

ROADSOULS

a novel by
Betsy James



Aqueduct Press, PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-61976-091-2

Copyright © 2016 by Betsy James
All rights reserved.
First printing, March 2016

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015955946

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover and text illustrations © 2016 by Betsy James

Printed in the USA by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to Craig Werner, who can see in the dark, and to brilliant readers Vonda McIntyre, Shannon Guinn-Collins, Diane Hersh, and the late Dr. George Hersh. Also to Ken Hause, who, though Farki can ground him, now and then can ground Farki.

And, of course, to Ursula K. Le Guin. The ring of her hammer leads us into the heart of the Mountain.

Who We Are

Wind is the prairie tide. We are the wind.
There is no wall the wind cannot unbind.
Rain is the prairie tide. We are the rain.
Rain turns citadel to sand again.

Build proud, build high; wind will unmake it.
Build for eternity; water will take it.
Even the gods in their high town
Are by wind and rain and the Souls brought down.

Waysong. The Roadsouls.

Two Stories

All life too small, all walls
too close for breath, the living heart
crushed to a fist, and the old stone gods
stone.

Pain beyond pain.

Lift up your hands!

Be seized!

Calling the Roadsouls. Welling-in-the-Mountains.



He was nothing but eyes and fire and bullshit, that boy—that man, not yet eighteen, red-haired, mocking the plaza girls with kisses, burning like a torch in daylight.

On the morning of an autumn day he rose from the sleeping platform in the Men's Hold, the center of the universe. He slapped hands with his brethren, ate bread and meat, baited the girls at the village gate by wagging his cudgel in front of his hips. The girls jeered, but their eyes did not. *We are the men of Creek, we walk like lions.* In the line of young hunters he walked first—his younger brother, Set, envious and worshiping, stepping where he stepped. He always walked first, his bow in his hand.

When they ran along the cliffs it was he who ran first. He saw the hawk in the air and thought, To see what the hawk sees—oh, if I could fly!

At the cliff's edge was a jagged rock. He gathered himself to jump to it. For no reason—just to jump, to shout, to stand at the edge of the abyss, laughing like a god.

His mind and his fate spoke then so instantly, one after the other, that five years' brooding had made no sense of it.

Betsy James

Jump

Don't jump

Jump

The rock's bad

Jump

Don't!

Jump!

He jumped with his whole body, joyful as a stag. His feet kissed the rock, the rock turned, it fell.

And he flew.

When they could find a way to climb down to him, they strapped him in a litter and took him to his mother's house. Not that he knew; it was a month before he opened his eyes, and they opened on unchanging dark.

He never went back to the Hold. As soon as he could walk he made Set take him to the ruined bothy, well outside the village, where they had played Roadsouls as children. He cursed and berated Set until his brother half led, half pushed him out there and left him, with a rotten tarpaulin for a roof, a kettle full of water from the creek, and a haunch of smoked pig.

Set shouted, "You're fucking mad!" There were tears in his voice. "Die out here, then! I'll be back tomorrow."

He lay shivering, rolled in the bald bearskin that was all Set could pilfer at short notice. He made his body rigid against the cold, his jaw against anything like tears. At last he slept. At some still hour he woke to feel the frost his breath had left on the bearskin, and something small and warm creeping at his thigh.

A rat! He cursed, pawed it away. It made a tiny sound that stopped his hand, and by the time he could think *kitten* it was back at his thigh, mewling and burrowing. It butted his fingers with its round head.

"Where have you come from?" He gathered it to his chest. It crawled around his neck screaming, looking for nipples.

Roadsouls

He was terrified it would leave him. He picked a shred of meat off the haunch that hung from a nail on the wall, chewed it, offered it at the head end. Smacking noises meant it was eaten. He chewed more; that was eaten, too. At last the creature settled under his chin, kneading his jaw with its claws.

“Stop that, you little shit,” he said through his teeth. It let him stroke it, its body lithe as water. “Brook,” he named it. “Robber. Nuisance. Tick.” With his hands cupped around the cat he fell asleep.



A brown girl in a brown smock, not quite nine, clinging to her mother’s hand and staring at a lion.

It was harvest fair. The lion was chained by an iron ring to the axle of a Road soul wagon, gilt and green. The Road souls stole children; she leaned into her mother’s thigh. Then she forgot her mother.

In some lands the male wears a mane of dark fur, but on Mma’s mountain, purple above the desert of Alikyaan, both male and female lions are sleek and tawny red. The girl could not tell the sex of this one. To her smallness it was great. It flexed its claws like a house cat and yawned, white teeth, red tongue. Its eyes were gold.

A boy in torn green silks said, “Stroke the lion, Miss?” He held out his hand. “One penny to stroke it.”

She had no penny. And who was she to stroke a god? She stared. The lion stared back. Her mother dragged at her hand, whispering, “Drop your eyes!” She did not drop her eyes. The lion stretched, it lowered its head as though it bowed to her.

When the fair was over she sat cross-legged in her mother’s cubicle—it was tiny, for her mother was only a fourth wife—and tried to draw the lion on her arm with urda paste. It looked like a mouse. She wiped it off. When her brothers came yelling and waving sticks she ran after them.

Cobalt sky, red earth, and purple mountain—Mma’s mountain, the tallest. Close to, the river ran blue-brown between the desert fields. Turtles plopped from the bank, blackbirds whistled in the reeds. The shepherd was bringing sheep across the gravel ford, and Jip, her Jip, was running them. While her brothers pretended to spear fish in the shallows, the shepherd let her call.

“Stay!” Jip poised, quivering. “Now!” she cried, and he ran like joy.

But her brothers were hunters. “You have to be the deer,” they shouted, and chased her to the granaries. She hid from them in the dusty dim among the sacks of corn.

In the forecourt a hawk screamed. The boys rushed out after it. She crept from her hiding place, alone for once. Girls were never left alone. She squatted in a shaft of sunlight that struck through the powdery air, and with her finger, in the grain spilled on the floor, she drew the lion. This time it came right: curved claws, long cat-body carried low.

The granary door swung back. She did not hear it. She drew the sweep of the long tail.

The lion disappeared under two sandaled feet.

It was Tumiin.

He took her wrist in his right hand and drew her up. He called her his little flower, eh? And how had such a flower bloomed from a plain, dry branch, eh? And who had got her those night-creep eyes? His own eyes roved over her, he pressed her against the grain sacks. He smelled hot, like a boar. She heard her own voice in a whine of terror, could not move, as his left hand sought, sought in the dusty odor of grain.

The door creaked. He half loosed her; she jerked away and scabbled up the grain sacks like a rat, up, up, up. He caught her left foot, dragged her down. For an instant he held her against the sacks. With his lips to her ear he whispered, “You speak one word, chit, I kill your mother.”

Roadsouls

He let go of her foot. She fled up the sacks again, into the shadows. It would be easy for Tumiin to kill her mother. He was an important religious man.

She heard him say, "The brat was playing in the grain. Take her outside and slap her!"

When his heavy footsteps had faded, the grain warden gestured her to come down. After a moment she obeyed. He did not slap her but knelt, held her shoulders, and made her look at him. "Do not ever go near Elder Tumiin. *Ever*. Do you hear?" His eyes were kind, but they burned as though to say more than his words.

She nodded. Looked down and away.

In time her birthday came. She turned nine, put on white robes of uncut cloth and went to live on the Maidens' Balcony. Tumiin came there sometimes. Never to the inner rooms, and Ganu, the Maidenward, was always there, but when he came his eyes were on her, always. She watched for him. She could not help watching. Sometimes she drew a lion with urda on the sole of her left foot, the one he had grabbed, like a charm against him.

On the Maiden's Balcony girls were kept safe and whole, they said. She had lost the fields, the river, and Jip, but it was a fair trade.



The dark has a language. I don't speak it.

I try *Please. Hungry. Sleep.*

The dark thinks I understand
and speaks too quickly.

I repeat the one word I am sure of:

No! No! No!

The dark takes my hand
as if I were deaf and blind,
and holds it to his lips.

Anonymous. On a slip of paper dropped in the Grip.

 He had been weaving at the sash loom all day, but the sun was leaving. He put out his hands into shadow.

The pattern was called Ravens' Flight Over Pines, but Raím had made it trickier by asking, What if the ravens were harrying a hawk? At the border he wove the hawk—tight, hard, wanting to break out and get away.

He unhooked the loom and groped to the bothy's open door, then to the edge of the dooryard. The scrub was loud with bees. Fronds that must be yellow with autumn bloom brushed his palms, his bare waist, his mouth.

Roadsouls

Five years. Five years, except for one tiny time when he had held a girl in his arms and kissed her, and by his greed and grasping had lost her. Now, they said, she was big with the baby of another man.

Somewhere in the sky a nighthawk twanged, *beent!* Pinprick clicks of bats. From the creek, the deep double *huu!* of an owl.

He went back to the loom. Brook would come home, he would come in the open door, bringing the bigness of the world with him, and though his paws scarcely made a sound Raím would hear him come. Brook would topple against his calves, and his tail, like a silk rope, would whip across the backs of Raím's knees.

"Brook," he said under his breath. "Robber, nuisance, tick. I'll wring your goddamn neck. Brookie."

Brook did not come home. Raím took up the hawk's thread until he wearied. Went to the door again and shouted "*Brook!*" into the big night. Cursing, he crawled into his rat's nest of blankets and slept. Rose. Slept.

He waited six days and nights. The owl called by the river, and Brook did not come home.



He went into the village sometimes. Not often. As a weaver he had memorized scores of patterns—Lizard and Mouse Meet in the Same Burrow, Badger Bites Snake, Clouds Over Straight Cliffs—and it was this map-making that got him down the creek path to the village, counting taps of his stick.

He knew the Men's Hold by its odor of smoke and singed hide. Dogs barked, but no human spoke. The south wall of the village gave off heat and an echo. The main gate smelled of urine; it was custom for men to piss at the foot of the arch as they came and went.

He pissed, then went through the gate. Heard his name spoken softly by startled voices. Scowled. Knocking with his stick, he made his way to his mother's house. He had not returned since the weeks he had spent there, in a dim back room, after the fall

that had taken his sight. At that time he had lain in double dark, as the suddenly incomprehensible world went on and on; he had lain utterly still, because, if he did not move, what had happened would not be real.

As an initiated man he ought now to wait at his mother's gate and call, "I stand here. Do you ask me in?" Instead he walked right into the courtyard garden. Spice of tomato leaves, of rosemary in sun. He heard a whimper under the echoing portal and spoke his little sister's name. "Thoyes?"

Scuff of bare feet, door-squeak. He stood on the flagstone, ants running up his legs. The door squeaked again. Garlic and onions and soap: his mother. With a sound like a cry she began the sound of his name. Stopped herself. Said formally, "What discourtesy is this?"

He did not answer. The ants bit his ankles, they ran up the stick to his hand and bit him there, too.

She said, "Come in, then." He bowed his head and entered.

His mother was the headwoman's daughter. She touched his curls, made him touch the lintel and say the house blessing before she laid her cheek against his.

Her cheek was wet. He flinched away. She offered him a glass of the wine she made herself. He refused it and asked for tea, which would not make him soft. Sat at the same scarred kitchen table where he had eaten until he turned eight and went to live in the Hold with the men. The same smoky peppers perfumed the oven's heat. Water fell, *plink!*, from the same clay cooling jar into the wash pan.

His mother said, "You no longer shave?"

"No."

A soft paw touched his knee. He brushed it away. She said, "Do you still have that cat?"

"No."

Roadsouls

After another silence in which he heard someone at the doorway, probably Thoyes peeking around the jamb, his mother said, "I shall speak to Zella. She always has kittens."

He shook his head. His mother set a plate of plum cake near his hand. He broke off a piece. She said, "Are you a Roadsoul? We have forks." He ignored her and ate.

She said, "So."

"I'm going away." The words came out of his mouth and startled him.

"Away? Where?"

He could not think of anywhere, so he said, "Ten Orchards."

"Ten Orchards? What is there for you to do?"

He could not think of anything, so he made a scornful face. His father came in, soft-footed as Set, with the older sister who had been sent to fetch him.

"He says he's going to Ten Orchards," said his mother.

His father said, "Eh." Sometimes he came out to Raím's bothy, where he sat silently or perhaps talked about weaving. Now he said, "So. You're here at the house."

Raím shrugged.

"Ten Orchards?" said his mother.

"I've got friends there."

"Who?"

"Friends."

His father's voice came muffled; Raím knew he was pulling his mustache, left side, then right. "You're welcome in the Hold."

Raím shook his head. His hand was sticky with plum cake but it did not seem manly to suck his fingers; he wiped them on his sash kilt. "I'm leaving tomorrow. Don't know when I'll be back."

"How will you get there?" said his mother. "Will your friends come for you?"

"Yes."

That voice in himself that always almost spoke said, *I'm your son, dead already. What's it to you?* But it did not speak. His

eyes filled with tears. He said “Going.” Rose, blundered out of the kitchen so fast he cracked his head on the doorframe. Blood poured down, he could say “Shit! Shit!” and rub his eyes while he rubbed his forehead.

In her little frog’s voice Thoyes said, “He walked into the post.”



They sent for his brother. Set led him to the Hold, wrestled him out of his bloody clothes, and sat him naked on the sleeping platform next to the line of Great Looms. One side was called Sunside, the other Starside. From this line of looms, the stories said, everything in the universe grew forth: the mountain full of lions, the town full of girls, and all the world beyond it. Raím sat at the center of the universe.

Set brought him a rag to hold to his forehead. “Shove it up your ass,” said Raím, and threw the rag into his darkness. One of the Hold hounds came over and licked his eye.

Set said, “What do you mean, you’re going away?”

“Get fucked.”

“Who’s this friend in Ten Orchards?”

Raím turned his back. Set left. Raím wanted the dog to stay and push its whiskery snout into his ear, but it did not. At the window a wasp buzzed, battering against the glass.

Night fell. He sat on the edge of the platform wrapped in a quilt, sucking down a bowl of soup and trying to shut his ears to the sounds he had not heard in five years.

Whisper, snick, hush of thread at the looms. Hiss of urine into the mordant pot. Male laughter, bets made, rattle of dice. Henno and Ros and Kim spoke among themselves, softly. They were not by nature soft speakers. Once they had been his seconds, reliable as hounds. It dawned on him that they were afraid of him.

At this thought he sat very still. His mind cringed from it, as one might cringe from looking under bandages at a wound.

Roadsouls

Set came in, smelling of night and freedom. Lest he show the least pity Raím shouted, “Damn you, what have you done with my clothes?”

Set cursed. Articles of clothing began to wrap themselves around Raím’s head. One boot caught him on the ear; he put up his arm in time to ward off the other. He set the soup bowl on the edge of the platform but the platform had disappeared, the bowl fell and smashed.

He began to dress. Only the boots were his own. “Where are my clothes?”

“They were filthy, Mother’s washing them.”

He cursed and put on the loans: loose breeks, hip cloth, tunic. He was cross-gartering the breeks, fighting a puppy for the garter, when Set said, “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“Ten Orchards.”

“The hell you are. And at goddamn midnight?”

“Better than listening to your crap. Mother’s got my stockings, too?”

“Puppies ate them.”

Raím pushed his bare feet into his boots.

“By the goddess,” said Set, grinding his teeth. “Here’s a pair of mine. I’ll take you to Ten Orchards and to hell with you. Only wait till morning, you clot, you’re not worth a night’s sleep.”

“Honor?”

“Honor. First light. If I haven’t killed you by then.”

“I’m dead already,” said Raím. Heard Henno and Ros and Kim cease whispering. “First light, then.” Fully clothed, he rolled up in the quilt and forced himself into the dark of sleep.