

Christopher Cole

The Cold that Settles Sideways in My Bones: Five Portraits

1. Chastity and Chance

You would recognize her in an instant if you saw her now--she is growing into her mother. Same dirt-blond hair that likes to string itself into tendrils like Kudzu vine. Rangy limbs that operate in reluctant tandem, like a rowdy team of horse. Soon she will have that same low hanging bosom. Soon enough she will decide if she wishes to smoke Swisher Sweets and weed and hang out with boys who tease her into doing more. There are always two roads, but like you always said to me, the straight and narrow is the one less followed through that yellow wood. It is obvious to me that you never forgave Chastity's mother for her choices. There were many, many sinners for whom you had genuine compassion but Chastity's mother was not among those many. When you prayed for her I could see it on your lips: you cursed her at the very same time.

I was dumping the feed sack down and had opened up the top and had the scoop down deep inside. Chastity asked if she could help. I thought, *I doubt that very much*, but I said, *Of course, dear*.

Chance came strutting up and shoved the smaller hens aside. He bobbed his head like he was mightier than Pharaoh. He made his cackle, which always sounded to me less like a rooster's crow and more like a crazy old woman's imitation.

Chastity laughed. *What's that one's name*, she asked.

That one, I told her, *is called Chanticleer. But you can call him Chance.*

Chance? She asked.

Yes, that's his nickname.

She got very serious for a moment and then that seriousness melted away and she giggled. She already had her mother's toothy, tired grin. She said, *Chance...I like that. Chance the Chicken.*

She scooped some feed out near her feet and then jumped back when Chance and company descended, pecking at her tennies. She danced away from the darting beaks, cackling mightily herself. She did a little jig on her bony ankles.

Be careful, I said, *they'll eat you whole.*

Nuh-uh, she said. She eyed me skeptically.

Yes-huh, I said. *Hens will eat just about anything, even meat. And roosters, like Chance...why, they're even less choosy, since they're the men.*

She looked up at me, her grey eyes hard and glinting.

Chance ruffled his feathers up big and made his old woman's cackle.

Chastity burst into laughter. She scooped another scoopful and tossed it up high and far, like she was winnowing the grain.

2 *Lady and Sylvia*

She dangles her paws over the edge of the porch in the shadow of the eave when it gets warm, then hot. She folds one paw over the other as if in prayer. Lady watches Sylvia stalk the chickens but with no great interest.

Sylvia's long low body slinks among the ferns and ruffage. She moves like some well oiled machine with a million gears. The way she moves reminds me also of those tiny red newts that like to slink and slither among the mountain rhododendrons, except that the newts are so innocent and wide-eyed, like they are seeing God's great creation unveiled on the seventh day, whereas Sylvia has murder on her mind. Chanticleer quits pawing contemptuously at the ground. He's seen Sylvia from fifty yards. Her sleek gray stands out starkly against the dirt and brush. He looks up at her and cocks his head to one side and to the other. He cackles a haughty warning. Sylvia stops her gears.

Then she streaks across the yard and the hens erupt in nervous cackling. They and Henry scatter like a cluster of clacking marbles struck by a well placed shot. Even Chance takes a few involuntary trots away before he recalls his dignified station. Then he cackles at Sylvia and refuses to move further. Sylvia dashes up a tree. The chickens reassemble a little further toward the creek.

Lady watches this drama a dozen times daily. I watch her from the kitchen window and wonder what she thinks. She's well above all this barnyard nonsense. She's an old dog now. Her tail and the hairs around her eyes are streaked with ashes. She's gotten thicker around the middle. *You* would say that I toss her too many scraps. *I* would say that since we're both a couple of old ladies, we two can eat what we want, waistlines be damned.

Sometimes I think that Lady suffers from depression, sometimes I think that she is just resigned. She has big brown melancholy eyes like mine. Old ladies with big brown melancholy eyes are bound to get accused of sadness, and we certainly do.

The latest one, William, is always very sweet to Lady. When he visits he brings her doggy bones and toys. He waves the toy in front of her, she looks at him dubiously, then clamps the toy in her mouth and runs away.

I know that the two of them do this solely for my benefit. William never particularly liked animals despite, or maybe because of, having grown up on a farm. Lady never liked change and she does not believe in replacements. Lady thinks when things are lost, they are lost, and when souls get holes in them they cannot simply be mended like a scarred tin roof.

3 *James and Chastity*

Lady's barking merged into the cough and rattle of his ancient Chevy block. He killed the engine expectantly but we two stayed seated. Chastity has learned from me the art of signaling to a man that she will brook no inconvenience on his behalf. She took a stick from the old pitch pine I had chopped up and nudged the kindling.

Saw the smoke clear down the road, said James, ambling over. Figured on behalf of the Cocke County Volunteer Fire Department I'd better check it out.

A smile spread out on his ruttled face.

No, James' repartee has not gotten any shaper since the days we took those long car rides with him to see Memphis preachers give sermons to big packed auditoriums. Nothing about James has gotten edgier or clearer and he has uttered this same one-liner about the fire department several times before. Sometimes now I have a long conversation with James and a day or so later I will see him at Donna's store and he will proceed to initiate the exact same conversation. Sometimes I remind him: *Of course, James, we spoke of this the other day*, and he will say, *Why, yes, I suppose we did*, without seeming the slightest bit befuddled or convinced.

I fetched James a spot of that apple moonshine which I keep only for him because for my taste it is far too sweet. He talked to me and Chastity as he always does, about rainfall and fears of washed out bridges, about teachers at Chastity's school that have long since died or retired, or retired and then died, but that will teach on in his memory forever.

When Chastity had gotten up to get him some more moonshine he started rocking again, slowly and I knew just what was coming.

How's things with Trevor, he began uncertainly.

You mean with William? I asked back.

Trevor was two--technically three--Williams ago.

Why yes, he said. *How's things with William?*

They're fine, I said. *We're quite well. Thank you for asking.*

He nodded. Chance cackled from the coup, then the little leghorn called Henry cackled too. Then a crow cawed from up in the tallest hemlock. Lady barked once from inside the house.

Well, he began again. He stopped his rocking and leaned his rocking chair forward, with his hand cupped to his ear.

Well hark, what's that I hear a-ringin'? Is that wedding bells in Pilgrim Congregational?

He grinned and leaned toward me.

I don't hear a thing, I said, *except a very bad doggie and some equally misbehaving birds.*

Come now, he said, *we both know that you need a man 'round here.*

A man around here, I asked disingenuously. *For what?*

Chastity sat back down and gave James his moonshine. James took the

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shine but he didn't seem to notice it or her.

For what, he repeated my question indignantly. Well, what if your septic system's broke?

Well, then I'll call a plumber in to fix it.

Well what if one of them big ol' hemlocks drops a dead branch down right on top of your roof?

Hmmm, I said. Now that's a fair question.

Chastity was listening intently. She poked the fire and it roared up in her eyes.

You see that piece of stump that Chastity is sitting on? Well I suppose I would do the same as I did to that sick old pitch pine that was drooping over the outhouse. I'd cut it down with a chainsaw and make it into firewood like this wood we're burning, and make some pieces of it into chairs like that one that's holding Chastity.

Chastity cackled, and Chanticleer cackled.

I never let James have the upper hand in front of Chastity.

James just shook his head. He only made that look which you gave a name to once, that *Jacob* look of his, like he's grappling with something mighty.

4 William and me

He wanted to take me to a show in Knoxville or even as far away as Nashville the other day. I told him I couldn't leave Lady, Sylvia, Chance and all my others to their own devices.

He said, *But what about that young girl that's always hanging around... what's her name?*

Chastity, I said.

Chastity, he said. *Why not ask Chastity to help out?*

She's a sweet girl, I told him, *but I just can't trouble her with the care of all those silly little lives.*

William accepted this, as he accepts all of my small, pale falsehoods.

We went walking instead. We climbed a rocky path which the recent rains had eroded, our feet sinking into mud as soft as fresh-baked bread. Old growth tulip trees, maples and hemlocks that the settlers never felled crawled halfway up the valley. Their farms were long gone and the great-great-great-grandchildren of apple trees they had brought from the old world as seedlings gazed down from the fog upon their bones.

We passed a few young hikers as we ascended.

We're too old for this, I pointed out.

He agreed, and we stopped for breath just shy of the cascades and listened to the roar of the descending waters. There was a gray old beech which lovers had adorned with their vows, carved deep into its pliant skin.

In the wind from the river he took me in his arms like a silent movie lover.

When? He asked me.

Like a silent movie lover, I looked away.

William is a good, God-fearing man. He's handy around the house. His eyes are blue and sparkle like the seafoam. His voice is deep and soft. He never talks politics and his after-shave is sweetly redolent of pine sap and he's deeply in love.

William is as patient as he is perfect.

He'll wait for me for all of time.

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5 You

You are in our cold upland waters when they come tumbling down from the mountains and cleanse away the soot. You are in the summer storms that crack the sullen sky, all of a sudden, and drop their rains down over Clingman's Dome.

You are in those cute little hobby farms for tourists with their perfect little pastures, their custom built craftsman houses, ringed with perfect rainbows of invasive flowers all in bloom. You are in the real hardscrabble farms, out in those working piebald pastures, among those scrawny bulls and the scraggle-bearded folk trying to eke their bare existence from this Appalachian dust.

I see your frolicsome joy in Chastity, I see it's jaded negative in her mother. I see your wan smile in Jim's forgetful grin. I see your crackling temper when Donna is in a mood up at the shop and her *how're y'all* sounds more like *now what in the hell do you want*, but maybe more so I see your temper in those sudden summer storms because you would always find a way to sublimate that anger--into working, into chopping up kindling into teeny, tiny pieces, into tinkering with that leaky radiator on the van--just like the storms sublimate their anger into healing rain.

I feel you in William. Though you two will never meet, it's your patience that I feel in him. It's your acceptance of God's good grace as both a bounty to be savored and a burden to be borne, of love between two people as both a promise and a debt.

You are the mountain mist which clings to each and all. You are that gentle cold that settles sideways in my bones.

You are in all these things, but the one thing in which you are not is that taffeta-lined casket that I picked out in town, from the paunchy salesman with the runny, red nose. Him wiping his nose and expounding to me the virtues of copper versus bronze or fiberglass or steel and me nodding politely while knowing full well that some box lined with taffeta could never hold you. Knowing full well that you would live in all of these places but you would never fit inside that tidy family plot.

Forgive me for the choice that I have made, for choosing not to believe that you are just there, just moldering there where I laid you down beside your father.

You and God forgive me, please, for never--not even once--having returned.