my father, who is rather a cold, distant person, was having regrets for the part he played in urging me to break up with my boyfriend. We were sitting in the living room having a cup of tea after dinner and I had been quiet, as I often am now. Sometimes I can't see the point in talking. What is there to say when you've made the worst possible life decision? My father looked at me with his small watery blue eyes and I think he was surprised that I said yes so readily to his question. I wasn't about to lie to make him feel better. We all have to live with our choices, and his was, in my view, misguided.

I can't help wondering whether my parents were threatened by my boyfriend. He was someone who only spoke when he had something to say and then he spoke honestly. My parents engage in repartee and conversational gambits. My boyfriend didn't speak about things that don't matter. He was economical with his words. And his eyes were strange. He always seemed to be looking at something just above the sight line. He was a fine art painter and saw things differently from the rest of us. I was used to this because I knew him so well. And because it was that gaze of his that I first shared when we met.

We both waited on tables at college and a group of us were standing around in the dining commons waiting for our shift to begin. He was on one side of the group and I was on the other. We looked at each other and



intuited about the other. When we did speak at the end of the shift, we skipped the preliminaries. We had already said it all in that gaze. People who knew each of us found it perfectly natural that we were together.

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I just had a letter from my college friend. In it, she writes that my boyfriend died last month from colon cancer. He was divorced from his wife but, she writes, he was a good father. They had three children. As I reread the letter, I remember ice skating on a pond with my boyfriend and his little sister. His keys fell out of his pocket and onto the ice, and they made a hollow, echoing sound. That's the way I feel right now.

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