

the floods

flood #1

The old family farm is going to drown. They've built a dam downriver. The cow-dung meadow will be flooded, the disintegrating tractor and the dandelions. You can't think of anything to do but throw an enormous party.

Your parents. Your sisters. Your brother. Your grandparents. Your step-grandmother. Your aunts, uncles, cousins; the greats and the seconds, the in-laws and the friends. The guy you once screamed at in the street. The person who shrieked at you in the zoo. The woman who got secretly divorced; the woman who got secretly married. The people who keep dead songbirds in their freezer. The old lady who prepares faces for burial. The couple on the L.L. Bean catalogue. Arctic brides, amateur astronomers, nine pirates, 112 magicians. All the wedding guests, and all the Helen Philippses. The beekeeper flirting with the blind woman, Persephone flirting with the fatigued photographer, Bob Dylan grudgingly whirling the girl who thought she was a mermaid, Jack Kerouac making big promises

to the Neanderthals, Anne Frank slow-dancing with St. Nick, Snow White on a hay bale braiding Mary's hair, Eve chasing your unborn daughter, the man at table 14 trying to amuse glum Noah, Charlie Chaplin aping Adam, the detectives goading the firemen, Orpheus telling the alien the violinist can't fiddle to save his life. Not to mention the things emerging from the dark of the woods: beast, unicorn, monster, dragon, animals lined up two by two.

Everyone! That's all you want. Everyone!

You just want everyone to be there, drinking beer, drinking cheap red wine, eating cakes and cookies, lingering by the bonfire, you want to look up at the soft black sky with its mournful stars and then look down to see everyone standing around the bonfire, starting to dance around the bonfire, jubilant, guitar and banjo, harmonica and tambourine, trying to have the time of our lives as the river begins to rise, water coming like snakes through the tall grasses and the blackberry brambles, lifting plastic cups and paper napkins, the river rising, rising.

flood #2

Tonight an old man came in and asked for honey mead. That's not a request we get much nowadays, and I kept a close eye on him. His beard was outrageously long. I couldn't see the end of it from where I stood behind the bar. It had things, twigs and leaves, stuck so far into it that I wondered if they hadn't been intentionally woven among the strands. His hair too was chaotic. A bird could've built a nice home there. Walt Whitman times a hundred, I thought to myself.

This old man was not like our other patrons. He didn't glance in the direction of the pool tables, and he was oblivious to even our prettiest girl. With each cup of honey mead, he crumpled further into himself. Eventually I noticed that his beard was soggy. I leaned over the bar in a manner that has been known to make old guys tell their stories.

“I didn't get them all,” he said.

“What all?”

“Madam.” He looked at me for the first time. His

eyes were golden, no kidding. “There were small elephants. Beautiful little elephants no larger than housecats.” I nodded. “Madam, there were mice the size of rhinos and rhinos the size of this building. Fire-breathing iguanas with gentle dispositions. Six-eyed crocodiles that spouted like whales. Squirrels as ferocious as lions. Turtles with opposable thumbs. Miniature foxes living in treetop nests. Cranes as big as cranes. Dragonflies that flew faster than your airplanes. Doves that flew backward. Blue giraffes. Vegetarian tigers. Bloodthirsty mountain sheep. Antelope with wings.”

I stroked his wobbling hand. His beard was getting downright wet. I hung on to his finger. I’ve seen a lot of sad crazy old men. But this guy, he was different. He was not crazy, and he had every reason in this godforsaken universe to be sad.

“The rain kept coming,” he said. “It became difficult to gather them two by two.” I was stricken by the length and filth of his nails. “At times,” he said, “impossible.”