

SANCTUARY

A couple of weeks ago a few of my friends had a bat flying around loose in their house. At the same time I had some astronomers flying around loose in my life, and I came to the conclusion that bats and astronomers are essentially the same species: dark hairy mammals that flap around in the night and make feeble attempts to detect what's in their universe by sending out radio or sound waves and trying to interpret the waves that bounce back. You might be intrigued by their activities, but there's no point in trying to have a relationship with one because they are among nature's most profoundly inarticulate creatures.

That's the version I told my friends. But here's the one I tell myself.

After so many years of singing to console myself, it seemed right to stand up and sing in joy: but he hushed me and had me lie down on my back. "This is the usual way," he said. He was always saying things like that, as if silence required commentary or assistance. The usual way for what? If I had known what narcissism was I would have recognized it not in his long intentionally careless hair but in his delight in sitting me down when it grew dark and explaining to me things like the apparent closeness of two heavenly bodies. "Look," he would say, and point his fine hand at any number of stars or planets. But he himself was not looking at the sky; he was watching my gaze reluctantly leave his face and move down his arm; he was noticing that I found his hand more amazing than any constellation of light.

When I went to China, someone name me Yu, short for universe. It was a joke and not a joke to tell that to an astronomer. According to my dictionary, *a woman who dwells with a tiger is a virgin*, and *to kill someone* also means *to tighten a belt*. I own far too many belts and I have never liked them loose. One textbook told me, "Students must learn to distinguish *bone chips* from *dusk*." Since then I have constantly confused those things and seen the night scattered on the floor of a butcher shop, unable to collect itself and terrified by its own grief, while the sky gives itself over to useless bits of bone, glinting and smugly

divorced from live flesh.

If only I had known what *sanctuary* meant, I might not have asked God to grant me a lover, I might not have asked my lover to grant me a place to dwell, I might not have opened the door of my dwelling to that small black tiger who burns all day asleep on my pillow and yowls all night for fresh meat.

My lover was a coward, I'll grant that, terrified by my story of butcher shops, afraid of the arrogant bones he was drawn to, upset when he saw that at some point each morning my right hand touched my right ear and the sun appeared behind me. Well. What I am now means *virgin* but *virgin* doesn't mean *lonely* any more than *hungry* always means *thin*. I belt my jeans more tightly and throw my cat her meat.