

## A HORIZON OF CLOUDS

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John H. Richardson

*"Forget the Earth spinning round the Sun with the motionless stars infinite distances away, and imagine that the Earth is the center of the universe and all the heavenly bodies circle slowly round us . . . this pre-Copernican outlook comes easily as we watch the heavenly bodies rise and set, and is a help in practical navigation."*

—Mary Blewitt, *Celestial Navigation For Yachtsmen*

### Ramblin' Man

In Hawaii we used to cruise around in my dad's pickup. Driving along the red-dirt roads by the edges of the fields, looking out the side window down the curving rows of sugar cane, we'd drink beer and the hot wind and think about mountains and girls, going to the waterfall, maybe a sailing trip in the summer, that kind of thing. And I'd close my eyes and think of her.

She was fourteen. She wore tight Levis and a brown leather bomber jacket and listened to the right bands. I mean, she went from The Doors to Dylan to the Velvet Underground all before the tenth grade. This girl was tough. She took drugs. She drank. She fucked.

I won't make her beautiful. Let's say her eyes are large and brown, with thick dark eyebrows, but we won't give her a regular pixie WASP nose; take it with a bump and slightly flaring nostrils, and her mouth, full-lipped but not perfect, oddly turned and creased in the corners, slightly pursed like she's mocking you a little. And that taunting grin.

I dreamed of her at night, always. Sometimes she stood at a clearing in the woods on top of a ridge, and beyond her I could see the valleys far below and everywhere the ocean, and she was holding a hand back towards me. She was waiting for me, reaching for me. But her eyes were on the ocean, and I felt the pull of the dark trees behind me, and I knew she wouldn't wait for long.

### No Particular Place To Go

It was kinda warm and I was moping down the street, slow and dreamy from the Kansas sun. For some reason I'd gone through town instead of cutting through the wheat fields the way I always did. Maybe Ma asked me to pick up some Kaopectate. So there I was walking past the hardware store and I heard this music coming down the alley, strange music like it was by Indians from India or something. I went down the alley and down at the end of the alley there was this big red door and a red glow coming from under it and I could smell the incense. I think it was incense. Then the door opened.

A girl in a white blouse with long blond pigtails hanging against her cheeks opened it. She smiled like she'd been expecting me and waved me into the room, which was jam-packed fulla people and none of 'em from town. There were girls in silky dresses and guys with long hair in suits. But the first thing I picked out of the blur was the window and what was behind it. It was the ocean. I'd never seen it. I said it out loud.

"That looks like the ocean."

But the girl was gone. I looked around. No one was paying any attention to me but a thin girl with long straight black hair and she just looked at me and looked away.

"I thought there was a girl," I said.

### This Land Is Your Land

In New Mexico we used to ride around in my dad's pickup truck. We went to the desert, we went to the mountains. We went to Taos, we went to Chama. I would read in magazines about New York, L.A., San Francisco, and I thought, that's where I'll find her. The girl with the pigtails and the taunting grin.

One of those places, anyway, faraway.

Our house was made of adobe, only Dad didn't have the money to stucco the outside and each time it rained a little bit more of the adobe mud melted back into the fields. The cows rounded off all the corners by rubbing their cheeks against them to scratch. It began to look like a little pillbox made out of dirt. Finally one day a thunderhead came across the desert, you could see it for miles, coming right for us, and the sky cracked like it was going to split wide open and dumped a lakeful of water on us, and when it was over the roof was in the alfalfa field and the walls were melted and we were on the dining room table under umbrellas. Two cows were standing in the living room, their drool dripping down on the muddy

carpet like thick gooey lace. And Dad said, "Get me a beer, boy."

I knew it was time to leave. I sent in my application to astronaut's school and left my forwarding address with the postlady: From the Redwood Forests to the New York Island. Dad said, "Get me another beer before you go, boy."

But society had no use for me. They asked me about my experience and qualifications. They asked for a resumé. It was certainly a subtle attempt to drive me insane. That's when I began robbing banks.

I'd walk right up to the window and see the ocean beyond, see the sea, that blue infinity that refined itself into such a modest thin line, and I'd slip the note to the teller. It always said the same thing, and it worked every time: I AM AN ANARCHIST AND I DON'T GIVE A SHIT. GIVE ME ALL YOUR MONEY.

### Dance To Keep From Crying

How can I describe her? What a girl. She's the kind of girl Smokey Robinson writes ballads for. She's the kind of girl, when she moves her hips, you hear moans even when there's nobody there. She's a girl just like the girl some miles to your left, who is beautiful and brilliant and lonely and just cried out in her sleep for a man just like you.

She was waking up on a winter's day to the first snowfall of the season, when the tufts of grass poking through the crust are rimmed with white, and the branches on the trees have white blankets, when the stones and hills and barbed wire all have a white echo of themselves piled just above them like the opposite of a shadow, all white white white.

She was body surfing on a far break with flippers so you're just flying for what seems like forever in the crash and rumble of the wave, doing it again and again until the tide slowly changes and the surf turns into a shore break and a big wave hurls you into the sand, rolling you over and over until you forget which way is up.

But she was also shooting your first deer, only it turns out you were drunk and too eager and shot too quick and what you killed was a fawn, and you run to it and hold its head and feel its heart still beating for a while and then it's done but the fawnhead is still warm in your lap and you notice its tongue has left a damp spot the shape of a spoon on your pantleg, and you think, hell, I didn't mean for it to be this way.

At night I dreamed of her, and in my dreams she always wore tight blue jeans and a tank top T-shirt that clung to her small breasts, and she leaned back and opened her arms to me. All around her, the air was filled with music, old blues, Bessie Smith groaning about gin, Big Mama Thornton

shouting, "I got a sweet little angel, I love the way she spread her wings."

My girl.

In my dreams her arms were always open and she smiled with infinite patience waiting for me to forget (about the fawn, the ocean), telling me we didn't need the money I got from banks. But I was bitter as a Norse god. I turned my head and waited for her arms to close.

### Heart Of Gold

So I wandered. For years I travelled. I body-surfed on the beaches of El Salvador, smoked dope in a hotel in Lago de Atitlán, drank tequila in a shed in Oaxaca, brooded on the zodiac signs in the ceiling of a hotel at Cuernavaca where Malcolm Lowry once drank gin, took a steamer to Florida and gazed into the ocean Hart Crane jumped into, smuggled pot out of Mexicali with a blonde boy who later became a big time coke dealer and died in a gunfight, smoked heroin at Manhattan Beach and threw up, tumbled whores by the tunnels of Manhattan, sat zazen in a monastery in Big Sur, camped out in the woods above Santa Cruz, bought black buds in the tacky International Marketplace at Waikiki, hiked the Diamond Mountains of South Korea, where Chinese emperors went on their vacations, sailed a small boat to Block Island, slept on sacks of vegetables in a Korean train, got busted in Honolulu for dealing acid and spent three days in jail, studied French philosophy at Columbia, played guitar in biker bars in Arizona, wrote stories about gang warfare for a small town newspaper in New Mexico, cooked on a fishing boat in Alaska before they kicked me off because I'd never cooked breakfast before and didn't like breaking eggs to make omelettes. And it added up to nothing. A dream I had. And she was nowhere to be found.

Nothing stayed the same. It was time for a change.

### Satellite Of Love

Within the cinderblock buildings of the NASA complex we heard lectures on space. We exercised and studied, dreamed and floated in the weightless room. I remember a lecture on interior space, intended to prepare us for our life beyond the sun. "I am speaking of the mythology of the room," said Dr. Kafka (he was fired soon after). "An enclosing, protecting space, with or without windows, portholes, peepholes, poopholes and other openings, orifices, and apertures. Doors will not be discussed."

I flew to the islands often, when work was light. She was there, working

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as a flamenco dancer. She was working under another name, but when she stamped her heels and threw back her head, I knew. The guitarists would smile and toss their black hair, burning desperate riffs off the crack of her heels. There was always only one of her.

The ocean was all around us and every day it rained, but the sun always shone and the rains only lasted minutes, dissolving into rainbows that lasted for hours. We would swim in the warm water in the moonlight under the stars. All the world smelled of hibiscus. Charlie Parker stood on the beach and played his heart out just for us, the torn wail of his saxophone bouncing off the stars.

Then money. Telephones. Obligations. Commitments. My career. Her restlessness. The waiting stars—all the problems of an island love in a continental world. What could I do? What could I do?

Only this—

#### For Your Love

There wasn't much time. With the silent alarms singing their malicious song in some security office, I figured on ten minutes to break the safe. The cordless drill (with graphite bit) hummed and the steel of the safe smoked. Minutes passed. I thought of nothing.

Poets are afraid of nothing, she had said. Nothing and death.

I slipped nitro into the holes I had made. Hooking up the wires, I thought: we had thirteen dogs when I was a kid. They all rode in the back of my dad's pickup truck, which didn't have any doors. Then one by one the dogs ran away. My dad died, and I sold the truck.

The safe blew open. Gems.

Why did I do it? Listen: in this world men burrow in the earth, deep as they can, into the very heart of it, then carry rocks back with them to the daylight and sift them with monkish care. Certain rough stones bring gleams to their eyes. They scratch and scrape and heft these stones, then smile and slip them into their shirts next to their bellies and go off to get drunk with big smiles on their faces, and if the morning doesn't find them knifed in an alley in Bogota, Rangoon, Singapore, or Capetown, the stones go on to men who put on thick protective glasses and grind them, dip them into water and grind some more until finally they gleam on women's fingers and dangle from their lovely necks.

I ran and ran with the gems clutched in my hand. When it was safe I took them to a high mountain, to a clearing out of the dark trees where I could imagine the ocean, and threw the stones down the face of the cliff back to the indivisible dirt from whence they came. And I cried as loud as I

could, "FOR YOU! ALL FOR YOU!"

### My Aim Is True

I tried to explain it to them. I was perfectly willing to go off into space forever, I didn't care, there was sure as hell nothing keeping me here. Oh, there were a few new bands, but I could take the Sun Session CDs and a few others and I'd survive.

But not without her. I wouldn't go without her. Oh, they were clever. They told me she was dead, that she never existed. There was only one thing to do.

I planned it brilliantly. I would make my escape from NASA in a balloon. I would steer to the island by compass and sextant. The balloon gondola was in fact a small dory, its mast collapsed into two pieces. I planned to deflate the balloon some miles from the island and, dead to the world, sail to my love. For her I was giving up everything, even my chance to soar among the stars and visit other worlds. All that was gone.

But I didn't care. I could find the world on a white sand beach. It took only an act of imagination. (This was all part of my developing philosophy of the island.)

I hadn't anticipated the helicopters.

They talked to me through an electric megaphone. They said they'd caught up with my crimes. They were going to indict me for the murder of thirteen dogs. Some black cats were said to be missing and I was suspected of their murders too. Not to speak of the banks and the one night stands. They turned up the volume and shouted louder: admit it, admit, you are the guilty one.

I wasn't going to put up with that shit. I showed them my gun. I AM AN ANARCHIST, I shouted.

What could they do, really? They couldn't come close or they'd cut my balloon to shreds, and I knew they wouldn't shoot me because they liked to pretend they had compassion. So I just laughed and waited for them to run out of gas.

Then a boat chugged up below and tried to follow. Tenacious bastards. They probably still hadn't forgiven me for throwing that resumé in their faces. I dropped ballast and sailed up into the clouds.

I hadn't expected the thinness of the air, or the great pressure. Worst of all, it was impossible to take a sun sight, as the horizon below me made a lie out of all the figures in the pilot book. When you use a sextant, you create an angle between the horizon and the sun, then compare that angle to the angles in the book. But the book is based on a horizon of ocean, of course,

while I was looking down at a horizon of clouds.

But the sun above me shone gloriously unobstructed. The sun shone like the idea of the shining sun.

There was no choice. I adjusted the mirrors of the sextant and brought its thrice-reflected image down to the clouds. It was the best I could do under the circumstances.

When the sun sank I came back down through the clouds and dropped gently onto the water. I gave the balloon a small blast of hot air and cut it loose. It bobbed off on the dark ocean like a giant frog's egg. All night I steered toward her by the light of the moon and the angle of the stars.