

Fall 1986

Deep Water, Wide River

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, Shannon (1986) "Deep Water, Wide River," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 25 , Article 24.

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Deep Water, Wide River

Hillbillies from Tennessee, all twelve
strummed on the big front porch
which sagged like a beer belly,
music twining through the creepers,
dusk licking its tongue
of light around my summer bed.
I floated on their twanging boat
wondering where Jordan was.

The other neighbors latched their screens,
turning up Milton Berle,
something in the way that family
“howled” they called it, that string
of harmony winding up the street
like a dog, tail tucked-under,
the moon a locked-in
bitch in season.

But I loved the old instruments,
frets worn from the oil of many fingers,
the scratched upright slightly out of tune,
ivories bruised as aging flesh.
Roped to the heaped truck like a cow,
I watched them lower it,
along with banjos, guitars, mandolins,
“barnyard heaven” the neighbors called it.

One of the girls taught me notes,
her thick rug-colored braids
tickling my nose as she bent over me,
humming like running water,
Ah-ah-ma-zi-i-ing- See?
I ached for music or God
as I lay in bed, listening
to them sing their mother across.

Her coffin sat on the porch for three days,
the neighbors about to call the police,
the *noise*, they complained, the *stench*
of those roses— I wanted to cross the street,
sing with them from the lap of their porch.
On the opposite shore, the moon rose
pale and gold as the notes we held.