

☞ River People

Guy Hand

FEBRUARY 26, 1997: I hardly recognize the thin, sere look of this place. The California spring I left behind was awash in poppies, paintbrush, and shooting stars; the grass green; the air summer sweet. Here the air smells of frost, the ground is brittle, the riverbank faintly scratched with colors I have to push my face against to see. Pale yellows, like this winter sun, and faint rusts (colored more by my imagination than any sort of native pigment) cling to the bare branches of plants whose names I can't recall—all thrown together with the unsettling notion that I'm a native here and a newcomer all at once.

Shadows are illusory: the banks of the Boise River are caught in the diffuse light that comes before snow. Cottonwood trunks are modeled not by the play of sun against shade, but by the dark stain of an earlier rain, their limbs silhouetted only by the dusky leaves that pool on the ground beneath them. I walk tentatively—no longer accustomed to this light, this cold, this clutter of downed leaves—like a tourist wandering the beach in dress shoes. With each step, ice hidden beneath the duff cracks like bone. I consider turning back, but then catch a flash of water through the trees.

I break through to a river the color of scrap tin, a blank, heatless gray that mimics the sky. No rapids or even ripples complicate its

