

Emily and the Hobo

1907. The sky's a commotion of snow clouds. Everywhere clumps of stiffened brown grasses. No thrushes, no robins, no doves. No monarchs. No fireflies. Only men on the tramp pass the farmhouse kitchen. *Do not feed them, Emily*, I am warned. *They'll not leave. A flock will form from one.* The men's beards don't reach their chests, it's just dirty whiskers on cheeks and chins and hair sticking out from under cloth caps, the color of rolling gravel. A deep voice asks for something to eat, then once fed the voices walk into the darkening woods. My man has gone in the sleigh to cut wood and tomorrow returns. Our first child makes the sound of a cricket in my womb. The straggler hobo comes in the afternoon. Yellow leaves from the ground pillow still asleep in his tangled locks. His suit jacket and overalls reek of burning wood, the campfire two nights shining through the slough trees. *They're like vermin, Emily. Like the parable of the loaves.* Hair black as the dirt under his nails and yet his fingers through the cut gloves show themselves slender and long as if they'd stretched themselves on a piano's keys, as if yearning for grandeur. He wears a cross, the chain too short around his neck. I slice him thick rye bread warm from the cookstove with butter and jam. He turns like a wolf to the plate, wiping it clean in one sweep of pink tongue. Then he, too, vanishes into the end of the short day before night. The lantern's kerosene signals early dusk; it is the time that separates the seen and unseen. I wrap myself in chorecoat and ferry out to fork hay into the shed for the two old sheep. Summers they rub their sides against the gnarling apple trees; in winter they grow more fleece and their weepy eyes dream. I cradle hay and inhale green spring. I hear the roosting hens. I duck into the chicken coop to pick the brown eggs; the hen's beak and yellow eye always watching. How do they see me? The house of a human shadow, reaching, stealing your young? I hear footsteps crunching through snow. The footsteps know about running from bludgeon and sheriff, hiding in fields and barns. *I'm here, Emily, I want flesh. A baked chicken.* His eyes shine, the gold of a goat's. He tells me he knows I want

to travel to Africa, to the hot countries. He offers me the wood burning boat docks in Guinea. We'll go by river. On the road they call him The Missionary. I'll wear white, mutton-leg-sleeves and high Victorian collars. He'll tender me flies twitching over my face, cascading waterfalls. He's been there. The people are long-limbed. Seven-feet-tall. The women, bare breasted. Towns cling to the coastlines. *All that for a drumstick lathered in gravy and mashed potatoes.* They scar themselves with leopard spots. They wear jaguar skins. Three-foot pygmies sing like a thousand bird choirs.

Emily and the Mule Man

1917. The shagbark hickory is our tallest tree and that makes it our lightning rod. Lightning usually wallops the tallest but this time it struck the smallest, my seven-day-old infant and her soft white head of potato flesh. The lightning—some ailment known only to God—twisted her intestines. How blue her pale cheeks grew until her face took on the hue of the half moon's cratered bruises. Their silver instruments have forked out my womb like veal at a rich man's supper and I lie prone on a bed. In Mercy Hospital where nuns make rounds in enchantments of black and white; their giddy beads click. *Hail Mary Blessed Art Thou and the Fruit of thy Womb Jesus*. If I close my eyes there's my baby crying between the *Art* and *Thou*. If I will my eyes open it's the mule man and his long-tongued wagon that bears a tiny white coffin I see passing the window. The room is seven stories in the air. He's dressed in his soiled magenta vest and black frock coat. I smell the mule, the sweating hide of him, his hooves. Again, the heavy wheels turn, grinding past; and the mule man reaches for a round tin and its lid that perfectly fits. Pinching wet brown tobacco worms into his mouth, he mumbles to his pulling mule, eats more wet worms, then spits. "Lightning always strikes the tallest thing. This time the wee one's hit." The coffin made pretty for the dirt, the cloud-colored velvet flowers, cherubs floating in white smoke, gold ribbon and angel hair. My seven-day child's inside. I ask the nun who comes to wash my face: Do you see the mule man's boots and the wagon's iron wheels? *No, my dear, there's nothing there. Fill your mind with common things.* 2 cents a bushel for corn. 3 cents a bushel for oats, the mulberry bush naked after a rain bath, all her purple-red fruits eaten and safe inside the orioles and bluejays that fly south. The farmhouse and barn and corn-crib built so sturdy no storm can knock them down. Everything on a foundation of field stone. Cows brought in from bluegrass pasture milked by five p.m. The mule man still circles, muttering, chews more tobacco worms. *Nothing there. Think common things.* 3 cents a bushel for oats. A mongrel dog is best for his cocklebur

tail readies to wag at the sound of your voice. To pet its fur pull your fingers through quick as a thrush wing flitting. His nose is snow but his odor's warm green like church supper ditches in summer all sweet with weeds and full of daddy-long-legs, toads, and mud. Folks get foreclosed on and dump their hungry animals seven stories in the air. All night the mule's shuffling hooves pull the squeaking wagon. *Hail Mary Blessed Art Thou and the Fruit of thy Womb Jesus*. Rosary beads 2 cents a bushel.

Emily and the Scarlet Fever Deity

1903. Father brings the three of us here to the Palisades in the heat of July to rock climb. The cliffs rise up to meet us, not far behind the black-green breathing trees and leaves that reek of spit. The horses hardly stop when my brothers burst from the buggy scrambling up the trails of beaten dirt, skittering over the moss-scabbed boulders, pebbles sifting down. Even climbing a girl must be ladylike, must be clad in chastity: drawers with hooks and eyes, muslin undershirt, a slip, long-sleeved cotton dress. Farther up, my bare-armed brothers in their bibbed overalls, grab roots that snake between stones. The heat ascends from the dust, plasters my underthings—skin upon skin upon skin. A headache blisters my forehead, and still my brothers yelp and climb. From behind, father urges me to keep going; his gentle voice flickers over my earlobes like a cow switch. I tell him I feel unwell. He sighs, *You must not spoil it for your brothers*. They are explorers, Balboa and Magellan, searching for the East by sailing west. Shivering in the ninety degrees, my teeth chatter. The dirt trail drags me along. My brothers shout from above; they've reached the top of the world. I peer through the green air at bass trees hung with heavy vines of black grapes. Rocks oozing heat. The river has cooked, water thickening to chocolate sludge. Hand over hand I grasp branches and roots, things give. There are pink suns everywhere. At last, I reach the top. Across the river and built on the highest rock stands the cliff house—a temple to an ancient god—old darkened stones. Like tales I've read of deities with blood-stained teeth and eyes of black stork nests. Who lives there now? *Race you to the bottom*, I hear a shout. We are going down. I run, faster and faster, until panting I reach the horses grazing and throw myself down beside their hooves. Ants crawl on me; they rash into my pants. I hear their ant voices, a long way off. I am burning up. Bring me water. Not the river mud. I roll into a ball on the buggy's back-board seat as father clicks the horses home. My temperature's so high my brain's a swollen smoldering. By nightfall they shave my hair to cool my head. I no longer know who holds ice to my

forehead in an oiled silk. The scarlet fever deity hovers over me,
washes me with the hot rag of its fetid, strawberry-colored tongue.
Kiss touch.

STEPHANIE DICKINSON, raised on a farm in Iowa, lives in New York. Her books include the novel *Half Girl* and novella *Lust Series* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Port Authority Orchids*, a novel in stories (Rain Mountain Press), and the fictional interview *Heat: An Interview with Jean Seberg* (New Michigan Press).