

July 29+30. preview VA Highland festival
July 24 - rehearsal
Sept 18 - Equity rehearsal
Oct 7 - close

Prop list for CALLING ON LOU:

~~headboard of an old iron bed, or an old iron bed~~
a small primitive table
a rocking chair (primitive)
old basket filled with dried fall leaves
an old iron (an antique one)
a wooden bucket
a little bowl or vase with artificial violets
umbrella-hat stand with old hats and an umbrella
a churn
an old country mixing bowl
old Christmas decorations (string of popcorn, colored paper chain, an angel for the top of the tree)
a small primitive stool
a globe (world)
oil lamp
a table lamp that works (electric)
a chair, and a table that serves as a writing table
3 trunks (1 trunk with top section built into it, on which the rag dolls can be placed so that they are visible to the audience, but then can be made to disappear when the trunk lid is closed)
13 rag dolls
an oriental fan
an old country lantern
2 coffee mugs
(5 enlarged photos of women--and some way to make them stand)
(6 female torsos)
3 pairs old tennis shoes
6 old quilts
~~6 white sheets to cover torsos~~
a boy's cap that will fit Cleo (costumes or prop?)
a woman's country hat or cap that will fit Cleo (Old Keller) (costumes or prop?) - A bonnet
A pair of gardening gloves that will fit Cleo
A tambourine
Wind chimes for offstage

Performance Schedule
(Performance Schedule)

9:30 AM - 12:00 PM: AL - VINE HARBOR CHURCH?

Sat 7/20: 10 AM - 12 NOON

1:30 - 4:30 PM

Sun 7/22: 10 AM - 12 NOON

1:30 - 4:30 PM

Mon 7/23 1 - 4:30 PM * NO STG MGR

Tue 7/24 1 - 4:30 PM

Thurs 7/26 1 - 4:30 PM

Fri 7/27 10 AM - 12 NOON

1:30 - 4:30 PM

Sun 7/29 10 AM - 12 NOON

1:30 - 4:30 PM

Mon 7/30 5:30 - 7:15 PM

9:00 REFERENCE

I wonder what would happen if Lou got together with another writer, a novelist half her age perhaps, whose work she admired and whom she felt affection for. It's not as easy for women to talk across the generations as it used to be, and such talk is precious. They would just sit and talk and laugh and be easy with each other, and the younger woman might say, "Lou, what do you think success is?" And Lou would say

CALLING ON LOU

ACT I

(Cleo comes on to center stage, turns, calls into wings:)

Lou. Lou!

(to audience)

She's probably out back in the garden. Oh, Lou Crabtree! I wanted her to tell you the story about the long-tailed sheep and the short-tailed sheep. Oh, what a shame. Well, I'll see if I can remember it, and since she's not here, I'll tell it in her words.

Now my paw raised sheep, and all of his sheep had long tails, and Cousin Phillip Reynolds's sheep had short tails. So one summer the grass got short, and my paw and cousin Phillip were going to turn their sheep into this one pasture together. Well, they went out there, but when they came back that fall, there was not very many long tail sheep, and there was going to be trouble. Now that is when Cousin Phillip did something that has meant an awful lot to me all my life. He went up to my paw and he said that his gal---that's me---was the smartest gal in Washington County! Well, now, all my life that has sort of bolstered me up, and I have liked that. Now just here lately, I have figured out what cousin Phillip was doing, because I told you there was going to be trouble and he was just a-bragging on me, just a-softening up my paw--that's what he was doing.

Oh, she's sly, she is, pretending it took her sixty years or so to figure out that her cousin was a sheep stealer. She's 70 now, in round numbers, a smart tough old lady in tennis shoes.

I'm sly too, in my way. You have to be, in this business. Lou and I are so different and so alike. She's country-bred, an Appalachian with roots in the dirt, a teacher with 36 years in the same school system, a stay-at-home. She's a solitary midnight writer and also a good neighbor, involved in the comings and goings and gardens of Valley Street in Abingdon.

Me, I'm a townie from the other end of the state, born in Richmond and raised in Suffolk. Even though I live in Abingdon most of the time, home for me is where the work is. I'm a traveller, a trouper. For me, you're the neighborhood.

But here is how we're alike. We were both led into the arts early on by women in our families, she by her mother, who was literary, and I by my grandmother, who always listened to the Metropolitan opera on Saturday afternoons, and took me to concerts ~~in Richmond~~. And then we both began to know very early what we were going to be involved in. ^{Lou} She says she never learned to read, that she always knew how. As a little bitty girl she would memorize and recite long set pieces, and she began to write early too. She showed a poem about her mother to a boy she liked in high school. He said, "You didn't write that." She said, "I wrote it." He wouldn't believe her. She said, "Goodbye." She showed him. Her priorities were clear.

And so were mine. When I wrote and directed and of course starred in "The Red Rose" in the third grade, my course was set. For both of us, there was never any decision, but there was never any doubt.

We've both raised children too, and watched them grow up. And we like each other. That's enough similarities.

Lou's father was a big landowner, and Lou says that growing up she spent more time with animals than with people. She says, "I've known a lot of good old animals, and they are very smart, and they are part of the Kingdom. We can't do without them."

Here is a poem.

ALL THE LITTLE BIRDIES AND BEASTIES

Lord who rides the crest of the storm

For those who cannot last it out
for those who cannot survive the blast

 gather them in your lap
All the little birdies and beasties.

The trumpet blast arrives
Then passes on leaving the cold

There is no refuge under roof or rafter
Where the icicle fingers of cold
 have not poked

The field mouses eyes look out
 Of his nest through straw and ice
The old cock's crow freezes to a chortle
Old Jane doesn't snake out any crumbs.

Collect them Lord,
In the great apron of your lap

All the little birdies and beasties.

As a child Lou went to a one-room school. After high school she went on to what is now Radford University, and came back to Washington County to teach in another one-room school. After a number of years she married and went with her husband Homer to Smith Creek, there to work and live and work and have five children, and work. And work. Here is a poem on that experience.

Smith Creek No. 1

I loathed the likes of Smith Creek
 where I followed my husband to
 those years I looked down my nose
 and revolted and seethed until I was
 widowed my husband taken
 I hated those years of no new dresses
 ten of them I counted
 the years of borning five young ones
 by myself with no doctor
 And washing for five on a board until four o'clock
 Until the sun dropped behind Gumm's Hill
 The years of tracking the turkey hen
 over ridges finding her eggs to hatch seventy-five
 to feed seventy-five and to sell seventy-five
 To go on a truck to make seventy-five fat dinners
 for some New York~~ers~~ at no profit to me
 Doing everyday the same thing the same way
~~the~~ milking morning and night
 Sunday too
 The thistles that grew overnight
 I was the foreigner wanting to remain a foreigner
 Though people returned from as far away as Missouri
 They would stand and look at the hills
 What are they looking for I wondered
 Asking where was Pa buried
 Poking in old buildings
 Grabbing at pictures I brought out
 Drinking from the spring
 Asking on and on questions like
 who did Uncle Jerry marry
 how old was Cousin Jake when he died
 and what did he die of
 I could never see any proper mates for my young
 from those old maids and dirt farmers asking
 is it going to rain or not going to rain
 repeating the same tales until
 I bought the piano and changed the tales
 for a while
 Now I wonder why no one
 Ever said to me you are young
 Not one ever said you have a lot to learn
~~the~~ only thing I can say is
 I stuck.

She stuck, not only to the mountain, but also to writing about it. Here's the companion poem. You can guess the title--Smith Creek No. 2. And the subtitle is "Feeling Bad About Writing Smith Creek No. 1."

Smith Creek No. 2
(feeling bad about writing Smith Creek No. 1)

Calling back

Those years of planting harvesting
Breathing touching among our meanderings
In and out of lives where we pursued
All strange and wonderful things
Down deep into the mysterious dark
Where the roots wind about the heart.
Have you seen a locust hill by moonlight?
Or, the morning after it rained,
A field of purple phlox?
To think a flicker came as he did that year
And from all the ~~fallen trees and~~ stumps and cliffs
He chose my apple tree to live:
The bluebird came from nowhere to
Put his whistle in the mockingbird's throat.
Cardinals played red tag.
A crane came down from the mountain pass
And on one leg seemed to sleep
Eyeing fishes in the creek.
Jonquils grew beside an old house
Where women came out with baskets on their arms
Gathering cresses and shonney.

I laugh to see Bud drive the cows across the creek,
Lifting their tails to let go.
A bee is hanging to a catkin. Nearby
A red salamander from his frozen sleep
Creeps around his winter bed of rock,
The warm sun drenching him,
As my lover drenches me with delight.
The seasons change and go.
The fire-eyes of an opossum glow.
In the paw paw patch an opossum
Hangs by his tail to the limb, playing dead.
He is not dead.
Now he is hanging to my finger.
Mists rise, lift into fogs,
Lie caught in the mountain as
The crane flies up and down,
Following his black shadow.
A moth settles in the thistle briars
In Smith Creek. One scarlet leaf floats round and round.
One scarlet leaf floats round and round.

Changes your whole outlook on Smith Creek, doesn't it?

That scarlet leaf circling in the water--what a wonderful way to picture the cycle of the seasons, round and round, birth and death, the Kingdom turns. And right there in the middle of it is a good old cow taking a dump in the creek!

A lot of people write beautiful nature poems. A lot write angry biting poems. Lou can do both, and sometimes she puts the love and anger together in one poem or story. (She knows that where the victim's blood has soaked the earth the flowers will bloom with their most vibrant colors.) When she says, "in the mysterious dark the roots wind about the heart," she knows that is a message of life as well as of death, of laughter as well as of crying out in sorrow.

Here, to illustrate, is a funeral poem to make you laugh.

Sixty Years is long to keep a memory.

In his casket, surrounded by wife and seed
grown tall,
so rude a man, with hands of a carpenter
lay with one finger missing; that part
I felt a kinsnip with, of sorts,
like that finger was lost in me.

I had run white legged
and I was a good runner
I later learned other ways
to parry and pass and be coy.
My legs carried me in wild fear
from whatever there was to be fearful of.

When as playmates
male and female, innocent both,
he pressed his haranes upon me,
making me after sixty years,
go to look.

I'm going to take a deep breath now, and I advise you to do the same. Lou and I are going to lead you into a world of suffering and you will be glad when we come back out. I do not read this story to hurt you, though it will hurt you. I read it because in all its ^{horror} terror and grimness it is a beautiful and brave piece of writing. Take a deep breath with me. . . .

Holy Spirit

Old Rellar had thirteen miscarriages and she named all of them. Only of late, she got mixed up and missed some. This bothered her.

She looked toward the iron bed. It had always been exactly the same. First, came the prayer, then the act with Old Man gratifying himself. Old Rellar heard little of the prayers.

Always it came to nothing. It was like Old Man said, "You live all your life to work things up to come to nothing."

For so many years it seemed all Old Rellar's life, it had been so. Thirteen times she had almost come to term. Thirteen times came the approaching signs of miscarriage.

First came the kidney ailments with their burning pains. She grew to know what was coming.

Once the pains caught her down by the rosebush. She named that one Rose. Again she miscarried In November, and by mistake, named the child October.

Under the steep hill was the spring seep. Water was scarce because it had to be carried uphill by hand. Old Man was not particular. When he wanted a drink he dropped on his knees and blew the green scum aside and drank from water caught in the cow's track.

Old Rellar named that abortion Carrie, to remember being caught as she carried two full buckets of water uphill from the spring.

As other miscarriages occurred she named them after the place of birth or after the season—April, Turnip, Summer, Sunlight, Holy Spirit . . .

Old Rellar loved the sunlight. A spot fell in the middle of the floor where the yellow cat curled and slept.

"I careful to step over the spot. It might be the cat," she said.

The sun shining through the window struck different spots in the

shack, telling the seasons of the year. If the sun lay on the flat-topped iron stove she used for cooking, it was winter; in the fall, the sun lay on the iron bed; in summer, the sun struck directly in the middle of the floor.

It was here in the middle of the floor that she fell when the wrenching pains struck. Between black periods, after what seemed hours, she pushed and strained until her body relieved itself of that part of her, which afterwards she referred to as Sunlight. "I name you Sunlight," she said softly, before she arose from the floor, and weakly walked toward the bucket she had used before.

Long ago, since that first time, Old Rellar had learned to wait on herself. The pains brought streaks of blood, to issue forth with her broken waters. In the finality, she felt with her fingers to break the umbilical string. Then with both hands she pushed and bore down on her lower abdomen to expel the afterbirth. She tried to look closely in the mass to discern whether the name should be that of a boy or a girl. Most often she could not tell.

"Gather up the mess and bury it so the hogs won't eat it," Old Man said, pushing a bucket toward her. Then he turned his back and went to stand in the door.

Old Man, feeling sorry for himself, said, "The sun don't s'pose to shine on the same dog's ass all the time."

Old Rellar saw Old Man go for the shovel which leaned against the shed. He would take the bucket, and head up hill toward the knoll where the poplar trees stood. There were graves of all her other miscarriages.

She thought she had done the best she could by her young'uns. She had stood field stones upright to mark each grave. Visiting the graves she passed each one, bending over and tending them buried there, in order of birth behind the poplar trees. The graves on the little knoll overlooked a small marsh in which tall reeds grew supplying the need for coffin measuring sticks to measure the dead. Others had come for the reeds, but there was no need for reeds to measure Old Rellar's misfortunes.

Old Rellar was always the first to arise from her bed in the morning. To begin the day, often she looked toward the knoll.

In the springtime, before the weeds grew tall and when the ground was covered with violets, Old Rellar slipped away from the shack, climbed to the knoll and walked from stone to stone, murmuring, "October, Sunlight . . ."

In autumn time, she thought it pretty to see the sun shining through the naked poplars. For a brief time, their yellow leaves covered the ground in gold, making a golden carpet. Her hands stirred among the leaves, obscuring part of the graves.

It was in the winter that she worried over the cold and was glad when the snows came and blanketed each grave.

"Now, Spring, April, Carrie . . . you can sleep warm. You have a warm blanket."

Only one of her children had lived a night and a day. Too weak to suckle, it lacked the strength to hold with its mouth and draw out the milk. Old Rellar scarfered it with a knife, making a cross on its tiny shoulder, trying to get a drop of blood to put in the blue puckered-mouth, tiny as a rosebud.

"I name you Holy Spirit. It is somebody in Old Man's prayer," she said, hoping to bring good luck to a little boy. She saw his genitals perfectly formed.

There was no death gasp, just a tiny escaping breath like a lost whisper.

She wrapped Holy Spirit close and held him to her for warmth, but it was no use. He was so cold. With him in her arms she walked toward the porch, and stood in the door.

"Take him up with the others," she said to Old Man, not disclosing his name. Just this tiny part, his name Holy Spirit, she would keep for herself.

Old Man rose and stretched and took plenty of time. "I been looking at the flies on the dog's pecker," he said. "A man gets tired toting his

treads in a slop bucket." He watched a groundhog come out. Sniffing for sweet cunt, he thought. Feeling injured he took Holy Spirit uphill to scoop out a hole to cover him up before the hogs got at him.

Still standing in the door, Old Reller saw the dogwoods in white bloom among the poplars. Their whiteness was spreading, leaning away from the poplars, making a white skirt. The white bloom was like the nice white cloth she wished for to bury her dead in.

"Holy Spirit, the dogwood is yours," she said and assigned somewhere from her being, the dogwood tree to a little boy, for his very own.

Old Man came down off the knoll, and went to lean the shovel against the shed. He brought back to the shack a piglet wrapped in his coat. Someone had given it to him, thinking it would die.

"You got no young'un. Let the pig suck. Nurse him. It going to die without no drop of milk," he said.

Old Rellar did not want the pig to die. Her one good breast was strutted, swollen, tight and sore. The second breast was withered and spoiled from an old miscarriage. The pig's teeth were needle sharp, and she pulled back sharply, but only briefly, for as the pig began to draw out the nourishment, relief came to her distended breast. There was no indignity. Only the sharp milk teeth of the pig and its powerful suction. The piglet would live and come winter would sleep under the floor of the shack.

The shack was not a cabin built of logs, but was built of clapboard, weathered gray, with the timbers running horizontally. A stove pipe ran out of a hole cut in the side of the shack, for the flat-topped cooking stove inside.

"That kind of stovepipe will burn you down," more than one passer-by had told them.

Behind the shack was the ever-present odor of human feces, for out-houses came much later to the Appalachians. The feces lay and dried or were absorbed into the earth with the rains. Often the feces were eaten by a few bedraggled white chickens who roosted on a pole in the cow's

shed, shedding their mites and lice over the cow, the pig, or anybody who chanced to touch the pole.

Bunches of shamey-weed grew near the shed.

"Shaming you for no young'uns," said the Old Man.

When Old Rellar walked close to the shamey-weed, she felt it was so for the weed seemed to close up and pull away from her as she passed by.

The land was the Old Man's. God knows nobody else would want it. Brush, rocks, briars, at the end of nowhere.

At one time, the shed belonged to the brindle cow; lately to her bull calf. The cow's hill rose sharply from the shed. Now, on top of the hill lay the brindle cow's bones, bleached by the sun, picked clean by circling buzzards. Her bull calf bawled down by the shed.

"You will have to do without milk someway," said Old Rellar, as the calf nuzzled and tried to eat her dress.

Old Rellar recalled the bull calf's birth. The cow's birthing pains caused her to climb, between pains, to the high hilltop to born her calf. Old Rellar followed the cow and found her with her head stretched straight ahead. Old Rellar saw that with the final heaving contraction the cow had laid her head down straight ahead gently and did not raise it again. The calf had managed to get to its feet and stood by the side of the dead cow on trembling legs with no drop of the first milk.

"I carry you down," she said and with both arms she gathered the calf and started down hill, stopping and resting at intervals to get breath and a better hold.

"You are not a day old," she said as the wet umbilical cord hung down and became entangled.

"I will boil the corn meal and maybe the milk of the corn will come back." Later she had wet her fingers in the mush and put them in the calf's mouth. He responded at once. He needed to suck. Older, she licked the meal. She stuck his nose into pans of water until he drank. He had survived, but his growth was stunted and he continually bawled down at the shed.

"Damned old turkey buzzards," said Old Man as he flailed his hat about.

Old Rellar watched the buzzards. When she decided to toil up the hill to see the cow, she was unusually slow. She liked the cow and claimed her as her own. She saw one leg bone pulled down hill where an animal had dragged it. She could hear the cow's bull calf down in the shed.

"No good. A tease water," Old Man said.

Certainly the calf would never grow. Round like a cabbage, he stood on stilt legs, with his skin too tight.

Old Rellar thought of once when the cow was lost. She talked to herself. "I was looking for you, lost all night. All night I walked the woods, lost. I sat down once on a rock for a minute, but was afraid of poisonous snakes. I got tangled in blackberry briars and was over a cliff as the morning light broke."

Coming off the hill Old Rellar stopped at the knoll where the graves were. She found the Murray Boys had been there and had picked up the grave stones and rolled them down the hill.

"Now, nobody knows where anybody is buried." She made keening sounds and walked toward the shack.

Behind the shack were the frog holes, becoming, in time, rat and snake holes.

"I don't like four kinds of snakes," said Old Man. "Big ones, little ones, live ones, and dead ones."

Old Rellar remembered someone. It might have been her grandmother, who told her stories about the old people who punched holes in their ears and wore little green snakes in their ears as hoops or rings.

"The snakes circled around their necks and caressed their lips." She still remembered the pretty words.

Old Rellar had seen little green snakes in the trees and felt a kind of kinship. They were so pretty.

When Old Man killed the blacksnake, Old Rellar hurt all over. "It nearly kills me," she thought as Old Man stomped the snake and chopped it with his hoe.

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"It is like he is stomping me." She stood silent as one part of the snake was flung across from them and Old Man pranced gleefully about the other half, while the muscles were twitching, quivering, and contracting, seeming to fight with him. It was not over until the head was mashed sideways and one eye pushed out.

Later the snake's mate peeped in her door. There he was with his head raised. She did not want Old Man to kill this one, also. With a little brush, Old Rellar drove him up the cow's hill away from her house. He was troublesome to drive and slid off sideways. Old Rellar was very tired when she got to the top of the hill.

"Stay gone," she said.

Returning she stumbled and fell and felt weak. Getting back to her feet she stood still a long while. Her silent figure became part of the landscape. Old Man saw her standing immovable, a silhouette on top of the hill. "A stump," he thought. He watched to see if it moved and thought it did.

"No stump. Old Woman is standing up peeing," he said. "She can stand up and piss and not one drop wet her."

Soon it was late evening. Old Rellar walked around the house. It was like she was saying a goodbye. She looked at the snake holes and up the cow's hill. As for a last time she looked toward the graves.

"Come tomorrow I will go up and visit," she thought. "Not today, but tomorrow."

She walked over the house like going on a journey, seeing if things were right.

By the stove, by the bed, up into the little half-room in the attic where the snake has left his shed skin hanging over the rafters. She felt like the dead snake skin. She was so tired.

Old Rellar lay on the iron bed as she had all the days of her life, it seemed, waiting for Old Man's prayer to end, waiting to fulfill her duty. There were no protests, no words. She heard little of the prayer at all.

Sometime during the prayer she tried naming her children, but it didn't seem right to her. Worrying, she tried to shift her body on the

bed, but could not from some tremendous weight. Maybe if she imagined the graves and the stones she would not leave out any. The graveyard blurred and grew dim.

"Almighty Father," Old Man's prayer went on and always he began the same, the "a" in Father a short "a" as in cat. He had prayed since the time at the river.

"He went in a dry sinner and came out a wet sinner," they said.

"No good to baptize a brute," some said. "Wash a hog and he is still a hog."

Old Man lay his weight and tried to imagine himself fuller than a dog's tick. He thought of the bull calf. The truth is, he was becoming like the bull calf, just a "teasewater." Thinking to place the blame on Old Rellar, he said, "Feels like laying on quilting frames." Sulking he rolled off, turned his back and lay curled on his side.

"Have you enough hay for the bull calf?" Old Rellar's voice was weak, far away.

"Might near," Old Man said.

Old Rellar lay still and heard the rat in the wall. She tried to listen closely, hoping the snake had not come back. She decided it was the rat chewing paper for its nest as she heard no slides, slithers, or plunks that the snake always made. This made her feel glad. She thought of the graves on the knoll. It had been a long time since she had felt like going up on the hill. Maybe in the spring when the violets came she would go. She didn't know how far away was spring anymore.

She ought to get up and finish the patch on Old Man's britches where the knee was cut out. She did not want to get up. She would remember to do it tomorrow.

She was not sleepy, but was wide awake and she felt very clear. In fact she could see in the dark. She could see through the clapboard wall all the way to the graveyard. The grave stones were replaced. The Murray Boys had not rolled them down hill after all. "Holy Spirit's stone is whitest and biggest of all," she said.

Now she felt herself rising and it was wonderful. With no effort, she

was rising up to the knoll where the graves were, on higher and higher above the cow's hill. She could fly up and down the steep hill where she had carried water from the spring seep.

It was wonderful pleasant to float high and look down on the shack. "So wonderful," she heard herself say. "I can see myself inside, lying on the iron bed."

Old Man put out his hand and felt for the warmth from the flat-topped stove. Why was there no fire built in the stove? Why wasn't Old Rellar up?

He reached to push her out of bed and found a strangeness.

His stocking feet touched the floor, chill without the fire. Walking by the foot of their iron bed toward her, he backed off quickly. Some part of a thought came over him. "Slept the night away with Rellar dead and out of this world."

It was early morning, but he would follow the path downward, seeking help from men who would nail together a wooden box. Their women would come and lay out Rellar.

But first he must go under the knoll to the marsh and get a reed for a coffin measuring stick. "The men will ask for a stick to know how long to make the boards for the box."

The marsh stood under the knoll with tall reeds growing profusely in the wet ground. Leaning to cut a reed, Old Man's foot sank and stuck down into the soggy earth.

At the house, Old Man turned back the folded coverlet exposing Old Rellar's body. In a high necked white gown she lay stretched, so the measurement came easy. Old Man notched the reed.

Old Man looked briefly at her. Her nose was pinched and her mouth, agape already, was blackened. Her hands were brought up to her breast and curled like the claws of an animal.

Old Man knew he had seen the same someplace, as his eyes traveled down Old Rellar's gutted stomach, flattened from her many miscarriages. It came to him.

"Like the old dead she-possum. Her young'uns born dead around her like naked rats." Their mouths had been open in a grimace with nubbin-like teeth, black inside like Old Rellar's now.

"It is like somebody I never knew." Old Man dismissed it all.

"How is everyone?" The man asked as he came near.

"They are all dead or dying." Old Man's answer was true indeed.

"Where do you want her put?"

Old Man named the knoll where the yellow poplars were. "It will do," he said. There was no need to mention the graves of the young'uns. Not now or ever. There was nothing to tell then or now.

Old Man turned and started walking back up the path ahead of the others. He felt sorry for himself, mumbling.

"Old Woman picked a pretty time to die with this morning dew cold and wet as hell and myself about petered out. The sun don't s'pose to shine on the same dog's ass all the time."

The men were coming behind with their shovels. "Old Man rode his old woman to death," they said. The shack came in sight.

Old Man muttered, "You live all your life and work things up to come to nothing."

The bull calf bawled somewhere.

We all need something gentle now. Through teaching school perhaps, and through writing, Lou has kept the child in her alive. Here's a poem, from a child's point of view, about the wonderful ritual of burying a dead cat.

FUNERAL NO. 2

24

About two weeks ago
 Old Tom was put below
 the green under our apple tree
 with dripping handkerchiefs
 by Bud and me
 (we wet them at the pump).

Bud slipped out of the house
 with mama's little box
 I hid in my pocket
 Old Tom's catnip mouse
 We wound Tom in a towel
 (one of mama's best).
 Bud pushed in his legs
 I bent in his tail.

We sang a Sunday hymn
 "Bringing in the Sheep"
 Bud was the preacher
 For a mourner - that was me
 Until we changed procedure
 (Bud couldn't preach good).

Bunches of violets blue and white, wilted
 After night turned another day
 We discovered, too, that the gravestone
 had fallen.

So we dug up Tom
 had his funeral over
 gathered more violets
 from the morning dew
 Scratched upon a piece of rock
 and put it at his head
 markings only I could read
 "Tom Cat - age 7 - dead"

Called loud so Tom would hear
"Amen amen
dug up and buried again
soul ascend to cat heaven."

Bud threw dirt on me
and said, "Cut this cat heaven stuff"
He ran to tell and put blame on me.

I could beat Bud running any day
(cat heaven was too good for him)
I took time looking back
Looking back I could tell
we had done right
Old Tom was mightily pleased.

Miracles happen in two directions, good and bad. That bending of the laws of nature ~~that~~ we call witchcraft is the subject of this next poem. Lou says, "There's more unknown than there is known," and she says, "I believe in ghosts and spirits. Yes indeed."

mountain witch

27

stop your churn'n ma
get your fingers outn the cream bowl
bad luck ago'n to hit us
she's gone and done it
Lily stood on the mountain top
and calln up the devil
Lily shot the sun ma
our Lily gal sold outn to the devil

son little son I sent you lookn
for the clapper outn the bell
bell clapper's lost old cow needn her bell
all I want you bring was
not a tale not a witch tale telln
to be the death of me

Lily left her bed ma
stold outn across the dew
firen pap's fifle into the sunrise
I follown her to the mountain top
now broughtn her back to you

known you'd want her broughtn back
 so I fetchn her settn
 out there on the old wood pile
 her clothes all dew clingn
 strange eyes aglittern
 like green leeks ma
 her hair likn old tree moss

she cookn a cat till its bones fell out
 boiln them white and clean
 hidn in her bosom in an old knotted rag
 she headn where the brance forkn east

I follown her ma
 saw her lookn through the forks of the tree
 she hurln the bones where the waters swirl

I swear ma
 the bones floatn backwardly

holdn up my hand swearn ma
 devil take me is what she said
 devil devil my soul is yourn
 Lily gal partn with the devil
 reckon old devil tookn his applicant

get your fingers outn the cream bowl
bad luck a follown us
bad luck ago'n to catch us
bad luck ago'n to lay down on us

son little son not a whisper of this
about our Lily gal
We'll look for a witch to doctor a witch
to break the spell ... ma
whats Lily do'n she puttn a spell
my pet hen go'n plum crazy
roundn round in the dust
a standn on her head ma

hush son its maybe your pet hen
has been in the hen bane patch
you look for the clapper outn the bell
old cow needn her bell

I'll look for a witch to doctor a witch
to break the spell sparn Lilly hell
and worsen death afacin us all run
from this thing Lily gal has done
make the cross and spitn on it
don't lookn back hurry child
it be bad luck to lookn back

And now a miracle of another sort. Here is the story from which comes the title of Lou's book of tales, Sweet Hollow. The story is "The Miracle in Sweet Hollow"--and for this one you do not need a deep breath, but only a sense of wonder.

The Miracle in Sweet Hollow

Whether the miracle happened to Old Man who died cold sober or whether it happened to Old Woman that Christmas Eve in the barn with the animals, you can judge.

Beforehand were those welfare days when Old Man drank up everything. Many times the caseworker sat in her car waiting for Old Woman to walk out of Sweet Hollow as the whipporwills flew along in the trees, accompanying her. A report had gone in to the welfare office before: Their old stove has the bread box burnt out; they have a broom handle propping up the door. Old Woman came out the first of each month, talking, giving details. Each time she talked about her cow. "Had a bull calf. Me nor the cow can discern any eyeballs." She was undaunted. "Bull calf can suck and grow." Old Woman liked the caseworker. She said, "I am going to learn you a tree from a tree."

Old Man was a drunk. He gave out his tobacco money on the street. He had forty dollars left. Welfare had the police to bring him in. He said, "I owe forty dollars to the Home Loans." Welfare called and he did.

Old Woman brought things to town in a bag to sell. Her three children always came along. They lay down beside the street and went to sleep when they got tired. Nobody could move them, and the police did not know what to do.

Welfare finally decided to commit Old Man. They decided to send letters to each of his seven children by his first wife and tell them. And in this case, the miracle started. The seven children began to write in, send Old Man things, and those who were near came to visit. One wrote from Utah, "I was glad to hear thee was still in the World." Old Man turned over and about the word *thee* in his mind, and pondered on it.

Old Man drank less and less and thrived on all the attention from his

younguns. "A miracle," welfare said, and Old Woman went on doing the best she could.

Now the other miracle is not about their bad days and hard times nor about Old Man drinking less, but it is a miracle that took place one particular Christmas night out of their total lives.

The tree was ready, strung with white popcorn and colored chains of paper. "I growed that popcorn," thought Old Woman. "I popped it and strung it with my needle and thread. That colored paper I saved all year for the chains the flour paste holds together."

They all admired the tree, especially the children. There was Bud, the oldest boy, a middle boy, and the youngest who was a girl. Under the tree were the boxes the mailman had left down at the road in the mail box. One box was heavy. "Might be oranges," they said. The children handed the box around, weighing it in their hands and shaking it, until the box somehow developed a big hole on one end. Big enough for little hands to reach in come out with a handful of candy.

"Who did this?" teased Old Woman.

"Maybe it was a rat," said the children. They didn't know if they should own up.

"I know who was the rat," said Old Woman as the children laughed.

Before dark Old Man brought in the huge back log for the fireplace. Bud helped saw it from a great fallen tree. The crosscut saw tired his arm, and when his strength gave out, the two other children put their hands on his end and helped him pull the saw through the great log. Old Man rolled it through the snow and finally to the fireplace where its fire would last through the night and throw its rosy glow over the room, the tree, and the bunches of bittersweet on the dresser. Old Man had brought the bittersweet in off a high ridge. On the mantel was the pile of cards. Old Woman set her bowl of potato bread to rise near the fire. But not too near. She turned it around to warm each side evenly. Waves from the growing bread floated about in the room.

"Tomorrow they will come," said Old Man. "They will be here tomorrow." He held a card with writing on the back. "I am thinking of

thee. I was glad to hear *thee* was not poorly." How far is Utah? Old Man's head dropped as he thought, there in the West, one of mine is one of the Chosen, and he has not forgotten me.

All morning Old Woman had sifted things into a pie, which had made the children run around the table and peek and lick spoons, and sop on the bowl, and crinkle their noses at the wonderful, wonderful pie.

"Maw has baked the devil in the pie." Bud caught hold of the youngest girl and pulled her back. Her eyes doubled in wonder, for she believed everything she was told. The next minute she would forget Bud's teasing words, but fifty years later she would remember, "Maw has baked the devil in the pie."

"Bedtime. Go to sleep. So it will be tomorrow." The children mounted a ladder to their beds up over the room in a half loft. The two boys slept at the head of the bed with the girl wedged down at the foot. They kept giggling and calling down.

Out of hiding Old Woman brought a rag doll for the girl and corn-stalk animals for the boys and placed them under the tree. Tomorrow there would be city presents when they opened the boxes.

"I had best go to the barn and see if the barn door has come open. The bull calf may have wandered out in the snow and can't see to find its way back," said Old Woman and slipped out the door with a lighted lantern.

The children called down, "Who went out the door?"

Old Man called back, "It is your maw. Going to the barn. If she catches a reindeer, I'll call you for a ride."

Old Woman's galoshes crunched the snow, already frozen on top. Her lantern cast light ahead. Inside the barn, she looked for the dark outline of the cow and tried to see if the blind bull calf was close by her back. She thought she could see them and the one ewe sheep and its lamb and Old Ram. All were asleep except Old Ram who heard her steps and stood up, a few straws sticking out of his mouth, his black face a mystery in the dark.

Old Woman held the lantern near Old Ram's face. She rubbed her

fingers into his two ears, which were soft and warm like a warm glove. "Hello. Are you warm?" said Old Woman. "Where is the blind bull calf?"

"Look behind its mother's back."

"I was afraid it had wandered out and could not see to get back."

Old Ram was standing guard. Overhead the doves talked, moving back and forth on the pole. Old Woman thought the sweet odor of the hay turned into perfume. Old Woman saw in the dimness the lamb near its mother, his black legs stretched straight, his black head turned on his side, sleeping.

Old Ram said, "Besides being very new, the lamb is getting fat on milk. He falls asleep any place. He may be hard to wake."

"Will you be waking him?"

"Yes, at midnight. We will all talk at midnight. But you must go. You must not hear."

"What will you talk about?"

"What our fathers and mothers told us. Wonderful things. From the past, and things to come. Mostly, about the Babe."

"In church today, they told the story of Mary and Joseph and the Babe."

"And the donkey and the camel and the sheep."

The cow had gotten to her feet.

Old Woman said, "I worry about the blind bull calf."

"Do not. He can hear better than any of us what all is said."

"We saw Him first," said the cow. "It is our history. You should go now."

"Why?"

"No one is supposed to hear what we say. We want to hear what the blind bull calf says. This is the first time he has spoken."

Old Woman saw the calf rising to his feet. "Can he discern the light from the dark?" she asked.

"Yes, he can see in the dark."

The ground was getting holier.

Old Woman saw fire in Old Ram's eyes as she took up her lantern.
"There is the star," he said. "Look over the door through that crack."

Old Woman saw the star blinking through the crack over the barn door.

Now Old Ram was nosing the lamb to wake him up. He was hard to wake.

"It is time," the cow said. "Can you feel what I feel in the air?"

In a minute the new lamb would be back asleep. His head drooped. Old Ram stood close nudging him upon his black knees.

The blind bull calf was standing. All were looking his way, listening for his first words.

"The bells of heaven. They ring. It is the angels." It was the bull calf.

Old Woman thought she felt the whirring of wings in the air. I should be going, she thought.

"The angels began descending from heaven an hour ago. They are all over the place." The air grew thick. "They are strapping a pair of starry wings on your shoulders," said the blind bull calf to Old Woman.

"Good. Bull Calf can see things that we cannot," said Old Ram. "Don't stay. Hurry."

Old Woman laughed. "I am going now. Don't go out in the snow. I will latch the barn door on the outside."

As she looked back, all of the animals were kneeling.

Outside, snow covered the hills. Old Woman thought she heard bells ringing faintly from somewhere. Blind calf's angels are ringing them, she thought. She walked over the snow so lightly. "It is like I do have wings," she said. Old Woman was very happy. Happiness and the cold from the snow pushed her along fast, like she really did have wings. She thought she skimmed along so fast. "Like I really do have a pair of starry wings," she said. The very hills were singing.

Opening the door, Old Woman stepped into the room. She lifted the lantern to blow out its light. She listened toward the stairs for the children. She saw the room just as she had left it, with a rosy glow over the tree and Old Man asleep in his chair.

She looked about the room for an angel.

Everywhere there was peace and harmony and love. Here was a home, a man, a woman, and some children, and down at the barn some animals were kneeling.

CALLING ON LOU

ACT II

(Cleo comes on to center stage, turns, calls into wings:)

Lou. Oh, Lou!

Where in the world could she be? I wanted her to tell you about the women in her poems. They come striding, skipping, limping, a pride of women, abused and amused, a rainbow of women, girls and grandmothers, from city and town and mountain farm, Biblical, Greek, Chinese, on dope, on their high horses, on to something, usually, and that something is usually suffering and abiding and enjoying what can be enjoyed. And surviving.

Well, if she's not here to introduce them, I guess I'll do it. Here's a girl-child, embattled in the long everynight snugly-bedroom campaign against her awful brother, her dear enemy. The time is prayer-time, Mother is hovering in the background, and the prayer is that most famous one, Now I lay me down to sleep.

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

I'll get you

I'll get even

I pray the Lord

Your time will come

Don't worry

My soul to keep

You can't make me say one word

Not in our prayer

If I should die before I wake

My knees are getting tired, Mother,

Bud is trying to push me over

I pray the Lord my soul to take

Just watch my smoke

Amen

Ps-ss-st, Bud, where are you?

A darker scene now, much darker, for the bedroom of the next poem is the final one, the bedrock, the one we shall all lie down on, and the poem is a lament for a blind three-year-old girl.

April Dawn Clifton
(3 Years)

31

~~by L. Gracie~~

The significance is mine
that April is your name
and birthmonth

And that I chance by
the April you died
And see the young father
bend over you.

You shock me lying there.

No funery would have dared
on a child of three
Those must be your dark lashes
curling upward.

Those firm cheeks
and that mouth
I think you should speak
should look up and smile.

But your eyes never opened
on this world you are leaving
Some blemish in the genes,
in your grandmother, I have heard,
And in some ^{aunts}~~aunts~~ and female cousins
You never saw, this curse
In the twin you leave behind.

The significance is yours not mine
April Dawn Clifton
in the promise of your name
You should not have to wait long.

Lou is a religious person, and a careful reader of the Bible. In one of her excursions into the Old Testament she ran across a reference to a Shulam^mite girl, beloved of Solomon. The feeling was not mutual.

SHULAMMITE GIRL
SONG OF SOLOMON 6:13
I KINGS 1:34

Who were you, little Shulammitte girl?
How did you do
so rash a deed to Solomon?
Not that Solomon,
not that one, surely.
He of all the wisdom and glory,
Of all the splendors and harems of gold.

Little country girl, were you like the dawn?
bright as the sun,
as Old Sol wrote,
In that love sick poem,
pleading you to be his?
You chose love, love with your shepherd boy.
You had given your word and stuck to it.

Like a gazelle from a garden of doves,
You come to us,
like the dawn,
Beautiful as the sun,
bright as the moon,
When you told Old Sol . . .
With a resounding no to cram it.

Now a variation on that theme. From ~~another far corner~~
~~of~~ a long-ago world a young Chinese wife steps forward,
bows perhaps, and, speaking to her mother, pleads her case.

CHINESE WIFE

Most reverend lady Mother
 wisteria grew heavy by the summer house
 the summer I sat behind the latticed gallery
 my wicker basket laid by

Now is the autumn time of sorrow
 The palaquins go by and the chair coolies
 students go to examinations
 hunting excursions leave for the steppes
 the Feast of the Lanterns begins
 bandit-brigands and river pirates
 swim under water
 to loose the moorings of boats
 and hack off heads Alas!

The day my honorable husband
 came to my honorable parents
 leading a goose and a gander
 honorable emblems of conjugal affection
 the courtyard was full of presents
 He of the glossy pigtail--
 my delight was in his face
 not pock marked

With his own skilled pencil
he painted my eyebrows finely curved
 in a lunar crescent
 like a moon three days old
He painted on a screen peacock flowers
 calligraphy that speaks to me

In this autumn time of sorrow
my springtime of joy is gone
My pillow never undisturbed from my grief
The cadence of my prayers in the night
 shakes the temple bells
 the bamboo sighs under the pines

I salute the tomb of my consort
As an offering for the journey
 into the outer world
I fill vases with incense, feed the censers
 beat the gong
strike the earth one hundred times
 with my forehead
to avenge in the lower world
 the shade of my husband

Do not force me lady Mother
Bid the Keeper of the Gate keep it closed

I shave my head
in my poverty live on meager fare
and have nothing to contribute

but my labor
I care not one melon seed
that I am eighteen years
and among the beautiful ones

Most reverend honorable Mother
do not arrange a go-between
do not place my name on a list
to enrich some minister
do not force me
to people the Inner Palace

Like the wild goose
who does not mate again
is my fidelity

Age, that smoothest of con men, stealing everything from all of us, sneaks up on Lou in a poem she calls "Sister."

SISTER

It was not that I minded
being old
I just never thought of her
that way
She came and found my bed
to talk
She said of old sad things
And scars left on us all
My arm found the curve
of her
And we were young again
In a cold bed on a cold night
My cold feet moved away
from hers
It was not I minding
being old
That I shivered as my
little sister slept
And in the dark she did not know
I wept.

One of the most wonderful things we can do in art, though seldom if ever in life, is to have our cake and eat it too. Here is a short sad poem about several kinds of loss that nevertheless is a kind of triumphant finding, a victory of the imagination.

HUSBAND

I never saw my husband
naked
For all his years we were
under eyes, taboos, codes
Just that one time
I saw his yellow back
as I helped him
with his bath
when the liver cancer
had him
Not even in dreams
does he ever come
Gloriously in naked good health.

In ten million living rooms, dens, tv rooms, sit ten million husbands, watching ten million electronic reproductions of something trivial happening on a court or gridiron or diamond or track. And in some other room of the ten million houses, vibrating with a sense of outrage, jealousy, and not quite complete loss, are ten million sports widows.

SPORTS WIDOW

Got anything you want to say
before the season starts

Ball one. Ball two. Three games going
Two tv's and a radio
My God there are reruns

Boredom. Trouble, you light
on the sports widow

Bring me a beer
in his stocking feet
he stomps his hat upon the floor

Kill the umpire
O God he is killing me

Rattle pans slam the door.
step on the dog's tail

How do I like trying to talk
to a peacock

Sam, I am going to leave you
how would you like to
kiss a crocodile

You know what I am telling

you to kiss

He won't move out

I think I will be the first

to wear out

From this arrangement

of a live-in boyfriend

~~And that's me~~

~~sick and tired and~~

~~got a belly full.~~

Somebody said that what poets do is make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. In this next poem Lou does both, I think. Her title ~~and dedication~~ will perhaps explain. The poem is called "Mary Suffered the Crucifixion" and the dedication is "for all prisoners of war and all those missing in action."

MARY SUFFERED THE CRUCIFIXION
(for all POW'S and MIA'S)

Across that hill will he be coming
home from the wars
Will it be at twilight's turning
or as the morning's dawning?
The earth for him is yearning
home from the wars

Will he be hurrying
home from the wars
Will he be limping, bewildered,
befogged, hurting from pain
Bled in fields of foreign rain

His eyes may be battle blind
his vacant look not discerning
Oh hill! Will he be changed
The winter snows rest on your breast
Snow may have touched his hair

As midnight turns, am I awake
My heart stopped cold
as waters under winter's ice

Time has stopped as an apparition tops the hill
Black thoughts paraded in dream light
Out of opium smoke a ghost shadow
Stands on top of a hill
 in ~~a land~~ of some other world

Cold thoughts creep
My son might not be coming home from the wars

Oh hills! Shut up your storm-gashed gullies
"He is already dead," I screamed and said
"He will not be coming home from the wars."

Mary Mōther of God, stand with me
 Heart to heart I've held him
Gentle hands have healed him
Many tears grieved for him
 Home from the wars.

We draw sweet hope from Mother earth's ability to renew herself as the Kingdom turns. In a dry spell, Lou gets a present in the mail, and turns it into a poem, and in turn it becomes a present for all of us.

58

HARRIETT

My cousin in California sent a package
a ready potted Christmas amaryllis bulb
The picture shows a beautiful flower
 on a tall slender stalk
 but the poor bulb looks as withered
 and dried up as I feel
I water it as the instructions say
 give it a kiss and wish it well
If it ever blooms, maybe there is hope
 left for me.

I'm going to change hats now, and be a keen-eyed, mean, bird-doggin' little brother. The time is 1880, and the place is an exceedingly respectable home in the little town of Abingdon, Virginia. My older sister's name is Maud Mae, and my buddy's name is True. He's black, and we get along fine.

Maud May's Beau

Maud May's beau comes down on the train from Roanoke.

"It is getting to be every Saturday," Papa tells Mama.

Mama says, 'Maud May is a young lady now. She has a right to have a beau. Not many girls have a beau who comes down from Roanoke on the train.'

Maud May is really puffed because she has a beau coming down to see her on a train.

I call him Gold Tooth and he is about ten years older than Maud May. He wears a black hat with rolled up edges. He rises up on the balls of his feet, reaches up with both hands and rolls the sides of his hat some more. Then he lets himself down from rearing up with a smart click like a soldier and strikes himself out in front like he is bullying up to somebody.

He sits with Maud May in the porch swing or walks her on the street. If the sun comes out hot he raises a black umbrella and holds it over Maud May. Even if she happens to step sideways to dodge a mudhole or a warp in the brick sidewalk, he leans over that black umbrella. He has a hard time keeping it over Maud May for our sidewalk is full of warps where roots have raised the bricks.

When the curtains flutter in our house I know Mama is watching Maud May and Gold Tooth.

If I am sitting on the steps while he is slowly swinging Maud May in the swing, or if I am a few feet behind the black umbrella, he says, "Why is that boy always under foot?"

He eyes the gold lavalier Papa gave to Mama and the cut cameo with the little seed pearls all around it. Maud May had pinned the cameo on her dress and put the lavalier around her neck and I know she has not asked.

He follows Maud May through the door and into the parlor as I get up off the steps and follow inside. He mumbles in my direction, "Some people are always

under foot." I see him looking toward our Adams mantle. He asks, "Is that not a dresden plate?"

I tell True, "He is a Roanoke crook. I watch him all the time or he would steal something. Don't be surprised if they arrest him right in our house. It would serve all of them right who are always thinking about being civilized."

"You meaning Miss Maud May?" True does not expect an answer.

Old Magnolia follows about telling how she courted. Old Seacat, "Swept the snow off the logs men was sawing into wood. I set way off courting." Old Magnolia chuckles and plods about. You would never think anybody would court Old Magnolia.

One night we are all eating dinner and Papa gives us all a jolt. "He is bottle assed," says Papa. "That Roanoke person."

I think Mama is the most surprised of all as Papa never uses bad language at the table and never, never before Mama. I suspect it is the first time.

A few days later Maud May is standing behind Gold Tooth right where she gets a good behindside view.

"Papa is right," she says. "He is bottle assed."

Maud May appears wilted and the red v is in the middle of her brow which always appears when she is made or about to cry.

She says, "Mama, what am I going to do? I am not going to be here Saturday. I am going up to Sissy's for all day."

Mama writes the note. She gives me a dime to take it down to meet the train and hand it to the Roanoke beau. I run into True who goes along. We read the note while the train is coming.

"Maud May not at home anymore," the note says.

True says, "It don't say much."

I get a stubby pencil out of my pocket and put a finish in the bottom,
"Married and gone to Knoxville to have her baby."

The train is whistling for the crossing.

"Stand close to me and hold out your hand. Palm up. Maybe he will give
us a dime."

"Well, well." The Roanoke beau spies us, as we hand him the note with True
holding out his hand palm up.

He looks at the note, rears up, and rolls the side brim of his hat. He
starts walking away, but turns coming back toward us. He bellys up. I am not
giving back one inch.

"You stay out from under my feet," he says and stomps over to the station
window to see when he can board the next train for Roanoke.

The train is already on the switch breathing out little wisps of steam. The
brakes release, the train jerks and puffs and starts moving past in no time at all.
I see the Roanoke beau in the window. As the train moves, it is like he is
swimming by. There is no need to let him have the last word. I say, "Give my
regards to Roanoke."

True is running along after the train. "Come on," I call. "Don't worry,
Mama gave me a dime. We can get two double dips of strawberry ice cream. You
walk in right behind me."

I wonder what would happen if Lou got together with another writer, a novelist half her age perhaps, whose work she admired and whom she felt affection for. It's not as easy for women to talk across the generations as it used to be, and such talk is precious. They would just sit and talk and laugh and be easy with each other, and the younger woman might say, "Lou, what do you think success is?" And Lou would say

[Well it is this: it's finding the one thing that you can do to get out of yourself, get away from yourself, and do what you enjoy. Some people calls it work] because when you work, you enjoy. [Writing is what I can do to get out of myself. And I sit up until---oh, all night, and I don't know that it's four o'clock in the morning. And I don't know that the hours pass, because I can get out of myself.] [Success in life is finding a work where you can get out of yourself. Now it's sort of akin to love. Love is where you can get out of yourself and into the life of another person. And the two are connected, the work and the love. And there's a great discipline to it: love without discipline is slo^ph. And there is that discipline in work, and it's all very wonderful, very wonderful.]

And the younger woman might smile at that, and say, "Tell me about a day in your life." And Lou would say,

[....OK. Now this is what I do of a day. Ok. Get up] ~~and then go out and see what all kinds of flowers has come out over night.~~
~~and then go to get up,~~ and then go out and see what all kinds of flowers has come out over night. Now that is a very enjoyable thing. Real early of a morning. I like to get up at six o'clock but I'll oversleep sometimes if I am up late writing or something, but [I like to get up at six o'clock. That is a good time for anybody to get up. And you cook your breakfast and go out and see what flowers have come out during the night. There is all kinds of changes, you know, in the night. With the flowers and things.

I guess they grow so good because they are in good soil and because I go and tend them. You have to tend them. Look now, for example, what do I mean by tending? Well, if you have a cow and you love her, and you rub her and you pet her and you hug her around the neck and you talk to her, she will do better. She will do well for you. And you can get her to give down the milk by first ^s rubbing her and scratching her down. She likes to be scratched and she will give the milk down real good. And you know flowers and vegetables are the same way---don't you reckon people are too? It is a tending. And then you get joy out of a new leaf. One day you can go out there and there are two leaves, the next day you go and there are three leaves. You get joy out of it and some kind of fulfillment.

T [But then...well, I come back in from the garden and turn on the radio or something and see if there's any special news, and about that time the ^{dern} telephone rings.

You have to talk to people, you know, and you have to see what's in the refrigerator [for George to eat] and then you can go to the Senior Citizens and get your blood pressure took. They take it over there, you know. Get the blood pressure taken, and you can get your ---what is it?---blood sugar count, that's what they call it. And talk to all the people over there and see what they're all making, and see who's mad at who, and see what the latest gossip is. They always have a nice lunch and then we practice with our band, something like an hour and a half. And come back and go around up here in the neighborhood and see what everybody's doing. And you can spend an awful lot of time that way, and you can sit down and write a little, too, if you want to. You can go to the Piggly Wiggly or down on the farm and you can see what they're doing at the barn. And come suppertime, go up and see the children, and see the grandchildren. Then come back and it's some more talking on the telephone. And it's night then, and you can get to thinking.]

And then the question would come, "What do you think about, there in your house at night? Do you think about God?"

And Lou would say,

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When I was a child, I thought that God was my father, but as I am older I know that ^{God} it is some kind of spirits that's within us all, ~~and around~~ in, and out and around this universe.)

Did you ever go to a Holy Roller meeting? Well, little girl, you ought to go. Now, down below our house one time, this old man was down there that prayed every night before he went to bed. So my brother and I decided one night we'd go down and hide outside and listen at him. So he got to praying, and we got really scared. I can remember it to this day that I thought I'd better get away from there.

But now, going back to the meetings of these people, these people are very true, just as true in their religion as they are in New York, up there at some big, high-powered church. They have the feeling. And I've been to the meetings and even when they handle the snakes, they do it through the love and the faith in their God. And you can just feel ^{that} ~~is~~ there is something in there, among those people, and I've had other people to tell me that---you can feel that it is true. So, little girl, among the people of the mountains, I have found some true spirits, I'd have to say that...true spirits.

At those meetings? Well, they read the Bible, and they sing and they play instruments, and they testify, and they get the Holy spirit.....they have the snakes in boxes. You know how when you take the Lord's Supper, with the white cloth over it and all, you want it to be clean? Well, these people are clean, too. They take the old snakes out in the washtubs behind the house and they wash them

good before the meeting.

It is the Spirit, and I wish I could tell you, little girl, what I think about that! God is the spirit. He's in you, he's in me, he's all over this earth, and those people in the meetings, they can get the spirit, too. Now I've seen people get the Holy Ghost and fall down on the floor in fits. So one nasty person said one time that that was part of a sex act, and that what happened when they got the Holy Ghost---and it makes me mad to tell it to you---was that that woman had a ---what is it?---that's it, that's what they said, an orgasm. Now I think that's ^a real nasty ^(thing) to say about anybody who has got the Holy Ghost.

No, I never have. I would like to have a real strong religious experience, just like I said a while ago I'd like to have one of those romantic love affairs. But my religious experience has been a gradual thing. All my life I have prayed to God and I have felt like I was under His eye, all my life. But I would like to have a great religious experience that I hear people talking about, and I believe in it.

Praying is just a mighty good thing for everybody to do. Now it don't matter very much who you pray to. In other words, you can call him God, or Buddha, or Mohammed or anybody, just so's you pray, that's the way I feel, just so's you pray, and that helps you on the lonely road.

Well, all right. I remember this old preacher one time. Well, we was having one of these dry spells--draught--and so they all got in the meeting house, and the preacher said, "Well, we better be a-praying for rain." And so this old feller, he says, "There ain't no need a-praying for rain as long as that east wind is a-blowing." And

the preacher said, "Old fool! Don't you know if the Lord can make it rain, he can stop that east wind?"

Oh, the devil!

So you ask me if I believe in the devil. Well, yes I do. Yes. There's good and evil in the world and I believe in the devil and I don't want to get sassy with him.

And then the younger woman might get a look of mischief on her face and say, "Lou, what would you do if somebody came along and told you you couldn't write any more?"

And Lou would look at her and squint her eyes a little bit and she'd say, "Well, you know, I would just have to sneak!"

And she might go on and ask herself a question.

Now, you haven't asked me anything about the ERA, and I'm all for it. Certainly, certainly. And they can fight it, and they can chomp on their bits about it, but it's here, it's one of those things that has come---it is here, and it's going to make things better. We've got things going for the colored people, it's a little better than it used to be, and we've got things a-coming for the Indians, it's a little better than it used to be, and now the women need their freedom too.

You know, those pantsuits----don't you like pantsuits? They have freed the women, those and the pill. This thing about the abortions---I don't know whether there's anything wrong about it or not, but if it's a sin, sins can be forgiven. So I'm for abortions, that's all right, and I'm for ERA and I think a lot of good will come out of it.

Some people have asked me, would I marry again? Now here's another thing---you know about this living together today? And not married. I've thought about it for myself, but if my daughters had done it, I think I'd have killed them.

And I can tell you another thing. I believe in divorce. Now when my son married a divorced woman with three children, I thought I'd die, but she's been good for him. And I can tell you another thing. (I wouldn't want to live with a man that mistreated me, and that I hated, and that we had nothing in common. There are better ways of doing it. And so the old world wags on, and I think things get a little better all the time.

But women! Women have been enslaved.

It's evening now and the long day has passed in talk of this and that, of love and work and writing, of raising children and making stories and cooking beans. The sun is almost down, the long rays of the last light slant through the blinds of the darkening house. And what about death?

[I guess, from the time we're born, we start dying a little bit, and all along the way, we let go a little bit. OK, some day we all will let go, and when that time comes--- my sweet daughters, let me go!

No, no---what would I be afraid of? This is the way the old preacher said it at Rosa's funeral. He said, "To Rosa, who is alive. To you"---that means us---"who are asleep." I think he got it right. To a certain degree, we are asleep right now. There is so much we don't know, and so when death comes, there's more. There's a lot more. More. There will be more. There is no end. That's what I think.

Just take it as it comes. Now nobody need ask the question about what's going to be, because you're not going to get the answer. Make do with silence]

I want to read you one final poem. It's called Last Party.

If I had died younger, I would have
wanted

My love to hold my hand and forever
be my love

And kneel on my grave and drown me
with his tears

Now close the lid as a hymnal is closed
in church

Just some old women to sit an hour
and tell

Each other bits of gossip and glance my way
And say

Young she looks and well and so peaceful

Just a little get-together

And when the gossip lags to glance
my way

As I was one of them

Just some old women friends
to come and bide a spell

Just some old women smoothing wrinkles
from their gowns

As over their specs and under their specs
my judgment they pronounce

For love has ways of going away
And little children cry too loud
When news and gossip peters out
I would like sitting a last hour with me
Some old women I have known.