

Karl didn't come home and I had no supper. I walked through the streets with their heavy, heavy trees bending over the walks and the lights shining from the houses and over the river the mist rising.

Before I came into this room I went out and saw the pear tree standing motionless, its leaves curled in the dark, its radiating body falling darkly, like a stream far below into the earth.

1935

LAURA RIDING

1901–1991

In 1924 the editors of the avant-garde little magazine *The Fugitive* announced that they were awarding their annual "Nashville prize" for poetry to Laura Riding Gottschalk of Louisville, Kentucky, a young woman whom they defined as "the discovery of the year"—a writer "coming forward as an important figure in American poetry." The poet whose early achievements they were honoring was indeed to go on to become an important figure, not just in American poetry but also, through her thirteen-year personal and professional partnership with the British poet Robert Graves, in British literature. But she would give up writing poems entirely in her late thirties, eventually arguing that poetry is an obstacle to "something better in our linguistic way-of life."

Riding was born Laura Reichenthal in New York City. Her father, a tailor, had emigrated from Austria-Hungary as a young man; her mother was born in the United States, of German and Dutch descent; and although nominally Jewish, the family was not religious. Instead, Nathaniel Reichenthal was active in the American Socialist party, and dreamed that his daughter might grow up to be an American version of the Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. But his daughter had strong literary inclinations. After graduating from Brooklyn Girls High School, Laura Reichenthal attended Cornell University, where she began seriously writing poetry and where, in 1920, she married Louis Gottschalk, a history professor. In 1923, when she first published verse in *The Fugitive*, she adopted the name Laura Riding Gottschalk and she soon became a regular member of the so-called Fugitive group—a coterie that included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. In 1925, she divorced Gottschalk and moved first to New York, and then, at the invitation of Robert Graves, to England and, eventually, the Spanish island of Majorca.

Graves, who admired Riding's work, had invited her to collaborate on a book; together they coauthored an influential text titled *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), which helped inspire the kind of close reading promoted by the New Critics. Together, too, they founded the Seizin Press and edited numerous works by fellow writers. Sometimes turbulent, their relationship became so stressful that in 1929, involved in a romantic triangle with Graves and another male poet in her circle, Riding attempted suicide. The collaborators continued working together for another decade, but Riding was to return to the States in 1939 and to renounce poetry at around the same time. Years later, in a 1989 foreword to her posthumously published unfinished study *The Word "Woman" and Other Related Writings* (1993), she claimed that much of Graves's work, including his famous exploration of "the female principle," *The White Goddess* (1948), was essentially based on her own ideas, asserting "The literary production in which Robert Graves exploited my thought and writing on the subject of women most massively and concentratedly was *The White Goddess*."

Riding was not in any political sense a feminist. Until 2005, the Laura (Riding)

Jackson Board of Literary Management maintained her policy of refusing permission to include her work in women's anthologies, citing her 1986 comment: "I regard the treatment of literary work as falling into a special category of women as an offense against literature as of a human generalness, and an offense against the human identity of women." Accordingly, *The Word "Woman"* is laced with attacks on what we now call "second wave" feminist activism; about "Eve's Side of It," she insisted that she wanted to "warn readers against trying to see the story as a feminist interpretation of the Creation followed by a feminist analysis of the historical situation" of men and women, adding that "this spiritually modest story" shouldn't be brought "into the raucous favor of current feminist narrative." Yet despite these caveats, the author of *The Word "Woman"* explored many fascinating ideas in a collection whose epigraph—"Women are strangers in the country of man"—locates it squarely at the heart of contemporary gender studies. Thus her notion that among "early civilized peoples [woman] begins to play more or less constantly, a costumed role, to become the female protagonist: to be 'feminine' " points directly toward late-twentieth- and twenty-first century notions of gender as "performance."

As a poet, Riding was an acknowledged influence on such other writers as W. H. Auden and John Ashbery. In the introduction to her final volume of verse, *Collected Poems* (1938), she declared that a poem "is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other word besides poetry is adequate except truth." Yet such pieces as "The Map of Places" and "The Troubles of a Book" call pained, even obsessive, attention to the inadequacy of language. Thus, a few years after she published *Collected Poems*, Riding came to see poetry as, in the words of her editor and biographer Elizabeth Friedmann, "obstructing the dedicated use of words for truth that it inspired." Subsequently, adds Friedmann, "the nature of language and its potential for exploring the total meaning of being human (as in 'Eve's Side of It') became the focus of her working life." After her marriage in 1941 to Schuyler B. Jackson, a poet, critic, and sometime editor of *Time* magazine, Riding published essays, articles, and books—most notably *The Telling* (1972)—as Laura (Riding) Jackson. The couple's collaborative work, *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (1997), was published posthumously.

The Map of Places

- The map of places passes.
 The reality of paper tears.
 Land and water where they are
 Are only where they were
 5 When words read *here* and *here*
 Before ships happened there.
- Now on naked names feet stand,
 No geographies in the hand,
 And paper reads anciently,
 10 And ships at sea
 Turn round and round.
 All is known, all is found.
 Death meets itself everywhere.
 Holes in maps look through to nowhere.

1928, 1938

Eve's Side of It

It was not at first clear to me exactly what I was, except that I was someone who was being made to do certain things by someone else who was really the same person as myself—I have always called her Lilith.¹ And yet the acts were mine, not Lilith's. For Lilith did nothing. She had no body. Nor could I feel that I was Lilith's victim any more than a hand feels itself the victim of the person who makes it do certain things. The hand does these things as if it were doing them itself. It keeps count. And so I have kept count. There have been a great many things to do. I cannot say exactly how many, although I have kept careful count, because I have never added them all up. I have only said to myself "another" and "another" as time went on, not wishing to behave like a slave-woman grudgingly numbering her tasks. That, of course, is all over now. There is no more counting to be done. And since it is all over, I am ceasing to exist. There is no longer an Eve who is as the body of Lilith, no longer a Lilith who is really the same one as myself. There is a new one who is neither Lilith nor myself, yet no one else.

I know this because, although I feel myself ceasing to exist, I still am. I do nothing, there is nothing more for me to do, I am no longer myself. Yet I still am. I am this new one; who is, however, not I. And Lilith is also this new one; who is, however, not Lilith. Lilith is no longer bodiless; she no longer does nothing. Yet she has not become Eve, nor have I become Lilith.

1. In Jewish mythology, a female nocturnal demon (probably derived from the Assyrian storm demon Lilitu). Specifically, she was believed to kill babies. According to a story first recorded between the 8th and 10th centuries C.E., Lilith was Adam's first

wife—made, as he was, from dust and thus his equal. Because she refused to submit to him and left the Garden of Eden, she was cursed by God and replaced by Eve, created from Adam's rib (as described in Genesis 2.21–23).

ie, too, has ceased to exist, yet still is. We have both become a new one who is neither Lilith nor myself, yet no one else. I cannot give you a more intelligent description of this new one because I am only Eve—I haven't what they call "a good mind." But I can tell you more, at least, than Lilith can; for Lilith cannot talk. I can talk about myself, and about Lilith, and about men—until I have actually ceased to exist. And in this way I bring you very close to the new one who I become, along with Lilith, in ceasing to exist. I do not mean that I am superior to Lilith any more than a hand is superior to the person who owns it because it can do things that the person cannot without her hand. I only mean that Lilith could never tell about things. It may be that Lilith is in some ways superior to me; it may even be that the new one who is neither Lilith nor myself is more like Lilith than me. But I, and only I, am capable of telling in so many words how it was before there came to be a new one. For I alone was *there*.

I have sometimes thought of Lilith as my mother. This, of course, is a foolish way of thinking about her. It is true that Lilith made me, but I had no father. I was entirely her own idea. And I was never a child; I did not grow; I have never been different from what I am now—or rather from what I was just before I began to exist. Lilith made me, so far as I can make out, because she was irritated with herself. And she was irritated with herself because she was so good. Lilith knew everything that was going to happen. She also knew that it would be better for these things not to happen. She knew that there were going to be men, and that they were doomed creatures—creatures with hopeless ambitions and false thoughts. Yet she could not prevent their being. They wanted to be; and to have opposed their being would have meant hurting them in their ambitions and thoughts. This she could not do because she was so good. They must hurt themselves. They must learn from themselves, not from her, that their ambitions were hopeless and their thoughts false. She had to let them be. So she made me to take her place—not wanting to watch herself playing the fool all those thousands of years. And I freely confess that I have played the fool: I have been far too patient.

What were their ambitions, and what their thoughts? They wanted to make more than there actually was: many and many and more things. For they thought that what actually was was no better than nothing. "Where is it?" they asked. "What is it? Who is it?" Naturally Lilith was not the sort of person to answer: "It is here, it is this, it is I." Lilith was everything, but she was also nothing in particular. And she was not only incapable of inflicting pain on anyone; she was also incapable of telling lies. She could not say to those creatures who wanted to be: "I am everything." For she could not honestly have used the word "I" about herself, even if she had been capable of talking. Or I might say that she could not talk because she could not honestly use the word "I" about herself, or in any other way refer to herself. She had no self—at least, there was nothing definite you could point at and say, "That is Lilith." And so she could do nothing to prevent from being these creatures who wanted to be.

They were not even creatures at that stage. They were, like herself, dumb: they could not say "I." They were a dumb feeling of antagonism—dumb, blind, ignorant, helpless. I suppose that when something is as completely everything as Lilith was it is inevitable that there should be a feeling of

antagonism to it. And the feeling would be only a sort of joke at first, a sort of joke of Lilith's with herself, a sort of way she had of smiling at herself for being so completely everything, or of making light of what was really a tremendous situation. There would be, that is, a sort of mock-outside of herself. And then "one day" she would suddenly find that, by having failed to establish as a hard-and-fast rule that there was nothing outside of herself, she was surrounded by a vague feeling of antagonism, or contradiction, which insisted on being taken seriously, as something outside of herself, although it was merely a rhetorical effect. Lilith was at once too proud and too gentle a person to argue and answer rhetoric with rhetoric. And so it happened that she let herself be treated as nothing by what was actually nothing itself.

When Lilith saw that the result of all this would be for a time the creatures whom we call men, she decided to do nothing about it (that her nature prevented her from doing anything about it) and to withdraw to the very inside of everything, where she would be quite safe from challenge or argument. When she did this everything became, to all appearances, a vacancy that the men who were to be could fill in as they liked; and this vacancy men have called space. But in thus withdrawing to the very inside of everything and, so to speak, hiding her head in herself so that she could not see what was going on (although she knew very well beforehand the sort of thing that was going to happen), she was bound to leave something behind to correct the anomaly, which otherwise might have easily been interpreted as a lie on her part; and Lilith, as I have explained, was the soul of truth. In short, she left me behind. My function, which all men have misunderstood, has been to observe. And in order to observe living creatures, I too had to live.

At first men were not what we now call men; they were merely a feeling of antagonism, or a dumb anger—a dumb, helpless anger. And that was also my principal feeling at the time—a feeling of dumb anger against *them*. Lilith, you see, did not really feel; she only thought. And I suppose you may say that I have never really thought, only felt. But there has always been Lilith there behind me, thinking. It would have been idle for me to be a thinker, too, since I had to deal with creatures who only felt. Men do not really think: they make thoughts out of feelings, and you cannot make very good thoughts out of feelings. And so, in order to observe them truthfully, I had to learn the language of their feelings. In the same way, men can tell the truth about themselves if they keep to their feelings. But when it comes to telling the truth about everything—when they try to think, that is—the safest thing to say is: "I do not know." I myself, though I have always had Lilith to fall back on for thinking, have always kept strictly to feeling—to details, you might say. When, in my dealings with men, I have found myself in the midst of thinkers, I have always tried to set them an example: I have always said, "I do not know."

But in the beginning I had only this dumb feeling of anger. I was not really dumb, of course, for from the first I could talk. But I felt dumb because there was no one to talk to. There was Lilith, but one can't talk to Lilith. If you know Lilith at all you know exactly what's in her mind, at any moment. And if you know what's in her mind, this generally means that you are about to do something that she wants you to do. So there was no question of my talking to Lilith. I talked a great deal to myself in those early days: this is a habit which I have never quite lost. Even in telling about things here I am

for the most part talking to myself. Men have often wondered what women do with themselves during the time when, presumably, they are doing nothing. They are, of course, talking to themselves.

But in talking to myself in those early days I could only tell myself that I was angry. It was not clear to me exactly whom I was angry at. I knew vaguely that they were men, or rather were going to be men. But they were not men yet. They too were only, more or less, a dumb feeling of anger. If it had not been for me this would have been a feeling of anger against Lilith. Lilith was not, however, the kind of person one could be angry with. You can only be angry with someone who argues; and Lilith never argued. She merely withdrew. You cannot be angry with someone who withdraws—who isn't *there*. And this is where I came in, and what Lilith made me for. The men who were going to be were angry with me: it was my job to be, so to speak, a chopping-block for their anger. Lilith didn't want to deprive them of their anger, or of anything; and yet she didn't want to be there. So I did the dirty work. I was Lilith's eyes and ears and mouth, and then her whole body.

You can easily imagine that I was very impatient for these creatures to be—as impatient as they were themselves to be. It is no fun to go on being angry, day after day, with something which isn't yet—especially when there are no real days but only an unbroken vacancy of waiting. In the same way it is no fun to be travelling, no matter how comfortable the hotels and the trains and the boats are. You are not really happy until you are *there*, even though you know that you are not going to be happy there. At that stage I was, you might say, travelling, and in the greatest possible comfort. I was not quite there *yet*, I was going to be there, I was nowhere else. I felt very large, as people do when they are travelling, and very light, and very care-free—altogether too care-free: I was not made to do nothing, like Lilith. I do not mean that Lilith is care-free: how could she be, knowing about everything? But if you do nothing and *know* nothing it is very dangerous to be care-free: you may easily forget about yourself, and die. I was anxious to live—to get it all over.

In being impatient for these creatures to be—as impatient as they themselves were—I was undoubtedly putting myself in sympathy with them. But from what I have already explained it should be clear in what way I was in sympathy with them, and, from this, in what way women have, in general, been in sympathy with men. I wanted them to be, and they wanted to be, and to this extent we were, and always have been, in sympathy. But the reason why I wanted them to be was radically different from the reason why they wanted to be, and always has been. I wanted them to be because they were going to be, since Lilith was going to let them be; and because, if they were going to be, the sooner the whole affair was over the better. Lilith made me especially to see the whole affair through; I did not want to be hanging around with my work not even started—perhaps to die. Lilith made me, but she would not have made me again. Of course, there was no real question of my dying. Over and over again, when I have seemed to die, it was just *extreme* tiredness and pulling myself together again. But you cannot imagine how painful it has been to pull myself together each time, after I have been thoroughly exhausted by *men*. Well, naturally, I wanted at least to start fresh.

Often I have been called a scold; and this is a harsh word, considering that it was all their fault, for starting things. Once they started things they

couldn't leave them like that; they couldn't expect to be for ever coming to the point—although I quite realize that this is what they *did* expect. Well, I couldn't be expected to go on being angry for nothing, when I knew that sooner or later there would be good cause for being angry—or, at least, Lilith knew. I hope this explains my behaviour in the Garden of Eden. It must not be thought that I was tempted by the Serpent.² The Serpent was Lilith's way of encouraging me to do what I would have done in any case. I was fully aware that the fruit was unripe and therefore not good for the health. But things could not go on being lovely for ever when they were going to be *very* difficult—to say the least. Indeed, the ripe fruit was going to be much worse for the health. Things had to begin *somewhere* to be somewhat as they were going to be. And it cannot be said that I didn't take the first bite. Or, whatever is said, I think it ought to be realized that all along I have had a point of view of my own about things; my side of the story is not merely that I have been unlucky in love. And this is my private reason for telling about things: to explain that I, for one, never had any illusions. I do not see how anyone can be either blamed or pitied who has never had any illusions. This is my point of view. At the same time, I should not like it thought that I expected men to have my point of view about things. They are bound to feel that I led them on. Of course I led them on.

1935

Commentary [on "Eve's Side of It"]

I should like to provide this little story with a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue would warn readers against trying to see the story as a feminist interpretation of the Creation followed by a feminist analysis of the historical situation—the life of men and women (according to feminist argument) up to the point where it ceases to be a mere course of changes that did not ever amount to any general, permanent, pervasive change in it, the original masculinist concomitants of the Creation circumstances remaining the great Flaw. The epilogue would remind readers that they had had this warning in the prologue—for they would have forgotten it, in the inveterate manner of readers of reading as they pleased, and not as they were supposed to read. Yet, apart from the difficulty of winning the reader's kindness to the author's intentions, such twin provisions would, indeed, probably arouse suspicion and induce belief that what one said the story was was not just what it was.

The author is not supposed, according to The Rules, for the telling of stories, to put in an appearance in a story, or too near a story to remind of its having an author, as a First Cause operating from outside the story—unless it be a fictive appearance. But stories are not what they used to be. The rules are not what they used to be; or, rather, it has become intellectually fashionable to substitute a law of spontaneous narrative for The Rules, which outlaws sequential pertinence as unnaturally life-like. When something is intellectually fashionable, it commands, if not respect, fear: if you do not

2. I.e., tempted to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, an act that God had forbidden (see Genesis 2.16–17, 3.1–5).

treat it as a deliverer from the oppression of not knowing better, you will be thought intellectually unfashionable.

The tolerant attitude to confusion characteristic of these times is favorable to experimental procedure and thinking: there shapes itself, in the confusion, the premise, inspiring faith in experimentalism, that all procedure, and all thinking, from the beginning of thinking and procedure-devising, have been experimental, for want of the possibility of their being otherwise, and that the best to be effected is, therefore, that which is the *most* experimental. Thus is it that, in contemporary story-writing, the question, where the author is, in a story, whether on the outside looking (and writing) in, or on the inside, one minute, and on the outside, in the next, or broken into two author personalities, or more, that work in shifts directing the working personnel (the story-characters), is not necessarily asked at all.

When I wrote this story, I believed in the reality of stories as description of some of the unknown content of life that answers honorably to the affectionate desire for knowledge of it *all*, under deprivations of various sorts that limit the quantity of such knowledge available, in measure proportionate to the desire. The belief has not left me. I hold the concern with making stories, having stories, using them for maintenance of the imaginative loyalty to the sense of life as of a busy fullness in its general forces as exemplified in the personal living of it, and a perfect correspondence to this fullness in its content of detail, to be important to human sanity, and general being of intellectual good heart. And the dissolution in these times, of love-of-story, longing need of it for the exercise of desires not only of life-devoted mind but of the hopeful soul, in a characterless appetite for employments of the faculties of sympathetic attention in whiles of habitual idleness, I view as being of very potent general demoralizing effect upon the spiritual fortitude of human beings.

What are the chances that my making comments on this story will be helpful to readers if they have this contemporary predisposition to viewing a story as an escapade in literary invention, an experiment in writing in a narrative manner? I faithfully risk skeptic disingenuous reading of my comments, as I risked the like with the story itself. In writing this story I wrote writing to which I gave the identity of a *story*, presenting it to readers as such, because I *meant* the word "story" for name of its identity. I *meant* to be telling a story, not to be doing anything else. If certain persons, their *being*, and existing in the world of happenings, personal and natural, can be imagined as a credible possibility, there is in this the making of a *real* story: who tells it *means* it, means the name "story," means the story he-she tells. I meant it all, the story "Eve's Side of It." I meant: a character Eve, of whom stories were told of old, I imagine as "really" existing, far, far, back in existence; and the same, with Lilith, she further back. Great, big, personality-actualities looming up in the dramatics of the Private Life of the universe named "human." Lilith wrapped in veils of gloom never quite shed, seeming more a Mood weighing upon time's yet undetermined content than an imaginatively locatable Being. The other personality of the story is of ubiquitous placeability!

The personality "Eve" was an articulate presence: "I am not to be treated as a mythical character," it declared. "Whatever I am thought of as being, by the Others, or in relation to the mythical Adam, whether a piece of the

like of him, or them, or made in the image of them as made in the image of that in the image of which they have conceived themselves to be generally made—whatever has been or is done with me in *ideas*, I have to be treated *as real*." This being real, over and over, in every occurrence of me as to be included in the lived story of life, is both my welcome to the Others, as proving them real, and very inconvenient to their theories of the nature of life, which they deduce from the nature of themselves understood as that of philosophers whom the universe invented for the purpose of having bestowed upon it by them, to its peace and glory, the explanation of its existence. If I, in my irrepressible being wherever *they* have being, in numbers balancing in a natural sort of way with their own, am not otherwise knowable than *as real*, what of the theories about "reality" as knowable only by most complex processes of _____. There is incessant argument as to whether knowable by intuitive or rational processes (an impossible opposition, since the difference is only between speedy apprehension of a little, and step-by-step accumulative apprehension of much, of what is to be known of the entire knowable or—"reality," as they call it).

But what of the new one? This is a *story*: it has got to be as broad as it's long. A story moves on, but it always takes all of itself along with it—the persons, and the happenings, don't just disappear from one part to the next. The story holds it all together. It is *about* all that it is about. And so, if we are to pay respect to the character Eve who has figured so importantly in the stories of the past of our Life, we owe it to the sincerity of our story-sense of the real to put everything into the story of Eve that agrees with our ability to tell it or read it or listen to it as real, in the way in which stories can have realness.

As to the meaning of "the new one": it means that this is a story. A story does not cut itself short with itself, does not "really" end. A story hangs suspended in time. The New One, one might say, is the she-I when the story breaks out of its perpetual condition of occurrence in past time, and overthrows the literary difference between Story realness and Life realness, between what is imagined with belief in the possibility of its being "true" and what is perceived with the eyes of knowledge to be of the very stuff of reality, and requiring therefore to be *thought of* as material of *the story of Life*. For there is this peculiarity, this wondrous naturalness of story as truth of the imaginable, that empowers it to become a changeling, in its character of narrative, when thought's vision authenticates the credibility of the imaginable. Story is the communication of human beings to human beings of beliefs as to what the life of human beings is "really" like. This metaphoric mode of narrative suits both the case of uncertainty in knowledge of what things are *really* like, the subject being a universe of complexity, and the case of the uncertainty of the human form of being as to just what, in full and final determination, *it* is (whether as form self-determined or brought to be what it determinedly is by the managements of universal circumstantiality). Story has to stay metaphoric and at the same time (in so far as it is genuine in its really-like effect of truth) come to the very finest margin of vergence on the realm where story-telling changes naturally into truth-telling, story narrative into truth, the narrative that must be kept self-renewing.

Such is the doctrine of implication of this story. It may be said that, when I wrote it, the doctrine was but a matter of good-faith keeping with the spirit

in which I wrote it—my sense of where story fits into patterns of human communicative behavior, which includes so much that is imitation of truth that great confusion exists as to what is truth, what untruth, what falsehood, what lying. It will have been noted that I have let myself "go," in making these comments on the story, speaking about it and its characters now as author, retrospectively, now as myself as present-time reader of it, now dramatizing the personality of Eve of the story in words spoken as by her, additionally to the first-person mode of narrative of the story, and now, even here, in the midst of authorial comment, slipping into commentator's self-identification with the personality Eve. I think all this proves the extraordinarily live nature of story as the next-best thing to truth—when it is formed with love of it for its capability of feelable likeness to life. It does not prove, should not be taken to prove, that, as author, I conceived Eve to be a spitting like of myself, in writing the story, and that in commenting on it I recast this autobiographical hallucination by making an appearance as the spitting real of the story's Eve. The key to Story is bountiful sympathy with the immensely varied actualness of life, as the Key to Truth is bountiful knowledge of actualness, in the immense unity of its significances. I have spread out the case of my little story about Eve to conversational breadth with interest in generating an atmosphere of ease between readers of it, and it, and readers of it and myself. And I leave the matter at that.

But, a little more, finally, as to "the new one": let her be just that. Do not take her out of this spiritually modest story into the raucous favor of current feminist narrative.—And so I have, after all, supplied an epilogue, which can be used also as a prologue.

1976