



Spring 2017  
Issue 8

# CHEAT RIVER

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## Jasmine Cruz

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# We Who Befriended Twin Crocodiles

I am saying this to you because one day you will grow old and frightened. It was a lesson that I could have learned but never did. It all began on the day my older sister Alana and I rescued the twin crocodiles.

She was 8, and I was 6, and it was the first time that we had ever seen crocodiles. We didn't even know what the crocodiles were called. We actually thought that each crocodile was made of floating pebbles that were stuck together. Alana and I loved playing skipping stones at the old river, and so we thought, could it be that we created them? We threw so many pebbles that the river decided to give us a gift, two pebble-skinned creatures that floated on water. We need not play skipping-stones anymore; the river made us win.

The old river was more than our home, it was our bloodline. Yes, I'm talking about that old river in the hills, the one in the pictures that I show you. Yes, I go back there whenever my visits here are over—that one is my home.

Alana was like the old river, pacific in many respects, but when she moved, all her muscles undulated in unison like the rocking of the waves. Her black hair also channeled water. I also

have long wavy hair like my sister, but I have none of her grace. Look at my dark brown eyes, she had them too, but hers felt like the moon loved to be reflected on them, haunting and endless, while mine just froze at the first contact of light. She knew everything while I could only understand what was in front of me.

The crocodiles were like mirror images of each other, but we eventually discovered how to tell them apart. It was all in their right front legs. One crocodile only had three toes on that leg while the other crocodile had a full set. We called the first Kitty and the other Lady. We didn't really know if they were girls, but we gave them girl names because we were girls and we wanted them to be girls. We never figured out why Kitty only had three toes, but she always proved to be the feistier one.

All else, they looked like twins, and when we first saw them, they were but babies who were caught amongst the roots of the mangroves. Naïve as we were, we each took one crocodile and lifted them from their entanglement. With their scaly bellies in our hands, we waded into the deeper part of the water and released them. When they first felt their freedom, they seemed confused, splashing about, looking at each other, and turning to us with eyes that seemed to say, *is it ok for us to go now?* We smiled at them. They understood and swam away.

We rushed back into our village of *nipa* huts and cement houses, determined to gush about the creatures that we had just met. Back then, our village was a sleepy town where people walked around in their dusters or shorts and sandos as if the entire village was their sala. But that lethargy was being shaken up. A few concrete houses were being made here and there, and the teenagers were starting to wear jeans and t-shirts.

When we told grandma about the creatures made of floating pebbles, she said she never saw such animals. We were amazed because grandma was the oldest person in our village, but as we described the creatures, she stared at us, confused.

Grandma was the one who raised us ever since we were kids because a ship took our parents away. When they decided to sail to Manila to look for jobs, they left us with grandma, promising

that once their life was stable in the city, they'd return for us and take us with them. They never did because their ship brought them to the bottom of the sea.

Though grandma cared for us, she was the complete opposite of a parent. She never gave us advice, even when we pleaded for it. When we were young, we remember asking grandma to help us pick what dresses we should wear. She refused and said that we should be the one to choose. We cried because she was making our lives harder. We did not want to choose, but despite our pleas, she simply ignored us and walked out of our bedroom and started cooking palitaw. We had no choice. Alana picked a sea blue flowy dress, and I settled on a white dress with a straight cut.

When we got out of our nipa hut, we saw Gella the sumbungera and her mother. Part of the elite Lorenzo clan, Gella had wide eyes, thick eyebrows, and a big mouth. Her mouth probably got that way because of her sumbungera ways or her penchant for wailing, which she was doing right then and there. She was as if engaged in a tug of war with her mother, but instead of a rope, they were pushing and pulling on Gella's excessively-ruffled sleeve. "I hate this dress!" said Gella. "It's itchy! It's itchy!" "Don't take off your dress, Gella!" said her mother. "You're embarrassing me!"

Grandma looked at us without saying a word, but we knew what was on her mind, and we looked away in mixed shame and gratefulness.

The next morning after we told grandma about the floating pebbles, Alana and I went to the river to play skipping stones. Grandma was somewhere farther back, talking to some of our neighbors. People were milling about, busy with their daily tasks, when we saw the crocodiles swimming to shore.

We quickly ran to them as they reached the land. As we animatedly talked to them, we did not know that one by one the people around us were gasping, mouths open, finger pointing in horror. We were crouched down beside them, and we proceeded to lower our hands in order to pet them.

Before our hands lay on those scaly skins, I heard grandma shout *Alana! Kira!* I looked up and saw her running toward us, but that didn't stop me from continuing to lower my hand, and after a few seconds my hand was there on top of the crocodile's head. So was Alana's.

We looked down and saw the crocodiles with their eyes closed, enjoying the way we stroked them. Alana picked up Lady and grandma screamed. Both of us didn't understand why. I took Kitty, raised her up, and said, "Look, grandma! Look! The floating pebbles!"

We were all gathered inside a hut, and even the baranggay captain was there. Gatherings with him these days were usually held in the newly-built covered basketball court, but today things were different. Something was meant to be a hush. He began with a grave face as he told the story of one of his ancestor who was a great great great great uncle of his. He said that this story was passed down from generations to generations in his family. A foolish man, his ancestor boldly ventured into the forbidden parts of old river and toward the marshes downhill. Crocodiles who lived there never bothered the village, and the village never bothered them, but everyone knew that they were dangerous.

His ancestor wanted to kill a crocodile, skin it, and use it to prove that he was a courageous man. He didn't like that people insulted him because he was good at cooking and he enjoyed washing clothes with the women at the river. After venturing into the forbidden waters, he disappeared. Weeks later, his severed hand washed up on shore. Everyone knew it was his because the hand had a tattoo of a queen's crown, and only he had a tattoo like that.

When the baranggay captain finished this story, he told us not to touch the crocodiles again, but we defiantly said no, and all of the adults gave a collective *susmaryosep*. He talked to us in his "nice" voice, saccharine enough to dupe the uninitiated. We looked at him unconvinced. Red pinpricks started appearing on his neck until the color began to spread all over his face. "You will never touch those crocodiles again!" he said.

We weren't planning to heed his advice, and he knew it. So he became more active at greeting us whenever we were by the riverside. He breathed a sigh of relief when days and months passed and the crocodiles did not return. We were saddened.

One day our neighbor Gella was at the shore picking up shells, while Alana and I were further back playing in the sand. We decided to build a castle, and we were leaving the shore to look for some sticks. Before we got too far, we heard Gella say, "What are those?" When we turned around we saw creatures swimming toward us. They were each the size of half our arms and yet, even at a distance, we instinctively knew that they were Lady and Kitty.

The villagers who were standing even further back started to see them too. "Crocodiles!" one shouted.

We knew that, like us before, Gella didn't know what crocodiles were, but since she always needed to suck up to adults, she screamed, "Cocody!" and pretend cried as she ran, looking for an adult she was planning to *sumbung* us to.

When Gella passed us, the haze of shock suddenly broke, and we realized we had to run. Our legs moved, but it was as though the air became liquid. The adults eventually swarmed together to chase us, and they also looked like they were running against water as well. None of their legs or either ours felt like they could ever be quick enough to get to our goal—we: to get to the crocodiles; them: to stop us. In our gut we knew we had to make it to Lady and Kitty before the adults did, but from there, we didn't know what we'd achieve. The adults were catching up and Gella's mother almost snatched Alana by her long hair but missed. Then, the worst thing happened, Alana tripped. I tried to hoist her up, as I was looking at the crowd of adults closing in. "Alana, get up! Get up!" The adults were inches away, they were so close, and then, they stopped. They were like maniacs on attack mode but as if cordoned off by some invisible line. Time came back, and right beside me, I saw Lady and Kitty. Then I understood. The adults weren't going to come nearer. Their fear of the crocodiles stopped them from stopping us. Within this perimeter, we were safe.

A wicked smile spread on Alana's face, and she rose up like a goddess. She took two steps toward Lady and then slowly crouched down to touch the crocodile. The howls from the adults got louder as her hand went nearer and nearer Lady. When she finally touched Lady, everyone went silent. Nothing bad happened to Alana as she pet the crocodile. I followed suit by petting

Kitty. Then our baranggay captain broke the silence, "Someday, the crocodiles won't be babies anymore. They'll become wild and snap off your hand." We hugged the crocodiles and looked at him. "*Susmaryosep!*"

Alana asked grandma if she was mad, but she just kept on slicing the onions.

"*Wag kayo manggulo sa kusina!*" she said, shooing us away.

We left the kitchen and sat at the dining table. Alana looked at me.

"Don't worry," I said. "Grandma will come around."

From then on, the crocodiles kept returning every first day of summer. When we met the crocodiles the next year, Alana brought her old bulky camera and every year, she'd take her camera and we'd take turns in snapping pictures of us patting the crocodiles. Right after hearing the second click of the camera, the crocodiles instinctively knew that it was time to go, and they turned back to sea. We looked at them and waved until we saw them vanish from the horizon. At first grandma was very against what we were doing, but soon, she just calmly watched us as we stroked the crocodiles. The other adults would still be there, crowding around us in seething silence.

The crocodiles were getting bigger and so were we. We were in our early teens and they were already as long as half my leg. One day, they felt restless. Alana threw stones into the river, and she expertly made them skip again. When the crocodiles saw the stones, they dove into the river, swam a bit, faced us, and opened their mouths. Gella cried in horror, "They're going to eat us!" and she threw a stone at Kitty. "Nooo!" we screamed but were too late to stop her. Instead of being angered, Kitty ate the stone, and opened her mouth again. Alana and I looked at each other. We thought that this proved that they really were made of stones, and that we were their creators. We did not know that swallowing stones simply helped in their digestion.

A few days after that day, we were summoned into the baranggay captain's hut. By this time, he was weak and wrinkly. He told us that Gella was missing, and all they found was her bag that

washed up on shore. Gella's mother was there at the hut, crying. "*Mga walang hiyang bata kayo! Dinala ninyo yan sa atin! Magbabayad kayo!*"

We were shocked. What was she saying? Did the crocodiles take Gella? What was their proof? Kitty and Lady would never hurt anybody! We've had them for years! After we pet them, they'd just leave and go back to the river. They never roam around the village. How would they have the opportunity to take Gella?

She said that Gella had an argument with her mother. As to what that argument was, her mother refused to tell us. Gella went into her room and slammed the door. When her mother knocked the next morning, Gella didn't answer. Her mother went to the kitchen and started making breakfast. Gella's favorite was flying saucers, so ensaymadas were soon being flattened on a frying pan. In another pot, balls of Batangas chocolate were disintegrating into boiling water, the spreading color infected the tasteless water with the sweetness of chocolate. Her mother thought that these smells would entice Gella to leave her self-imposed imprisonment, as she often did after their fights. Gella was never good at resisting her stomach, a voracious power despite the fact that she was often skinny. Fed up with waiting, her mother went back to Gella's room and opened the door. No Gella on the bed. Opened closets. A few shelves that were once teeming with clothes were now empty. But the peculiar thing was on the floor. There was water, a slimy kind. Beside it, a reptilian scale and a spot of blood.

A few days after came the first day of summer and the crocodiles returned. When we were patting them, the crowd was again swarmed around us but at a distance. Gella's mother fought her way to the front of the crowd, looked intently at the crocodiles and gasped as she pointed an accusing finger at Kitty.

"That one! Near the right ear!" Gella's mother said. "That one is missing a scale!"

She was hysterical, but when we looked at Kitty, it was unmistakable. On her head, near her right ear, was an exposed reddened flesh.

*Gella is sailing away with Efren. Her mother won't be able to stop them anymore. They were long gone, in the middle of the sea. They were sailing far away.*

*"Good thing that crocodile came," said Efren.*

*"Yeah, I thought it was going to hurt us," said Gella.*

*"It didn't."*

*"It freed us."*

*And the clouds parted to welcome them eternally.*

I woke up with a scream. Alana rushed to my bedside.

"She killed Gella," I said. "Kitty killed Gella."

Alana hugged me and we both knew that we could never truly know that Kitty killed Gella. A bad dream can't prove anything, but our ability to trust the crocodiles began to erode. We still patted them, determined to defy the adults, determined to show that we will never bow to them, but our hands began shaking.

When we turned 24 years old, grandma died. We had a fantasy that when she'd die, she'll say some last words that were smart memorable, then we'll tell each other that we loved each other. She was sick for a long time, and there came a point when we knew she was about to die but we were hoping for that she'd still live for a year. Then, she'll say her last words. Maybe she'd start with, I love you, and suddenly all the things that we never said will be said, but no, there were no last words, she died while I was sleeping beside her. I didn't even see her take her last breath.

We hit our 30s, and I guess we couldn't help it, but we became wise. We stopped patting the crocodiles, but they still came to shore year after year on the first day of summer. From taking a picture of us petting them, we began taking a picture of us standing beside them. We could see



some disappointment in their eyes, some confusion, and a sad longing. We wish we could explain it to them why we stopped petting them, but we couldn't truly explain it to ourselves. It was like a friendship turned cold with no reason why. Yet they kept visiting us year after year.

When Alana turned 70, the crocodiles had a harder time walking to shore. They aged as well, and yet they forced their creaky bones to visit us as though adamant to keep a promise we never agreed upon. We'd still be there, greeting them, but we never touched them again.

When Alana turned 75, she sensed that there was something different. The first crocodile looked as though there was a weariness hovering over her. Right after we took the photo with them, the crocodiles began to turn back, but the first crocodile suddenly stopped. Its companion looked back. Then, Alana did something that shocked us all. She threw herself down to the first crocodile and hugged it. The crocodile looked like she was smiling the most content smile that she ever smiled in her life. She closed her eyes and died.

The second crocodile seemed to have understood what had happened, so when we finally watched her swim away, we thought we'd never see her again.

The next year, the crocodile came back, and the next year, and the next. We returned to taking a photo with the crocodile, but we didn't pat her.

When Alana was 86, her creaky bones made it difficult for her to walk to shore, but she still insisted to be there to meet the crocodile. The crocodile arrived, walking as wobbly as Alana was. Click, the photograph was taken, and it was time to go.

The second crocodile suddenly stopped, and we saw Alana gently crouching down towards the crocodile and welcoming it into her arms. The crocodile closed its eyes and so did Alana. They both died smiling.

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## Peter Grimes

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### Two Fences

I'd stopped wanting it by the fifth week. My husband, who'd taken over Fairgrove after Dad passed, was keeping me penned up in the house while he and the Mexicans ran the farm. John Mark drove around on his go-cart, ripping up root vegetables, plucking berries out of briars, and patrolling his employees; I paced our downstairs, talking to doors, because no task suited me. Knitting made me dizzy, and I couldn't eat since the smell of peaches turned my stomach. When I told him pregnancy felt like whole-body sepsis, like invasion, he just laughed in that way men do, as if to say, Women are cute. Not until day thirty-three did he grow concerned. At six o'clock, when he typically comes in for dinner, I pulled a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet, poured a finger in a glass, and sat by the backdoor.

"Let me out of this goddamn house. I didn't drink any, but I will." At that point I couldn't tell if I was joking.

At six the next day, I trembled behind the wheel of our idling pick-up. Dust settled behind the employees as they left in two cars for the house they shared in Norristown. Behind me, John

Mark lugged the compost bin onto the bed so we could drive past the pit and make our fieldtrip worthwhile. “We’ll start slow,” he’d said, “take some rides around the farm. You can even drive.” With sun on my arms, the smell of manure and sod on the breeze, I didn’t care that his tone had turned patient, as if he were dealing with a stubborn machinery supplier or waiting for the blackberries to finally yield.

We rumbled over the first rise, our fields to the left, quietly producing crop. I could tell the vibration made him nervous by the way he kept an eye on my belly, even though I wasn’t showing. Maybe he was imagining his seed, floating there in the dark. I hardly needed to watch the road, no one else on it, twenty-five miles per hour with shoulders of tilled soil. We cut through the stagnant air, making wind of it, while all around us waited for sun, rain, and season.

When we reached the pit, I stepped out of the truck and walked to the edge of the forest between our acreage and Torvald’s dairy farm. I stretched in the still sunlight. This is where my soon-to-expand body belonged. Outside. I had a vision of myself camping in the cucumbers, puffed up between green shoots. Behind me came the splatter of rinds and expired fruit dropping into the moldering pile. He really had taken it well, hadn’t seemed mad I’d threatened our fertilized seed. It was sweet, in a way, his being a farmer. I considered apologizing for the overreaction, but then a strange cry drifted to my ears.

“Ready, soldier?” John Mark said.

“Shhhh.”

The cry hadn’t been human, but we didn’t keep animals. Just tomatoes, squash, strawberries—silent creeping things. John Mark’s blank face told me he hadn’t heard. Then we both faced the woods as a low growl and leafy gallop pulled our eyes behind the trees to the left. A double report sounded—our border collie’s bark.

“Dame must be after something on Torvald’s side,” he said.

I knew the fence was there—as around the rest of our property—but I could only see trees, as if the edge of a vast wilderness. The cry turned and came back toward us. Strident, half-formed, the voice of a mutant. My abdomen vibrated like a drum. Something in me wanted to see it, the way I sometimes want to ogle horrible things on the road, on television. After the noises passed, I entered the forest, picking my way through briars.

“Where are you going?”

“One sec.”

Far to the right, the cry announced itself again, then fell off. I stopped short. Straight ahead in the shadows I saw the black fence, ten feet high, its links entwined with ivy. Three feet beyond, a smaller fence, gray and chest-high, ran away to either side along the property line. This fence I hadn't seen. Past it were Torvald's lots, his dairy equipment and sheds. Hardly a wilderness.

In between the fences ran an empty corridor of stick and stone, carpeted in last year's leaves. I spotted a child-sized gate in ours—a way to get in and make repairs, I supposed.

“Rachel?” Leaves crunched behind me.

“Why are there two fences here?” I had to stall him somehow, until the animals returned.

I heard him stumble through the underbrush. Soon his breath reached my ear. “Just for this reason.” His fingers grasped the links. “To keep whatever Dame's after out of our fields.”

He took my arm. “Come on.”

I grabbed the fence. “I can understand one—to keep animals out—but why two?” I followed the corridor between fences until it disappeared in the greenery that concealed the animals' coming.

“Why two with space between?”

“Why not? That's extra protection. The black one's ours, the other Torvald's.”

He tugged me gently—the way he'd handled me since we knew of the conception—but I held on. Then he moved off toward the forest's edge in long, slow steps. Belly pressed against the mesh, I felt like an offering left behind and suddenly doubted the wisdom of staying.

If I could only see it, I'd know what we were dealing with. That's what I said to myself. Then I saw Dame coming toward me on our side, weaving around saplings. Blood whistled at my temples. To her right a dusty blur, brown fur billowing above paws or hooves, moved along through the unclaimed space. Instinctively I pushed away from the fence and fell on my back.

"John!" I called as Dame's prey sped past, hunched in the shadows. Its hair was long, and it ran close to the ground. Baby warthog? Not with a cry like that. Goat? Too quick. As the shapes reblended with the bushes to the left, a chill washed over me and the bottom dropped from my skull. I'd been so close to it, something utterly foreign.

"It's on the other side," John Mark said cheerfully, moving behind me. "Won't hurt a thing."

"But it's in between."

"How'd it get in there, then?" he said, pushing aside a branch. "It got in, it can get out."

I stood to follow him out of the thicket, feeling confused. Soon I'd be back in the house. Safe. I sunk and heaved, yielding clear liquid on the roots of an oak. These spells of sickness normally came in the morning, but I knew he'd believe the act. My mother had spent most her life inside that house, ordering what no one but Dad would see. I'd always chuckled at her meticulousness, but remembering it now, I couldn't leave the forest.

Heavy footsteps came and a hand pressed on my shoulder.

"Please go. Stand by the road while I clear my head." I spoke with my face buried in my arms and listened to him hesitate before moving off.

The cry had stopped, but I could hear Dame's growls and scratching just on the other side of a clump of trees. Perhaps it had escaped, jumped back over Torvald's lower fence. That sight, I

decided, would be gratifying, an empty corridor of leaves. Whether I felt this way because I'd be glad for the animal or because I imagined it too hideous to see, I didn't know.

"Dame?" Her barks lowered and doubled, running together with growls. Picking my way around the sun-dappled trees, I squinted to find her black-and-white fur in the foliage. She squirmed back and forth, tail-tip wagging. In the passageway under a fallen tree limb that slanted down off Torvald's fence, a shadow lay. My knees locked and I felt the sweat on my wrists.

"Are you okay in there?" John Mark called.

"Call Dame!"

When he did, Dame backed off as if under a sorcerer's spell. "Good girl," I heard.

The animal breathed in jagged gasps, and at first I was afraid to get closer. I appraised our fence, how high it was, the thickness of its links. John Mark wouldn't have built one too low. All I had to fear then was the shock of its look. Its being there so close.

"What are you doing?"

I moved to where Dame had been, feet from the animal. I could see that its fur was both black and gray, that the tufts stood at different lengths. The fallen limb hid head and legs, but a wide tail of shorter fur stretched behind it. A sour smell, like compost or vinegar. The odor of experience. I tensed.

I'd been assuming without realizing it that the trapped animal was young, still growing into whatever it would become, something I'd never see. From the way it screamed maybe. If mothering instincts existed, maybe I had them after all. Yet something about its demeanor now as it huddled, gasping, under the limb told me it was full-grown, resigned. It was shameful.

"I'm coming in," John Mark called.

“Wait just a sec.” I couldn’t let him see it. He’d insist on uncovering its face, destroy it out of horror. “I’m peeing.”

The child-sized gate hung partially blocked from my view by a box elder. I couldn’t imagine John Mark fitting through this tiny door to clear the brush. A gate that size seemed both preposterous and perfect just now, and when I swung it open, my arms seemed hardly under my control. This had been my way lately, hurling cans against the wall, methodically ripping pages from a novel at the rate of reading, as if something were acting through me, practicing for life.

Nothing stood between my legs and the animal. And a strange magnetism drew me toward the opening, but I stumbled backwards and ran out of the forest, branches ripping at my eyes and dress. I found my husband just on the edge, dog at his foot.

“What happened?” His face looked as it had when I held the bourbon, set as if against eternal elements—wind, rain, pestilence. Patient. “Did Dame scare it off?” He approached the woods.

“Just a fawn,” I said, grabbing his shoulder. “Please take me home.” And I didn’t mind anymore the thought of going.

“Let me handle that sort of thing from now on. You don’t know what could have happened.”

We walked to the truck, its red chrome shining like John Mark’s promise to defeat the land, all obstacles between our family and the future. Inside, he turned on the air vents and sighed, stared again at my midsection.

“The baby will be fine,” I said.

I closed my eyes as he drove, imagined the animal waiting between fences, yards from escape. Crouched, it would spy the opening, a hundred acres of fertilizer-fed globes. Momentarily I regretted not having seen its face, its full form, because soon it would be gone.

John Mark slammed on the brakes. “How did it get in?” The horror in his voice infected me.

I followed his gaze out the back window, where I saw nothing but our dust, the strip of forest, our fields.

“What?”

“How did it get in?”

The animal must have already come through the gate. Too soon. I jerked my head in each direction. If only it had come out after nightfall, like something unreal. I saw only leaves flashing their undersides, a crow lunging into flight. I waited for him to identify what alluded me, but he didn't.

“I don't see anything,” I said.

He sped us toward the house.

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We went to bed shortly after sunset. He moved up behind me and slid his hand under my shirt, over my stomach. One of his nicer qualities, one that makes him a successful farmer, is his quickness to cut his losses. Surely he thought of the intrusion as a loss, an invading pest. Or, at least that's how I'd been hoping he saw it. Nothing more than a pest. Yet neither of us had mentioned the breach since we came in from the truck.

In the soft darkness, his callused palm on me, we spoke of the baby to come—names, places it could go to school, a playhouse we would build beside the vegetable shed. It was the first time since before I got pregnant that everything felt right inside. We were in here, while the unpredictable world was out there.

He fell asleep first, and the silence deepened the significance of our silence about the breach. Why, if it were simply a pest, hadn't he identified it, spoken its name? What roamed in the darkness beyond the light of our porch, through our fields, fenced in and desperate? Since a child I'd hated the woods, all its unplanted, unintended life. The poison oak that blistered, the



random bees' nests, every rock a risk to turn over. That afternoon, though, for twenty minutes, the world had seemed centered there, everything rushing out of the light to lose itself in the brush. What had I let in? I backed up against him under the covers and pulled his arm around me like a bar.

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In the morning, he was gone. Although it wasn't unusual for him to check up on things Sunday, his day off, I knew he'd renewed the search. Without me there to confuse or distract, finding the animal would be easy. He'd follow its tracks, see where it had nibbled a pepper.

In my state of half-sleep, I felt steady, not yet queasy. So I stayed still, dozed as long as I could. I got up an hour later to vomit a wicked curl of white in the toilet. Perfect evidence I didn't need to go running through the forest.

I grew hungry. Though the thought of food made me sick, I took some peanut butter out of the cabinet and ate it with a spoon. Not too horrible. Next, I got a bucket and scouring pad. On my knees I dipped the pad into the hot water and vinegar solution my mom had used. By keeping my eyes shut and my mind on John Mark, I found I could scrub the floor without feeling sick. Right now he'd be whipping in his truck past the red streaks of strawberries. Up ahead he'd spot the animal trotting along the road. As he drove toward it, it wouldn't run. Just trot, ready to be captured and released. Though I couldn't see in my mind what it was, having it in my husband's sight was enough. By the time I finished scouring and rinsing, the section near the stove had already dried. I doubted it looked any cleaner than before—doubted it was any cleaner. Except I knew I'd cleaned it. That's all that mattered.

"All done," I said.

I brewed some tea and sat by the den window, which looked out over the front yard and Route 80, through a power-line space in the trees, and up a steep field belonging to the Petersons. A few goats, recognizable animals, stood out in the dawn. Life could be simple. I wanted the baby

just as much John Mark. More, perhaps. I would be its soil. I'd lend it the patience of my body. Everything was fine.

As I studied the goats' peaceful graze, a splintering sound startled me. A gunshot. It echoed, as gunshots do, even without mountains and valleys. I set down my mug. I hadn't thought about what he'd do when he found the animal, his finding and identifying it having been my focus. Shooting it seemed like an overreaction. I watched the goats until they forgot about the gunshot and returned to grazing.

I went through the house to sit on the porch by the driveway, grabbing a light jacket against any chill. But the jacket did no good. I rocked on a dew-covered chair under the sparkle of a garden spider's web.

The black truck pulled up five minutes later, headlights still burning though the sun was already half an hour in the sky. My husband walked over and sat heavily on the swing beside me. At once I could tell something was wrong.

"I heard the shot," I said.

He nodded his head, eyes trained on one spot, as if the thing were still there, writhing in the open with a hole in its belly. I'd have him bury it on our land. A reminder, maybe. Or an apology. I would not look at its body or learn its name.

"They ran her over," he said after a while. "The fuckers."

I saw then the look was sadness. "Who?"

"Dame," he said. "Out on Route 80."

The tears were there before I even thought of them, my body forming my reactions. But underneath, an uncertain joy flashed through me. It was alive. I'd already counted it gone, but it had a life, a resilience of its own. It must have re-entered the corridor and this time found a way out. Or maybe Dame had gone in alone.

“I couldn’t keep up with her,” he was saying.

“You mean she got out of the fence? Where?”

I appreciated that he didn’t answer. Two breaches made even less sense than one, and I was, of course, to blame. I thought of the yelp he must have heard. How must it have felt for him to find the mangled fur? To see her teeth gnash in agony? That divide. He must have placed the shotgun barrel against her gently, looked away.

I pulled his hot head down against my stomach and looked the way he’d come, through the dust as it settled. I could feel his tears and drool through my shirt, but when I pulled him closer, his neck stiffened. In his grief, he remained careful of the life inside me. I loved him at that moment for keeping this place together. For his fortitude against certain dangers he saw lurking at the edge of our lives. For letting me alone decide what I’d done.

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We buried Dame behind the farm house in a quilt my mother had made. John Mark wouldn’t let me see the body, its wounds. For all I knew, it could have been the intruder we were burying, the way it could have—maybe should have—been. Together we lowered her stiff, hidden form into the hole. I flinched when a clump of dirt fell onto her side, though I knew she was dead. Safe. Once John Mark filled in the dirt, he sprinkled grass seed on the grave. We decided not to mark it. It was better that way.

The next day, he came home with a new dog. A border collie like Dame, but not as sharp. It’s his mind for crops, I guess, one generation preceding the next, on schedule. I also wonder though if he was showing he forgave me, that he was willing to lose our dog to keep me happy, our fetus safe. Although young, the new dog is lazy; Kirby sits around our yard while my husband and his help work around him. Our place might be overrun with raccoons and beasts of all stripes without us knowing it. There’s no way he’ll catch or even sense what stalks our fields.

It's been two weeks now since the incident, the breach. Already my nausea has decreased. I can get around the farm all I want, though I take it easy for John Mark's sake. With the exception of Kirby, the farm appears the same as it used to be. In the fall we'll harvest the gourds and pumpkins, vegetables for show. Then the winter will come, and the two of us will have more time together. Inside will appeal more. The fireplace. Stews. Movies. Doctor Phillips says that the baby will soon generate heat. I'll be like a walking furnace.

One change, though, does linger. The little unsown joy my body conceived the morning we lost Dame has grown. I don't summon it. It's just there. People believe children are miracles, fully formed identities sprouting from love. I'd have to agree. This imperceptible presence in me is coming fast, blooming into consciousness until one body won't be enough for the two of us. A miracle for sure. But I'd say it's just as much of a miracle that out of a space just wide enough for a person to walk, a space no wider than one body, a blur might come rushing, carrying strange odors in its uneven fur, renewed life.

*Peter Grimes is a writer and professor who directs the creative writing emphasis at Dickinson State University in North Dakota. His fiction has been published in journals such as Narrative, Fiction International, Mississippi Review, Mid-American Review, Memorious, and Sycamore Review*

## **Colin Pope**

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# Hotfoot

Even as a kid, I knew I wasn't cool. The cool kids wore Starter jackets and spiked their hair and they all hung out in giggly clumps by their lockers. Their moms didn't shop at the Goodwill and their dads didn't sell weed to pay for groceries. They didn't wear five dollar sweatpants and they didn't get their hair cut over the kitchen sink.

But the worst thing was my boots. I had brown rubber, wool-lined, hand-me-down Sorels that made my feet stink. They were warm, but every day I came home from school and yanked them off and the rank, vinegary cheese stench slapped me across the face. What made it so bad was that I left those boots on all day at school, where I clomped around the ice-glazed playground and stewed in them at my desk during those long, grade-school afternoons.

The Adirondack winters made insulated boots a necessity, particularly during January and February, when the temperatures dipped into the negative twenties and thirties. But while all the other boys glided around school in rugged, odorless boots that looked like high-tech Army supershoes, mine looked like leftovers from the fifties. Finally, it got to be too much, so I did the only thing a poor kid can do: I harassed my parents mercilessly.

"Heydaaad," I whined, lying on the living room carpet, my smelly feet propped up on the arm of his broken-down La-Z-Boy. "They're making great boots these days, right? Daddy-o? Please to give new boot...?"

"Oh, I'll give you a boot," he muttered, putting his lighter to the rim of the metal pipe and inhaling an after-work rip that filled the living room with the sticky, vegetal smell of weed. My dad had worked at Scheefer's Plumbing & Heating for a few years, but before that his only job had been dealing weed and, at times, other things.

"No, come on," I said. "It's like, hard at school."

“Well,” he said, exhaling. “Luckily, I know just what to do.”

With that, he touched his lighter to the bottom of my sock and a thin flame chased the little fuzzies and frayed bits up the length of my sole, disappearing in an orange-blue wave. He did it as a joke, just for effect, whenever I watched TV with my feet up on his chair. It didn't hurt and only lasted a fraction of a second, but I hated the surprise of the flame as the fuzzies burned off. It was scary in the same way as when one of the kids at school threw a fake punch just to make someone flinch. You couldn't predict it and the whole thing was over before you could react.

“Okay,” he said, nodding as he looked down at me. “I get it. You're a growing boy. But we just can't afford new boots right now, so you're gonna have to suck it up and soak those damn feet. You stink like a Frenchman's basement.”

“John!” my mother yelled in from the kitchen.

“Well it's true! We can't have the boy go traipsing around like his socks are filled with Gorgonzola. Go on ahead and fill up the tub and splash around a little. You can use the bubbles.”

“But it's the boots!” I cried. “Soaking isn't gonna help!”

“Well, we'll see,” he said, putting away his pipe, pot, and bowl-scraper. He kept them all in an octagonal, hutch-like side table next to his chair, along with his scales and an ornate pewter plate he used as a set-up station to break and baggie the weed. That side table was strictly off limits; the only time he opened it was when he was smoking or selling. When people were over buying weed, I began to feel like the whole living room was off limits. My dad's customers took up the couches and chairs as I lay on the living room carpet, watching them smoke and laugh and drink my dad's beers.

“Yes,” my mother said, coming in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “We *will* see.”

“What’s that mean?” my dad asked.

My mom shook her head. “It means get in there and dry the dishes. And if he doesn’t get his homework done because he’s too busy splashing around in the friggin’ tub, you’re going to be doing long division tonight.”

She handed him the towel as he passed her on his way into the kitchen, then shrugged her shoulders in frustration and motioned for me to follow her to the bathroom.

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On TV, there’s that comedy bit where Elmer is asleep by the rabbit hole and Bugs sticks a match in Elmer’s shoe and lights it. Elmer snores away, nuzzling his rifle as if it were a stuffed animal. The match burns down, Elmer howls, and they start chasing each other again. “Hotfoot” it’s called. It’s an old, old prank, and not exactly the same as what my dad did, but pretty close.

Giving me the hotfoot became sort of a party trick. My dad’s buddies and customers would be over—there was a big overlap between the two groups—and they’d be sitting around the living room smoking. He’d wait until he knew I wasn’t paying attention then flick his lighter at the heel of my sock. They all laughed at the spectacle and my huffy reaction.

My dad’s customer-friends came in the evenings or at lunch or on Saturday afternoons, knocking sheepishly on the front door the way reluctant, after-hours regulars are wont to do. I could tell who they were from the way they walked onto the porch, a little heavy-footed for their nervous business, their big shadows wavering in the textured, opaque doorway window. After a while I got to know most of them, and they were usually weird and polite guys who had the bearing of raccoons on top of garbage cans.

But it was one those odd men who finally came up with a solution. One afternoon a tall, skinny guy called Nehi was over, buying a baggie from my dad. He had bushy red hair and he had to duck to get in through the living room doorframe. I was on the floor, watching Elmer fire a volley of bullets as Bugs leapt around the screen, and my dad gave me the hotfoot.

“Hey—ain’t that dangerous?” Nehi asked, his voice a basoonish baritone.

“Probably,” I said, kicking at my dad’s hand as he pulled it away.

“Nah,” my dad said. “Besides, it’s the only way we can keep the stink off. Got to burn it away.”

He was joking, of course, but Nehi was one of those people that couldn’t quite pick up on sarcasm or irony or other social cues.

“Hell, you don’t need to set the kid’s feet on fire,” he said. “I got the same problem. Lenore kept saying my feet stank too much after work. Go on over to the Ames and pick up those Odor-Eaters socks they got now.”

That afternoon, my mother and I went to the store and poked through the clothes aisles. I remember thinking that they’d have run out, that Odor-Eaters socks were such an incredible invention that there must have been a rush of customers out to buy them. Since we were a poor family, we were usually the last to know about cool things. But there they were: socks made of Odor-Eaters fabric.

“It says you can put them right in the washing machine!” my mom exclaimed, turning the package over in her hands. Neither of us could quite believe it. We bought two packs and I could barely wait until the next school day to try them out. It was hard to believe that such a simple, elegant solution could really work.

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At first, I was still afraid to take my boots off in school. I’d seen my classmates eviscerate a little girl who accidentally sat on a chocolate Snak-Pak during snacktime. Her name was Alicia, and for months after she’d been known as “squishy Lishy.” I wanted to avoid announcing my smelliness at all costs. Some of the boys in class had already taken to calling me “colon poop,” and that was just for fun. If I’d actually stunk, god only knows what they would’ve done.



But, unbelievably, the socks worked. I started taking my boots off when I got to school to let my feet dry. The boots themselves still had a slight odor, but I flopped around in my socks just like the other kids. After a few days, I completely forgot I'd had a problem. In fact, after my feet stopped stinking, I started noticing how many of the other kids had problems with their feet. It wasn't just an issue of having old boots: kids' feet stink.

"Don't worry," I told some boys manfully. "You can just go get Odor-Eaters socks. Like me."

After that, my nickname became Odor-Eater. I think they meant it in ridicule, but I liked how it gave me an identity that didn't revolve around being stinky. And I noticed that some of those boys started showing up to school with socks like mine. Inadvertently, I'd become a trendsetter.

One night, a week or so later, Nehi and Philbo and Huey were over after my dad got off work. They had the look of men who'd been underground all day, working in the sewers and wading through rivers of "foo-foo," as my dad called it. Many of his customer-friends were work buddies. They'd come to buy dimebags and quarters and to smoke a bit before heading home. I was lying on the floor, as usual, while they passed the bowl over my head.

"I always wondered..." I said. "Why do they call it a dimebag?"

"Cuz it costs a dime," my dad said. His words came out on white smoke, stray rods and puffs spiraling away from the stream of his breath as he spoke.

"I know it doesn't cost a dime," I said, turning over to face the guys. "If it cost a dime, we'd have a garbage bag full of dimes and mom could buy me that scooter for Christmas." With that, I flopped my foot down on the armrest of his chair like a gavel against a block.

What followed was one of those moments where the light in the room seemed to squeeze itself together and the smell of dried leaves filled my nose. There are moments like that when, as a kid, you start to wonder how the human mind operates. For whatever reason, I knew something bad was about to happen, but I couldn't quite tell what it was. I sort of unfocused my eyes, as though I were preparing to detect movement in my periphery.

“Well,” my dad said. “You’re just too smart for your own good then, aren’t ya?”

Just as I figured out what was different, my dad touched his lighter to my sock and it burst into a torch of green flame, covering my foot in a shoe of fire. I looked up at it, my eyes wide, my leg stiffening as I tried to figure out what to do. This was not the hotfoot. The entire sock was blazing and there was a whooshing sound like the first ignition of a gas stovetop.

“Put it out! Put it out!” I demanded, beginning to wave my leg around. I could hear everyone laughing, far off in the disasterless background. A smile on his face, my dad grabbed me by the pantleg and pulled my foot down. My panic escalated; I realized how ill equipped I was to handle the sight of my body afire.

“Keep still!” he commanded, trying to tamp the flames with weak slaps and wispy puffs of his breath. He, too, was laughing, and while my foot began to char under the chemical burn from the Odor-Eaters socks I suddenly realized that he wasn’t going to be able to put the green fire out. Because this was still a joke to him.

I yanked my leg down and began rolling around on the floor, kicking at the air and trying to stamp out the flames with my other foot. The sounds of their laughter grew louder and louder as I struggled until I began to wonder if I was overreacting. Just about the time I got the flames out and had ripped my socks from both my feet and hurled them across the room, I considered how having one foot on fire might not have been such a great emergency. Maybe someone could go for quite some time with one foot on fire and not even realize it. Maybe, if the pain was just a joke, it wouldn’t really hurt. Panting, I looked around at all the guys. They were rolling around and holding their stomachs, and my dad was imitating my body’s terrified flailing and my fear-stricken face, goading them further into hysterical laughter.

The socks lay in an innocent pile by the front door when my mom got home that night. They were an experiment gone awry, an explosion instead of a solution. Disheartened, I told her the whole story. Then she asked my dad what happened.

“He wasn’t really hurt,” my dad said, grinning. “It was just a scare.”

By that point, I was already working hard to agree with him. I told myself it had only been dangerous in my head. If I could've relaxed, maybe I would've laughed too. But instead I kept wondering what would've happened if I waited for him to put out the flames. My foot had come out mostly unscathed except for a dark red welt across the bridge, but this was only because the Napalm-like fabric hadn't burned through to my skin. What if it had? What if I hadn't been able to kick out the flames? What if they'd climbed my leg and burned me to cinder?

After dinner, I sat on the counter next to my mom as she washed the dishes and I told her my thoughts. She stiffened a little, then shook her head.

"Well, maybe the best thing is not to put your feet on your father's chair anymore," she said. She'd said it before, knowing how I hated the hotfoot, but something in me didn't want to give up that armrest. My dad had control of the chair and the side table and the couches where his buddies sat and even the air in the living room, which he filled with smoke nightly. That armrest was one place I'd claimed, one comfort for one piece of my body. But she was right. I couldn't relax around my dad or his friends, couldn't close my eyes or look away for fear of being burned or laughed at or both at the same time.

"Okay," I said. "I guess that's easiest." I conceded, and not only did I never put my feet up there again, but I learned the essential difference between awareness and vigilance. At school, among my well-groomed classmates, I was aware of myself as dissimilar; at home, I became as tense as a minesweeper, always scanning the rooms and horizons for the faintest whiff of potential danger. When people came over to buy from my dad, I drifted into the kitchen and waited instead of lying on the floor. There, at a safe remove, I listened to them laugh and chatter almost like they were sitting in the living room of some TV show, just filling time between jokes with acrid puffs of smoke that hung in the air even after they were gone.

*Colin Pope grew up in Saranac Lake, New York. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Slate, Willow Springs, The Los Angeles Review, and Texas Review, among others. He has held*

*residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and Gemini Ink and is currently a PhD student at Oklahoma State University, where he serves on the editorial board at Cimarron Review.*

## Richard Bentley

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### Carefree Calls

She wasn't a girlfriend. She was a member of the "Sexy Seven," those thirteen-year-olds who were *everybody's* girlfriends.

"The Sexy Seven," that's what they called themselves. They would drive around the streets of Lake Forest in Sol Smith's convertible. They wore red cloche hats, which they would wave at everyone as they passed.

Karen proudly claimed that she was the only member of the group who wasn't sexy.

She said she would never marry. She preferred horses to boys. She had a temperament that excluded love affairs but encouraged friendship. She was an only child, and she lived with her parents in a remodeled farmhouse that had once been part of a vast estate. She kept a couple of horses, and I would ride beside her, galloping over fields and splashing through ponds.

Years passed, and the Sexy Seven married or moved away. But Karen stayed in the Chicago area. One afternoon, after a good ride together, I sat with her on the top rail of a fence that

overlooked the pasture behind her house. We were in our twenties by now, and we talked about our lives. She was no longer a teenager who threw erasers at her teacher. After college at Vassar, she herself became a teacher of young children. She wondered how, besides the reading and arithmetic, she could help them find meaning in their lives.

“What’s the point of education, the reading and writing, all that adding and subtracting? What does it,” she sighed, “all add up to?”

After this talk, I could see she was trying to make sense of her life. A few weeks after that conversation, I went east to visit some friends, two of whom were once members of the Sexy Seven. They had found important husbands, careers, and children. They were glad to see me, they said.

When I returned home, I found that Karen had gone to Silver Hill, a psychiatric hospital in Connecticut. I was bewildered. I was especially upset because of our talk on the top rail of the fence that overlooked the pasture. I visited her. We walked the grounds together, but I never asked her why she was there. She gave no information, and the fact that she was in a mental hospital seemed to have no meaning for her. She was casual, but she seemed sturdy. I knew that at last it was time to fall in love with her. She had given her life meaning and could possibly help me do the same.

But a job change moved me away from Chicago. Karen married and moved to Arizona.

Soon, the Christmas calls began. Every year around Christmas, she would call me or I would call her. The years passed. I told her about my marriage and the birth of my children.

She talked about her marriage and her divorce and her mother’s move to Arizona after her father died. I now lived in New England, and I told her about our family’s Christmas drive through the mountains—the Taconics, the Berkshires, the Holyoke range, the ski areas. I told Karen that after Chicago, you could be nostalgic for a place, even if you had just arrived there.

She laughed, and said she felt the same way about Arizona. She said she was moving to Carefree to be closer to her mother.

“There’s a town in Arizona called Carefree? Could someone like you ever be happy in a place called Carefree?”

“It’s nostalgic,” she said. “Your word. I ride my horse through the Ponderosa. I take care of people who need help.”

Over the next few years, she told me about her second marriage and the birth of her daughter. She told me casually about the brief trip to Silver Hill. It had been her decision, she said. She had been feeling depressed, but after the visit, the depression went away. That was all. Now it was over. She looked forward to many things in her life.

One year the Christmas calls stopped. I tried to reach her a few times. At first, the phone didn’t answer. Then I found it had been disconnected.

She had disappeared.

The searches began.

A few months later, the police found her body in the hot desert. She had been taped inside a cardboard moving box. The killer had assaulted her, broken her ribs, gagged her, choked her, and placed a bag over her head to suffocate her.

The killer and his wife worked as day laborers. They were helping Karen move to a new house. According to the police, they killed her because they didn’t want her to find out that they had stolen some of her jewelry—earrings, a necklace, some rings. They pawned the jewelry then went off to Las Vegas for some gambling.

Even though the case has been solved, the facts refuse to reduce themselves to any kind of meaning.

Karen suffered alone in the desert, intact. She was untouched, like many of us, by God, by grace, or by purpose.

*Dick Bentley has published fiction, poetry, and memoir in over 250 journals, magazines and anthologies on three continents. His books, *Post-Freudian Dreaming* and *A General Theory of Desire*, are available on Amazon, Powell's Books, or at [www.dickbentley.com](http://www.dickbentley.com). His new book, *All Rise*, contains recently published stories, poems, and graphic "wall poetry" that has been displayed in art galleries.*

*Dick has served on the board of the Modern Poetry Association (now known as the Poetry Foundation). He's a Pushcart Prize nominee. He was prizewinner in the Paris Review/Paris Writers Workshop International Fiction Awards. In 2012 and 2013, he gave readings of his poetry at the famous Paris bistro, Au Chat Noir.*

*Before teaching writing at the University of Massachusetts, Dick was Chief Planner for the Mayor's Office of Housing in Boston. He is a Yale graduate with an MFA from Vermont College.*

## Todd Hawkins

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### Down in the Bottom

I had gone there to meet you like you asked. Where everything seemed sprouted from the mud. The post oak leaves, dead three autumns, with beetles lapping each lobed curve. The lichen-

coated branches, hollowed by ants—all the things that reminded us that  
there are more than seventeen shades of brown: not

just buffed leather, burnt umber, russet, but also horse,

winter magnolia, night iris, skin. And when I thought of you—

darkness dropping slowly down from the trees—when I thought of you, I  
saw them all, streaming warmly by like that great

Muddy River.

searching the hollows

for our old spot

the sphinx moth



*Professional editor J. Todd Hawkins writes and lives in Texas. Todd's poetry has recently appeared in AGNI, Parcel, The Louisville Review, Bayou Magazine, Sakura Review, and American Literary Review. He is the author of the chapbook Ten Counties Away (Finishing Line Press, 2017) and is currently working on a follow-up collection of Mississippi Delta-inspired haibun. He holds an MA in technical communication, loves the blues, and nightly loses to his wife at Mortal Kombat while the kids sleep.*

## Bethany Reid

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### Once Upon a Time

In the tale, the girl  
has seven brothers transformed  
into swans. The girl, too,  
has to transform before  
she can save them,  
though not into a swan.  
She has to travel  
to a far kingdom, talk  
to a toad, unlock a door  
with a magic key, defeat  
a giant. Once upon a time  
you were young and unshaped.  
You had two brothers

and two sisters, so different  
from you, they might have been  
another species with their squawks  
and quibbles, their strange  
politics, their desires  
that never translated  
into your own. You don't know  
how to save them, or if you  
should. They have a way  
of being perfect in their bodies,  
their long necks, their black masked eyes.  
They have married into the world  
of swans. In the fairy tale  
the girl frees her brothers,  
all but one who has died.  
Your dead brother visits your dreams.

*Bethany Reid's most recent book of poems is SPARROW, which won the 2012 Gell Poetry Prize, selected by Dorianne Laux. She lives in Edmonds, Washington, and blogs at [www.awritersalchemy.wordpress.com](http://www.awritersalchemy.wordpress.com).*

## Bethany Reid

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### Be Saved Until Morning

Her heart  
a running horse  
she sings

in a sea

of wither

and stifle,  
fetlock and pastern,  
hock and flank,  
aching shadows  
trampling the downed fences  
murmuring, throaty mating  
of horses, fields  
of burdock and tansy  
and thistle,  
lip of stars  
in purple crowns  
salt  
beyond saying.

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## Liz Robbins

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## To You, Who's Tried So Hard

her whole life to be good, what other people want:  
I made a painting once of a pine tree in a yard  
at Christmastime, blinking at the coming dusk. Someone had dressed  
the pine in blue lights,  
and it reflected violet on the snow. I was dreaming  
of you, but I tried not to obsess on the beginning,  
having learned to keep open as long as possible  
before locking in. Our whole life, I've been  
the blackest black paint that completely absorbs  
the light, converse of you. A constant pendulum  
going too far, then struggling to pull back.  
In winter especially, light's a cool fascination.  
Long ago, someone strung you up with lights,  
and now, in midlife, your aura's unmistakable.  
I've always clung to representation, to stark truth-telling, but it's  
an exhilarating night sky  
dotted with stars, too far for real warmth.  
I'm learning to abstract the landscape, to wrap  
the box of grit in a bit of gold foil. How hard  
I am to change. All my people have begun dying,  
and I'm charged with collecting, burning  
the bones: is anyone old enough? Ask me for what  
you want. Until then, I'm painting you inside  
the warm house, inside the thought of gingerbread  
to eat instead of make. Looking out the window  
at tomorrow, the inviting piles of imaginative space.

*Liz Robbins' third collection, Freaked, won the 2014 Elixir Press Annual Poetry Award; her second collection, Play Button, won the 2010 Cider Press Review Book Award. In 2015 she won the Crab Orchard Review Special Issue Feature Award in Poetry and in 2016 was nominated for the Pushcart Prize by Fugue. Her poems have appeared in Beloit Poetry Journal, BOAAT, Denver Quarterly, DIAGRAM, Hayden's Ferry Review, The Journal, Kenyon Review Online, and Rattle, as well as on Poetry Daily and The Writer's Almanac with Garrison Keillor. She's an associate professor of creative writing at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida.*

## Tetman Callis

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# At Kahun, for the Health of the Mother and the Child

Your eyes are aching and you cannot see, and you have aches in your neck. You have discharges of the womb in your eyes. We shall fumigate you with incense and fresh oil. We shall fumigate your womb with it. We shall fumigate your eyes with goose leg fat.

Eat this, it is liver fresh from an ass.

Your womb has been wandering. What do you smell? Do you smell roasting? It is wrappings of the womb. We shall fumigate you with whatever you smell as roast.

Your teeth ache so much you cannot close your mouth. You have toothache of the womb. We shall fumigate you with a jar of incense in oil. We shall pour over you the fresh urine of the kine. If you ache from your navel to your buttocks, you have a worm.

Your calves ache. We shall apply strips of fine linen soaked in resin to your calves. If their smell remains sweet, it means you will be healthy. If their smell turns foul, we shall pour a cup of fresh oil between your legs.

You are thirsting and cannot be slaked. We shall say nothing.

You are aching in all your limbs and in the sockets of your eyes. You will know it is pains of the womb. You are bleeding and your head aches, and your mouth and the palms of your hands. We shall treat it by smearing you with dregs of sweet beer. If nothing emerges, we shall place dates in you, on the upper sides. You will sit. If nothing emerges, we shall cool boiled beer for you to drink. If blood or other fluids emerge, you will be unveiled.

You are burning, your eyes bleary. You will take cypress wood grated on the left side of your birth-brick. You will sprinkle it and sever it from yourself four consecutive mornings. We shall cause you to sit on the water of the lake. We shall determine if you will conceive or not. We shall take fresh oil and if the vessels of your insides are distended, we shall say it is the birth.

We shall have you sit on earth smeared with dregs of sweet beer. We shall place dates and other fruits within you. If any you eject, you will give birth. Every ejection which comes from your mouth will be a birth.

We shall pummel the top of your lip with our fingertips. If it does not hurt, you will never give birth.

You will go down to the place of the falcon, the place of the calf. We shall determine if you will conceive.

We shall place our fingers upon you.

When the waters come, you will be the same for ever.

*Tetman Callis is a litigation paralegal in Chicago. Callis' short fiction have been published in various magazines, including NOON, New York Tyrant, Litro, Gravel, alice blue review, Identity Theory, Wigleaf, Salt Hill, and White Whale Review. Also, Callis is the author of the memoir, High Street: Lawyers, Guns & Money in a Stoner's New Mexico (Outpost19, 2012) and the children's book Franny & Toby (Silky Oak Press, 2015).*

## Andrew Hertzberg

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### Out of Place

That train whistle. I would know that train whistle anywhere. But the timing is wrong. Yes, I knew something felt amiss. This train is late. A late train is lipstick on the collar. This train is hiding something.

I sip from my coffee and contemplate what to do next. No one else in this cafe seems to think anything is wrong. The employees, the other customers. They all talk, laugh, cry. But I am alone. I am idle.

"Excuse me, waitress?" I ask.

"Yes?" she responds while hovering over my way.

"This may sound like an odd question," I continue. "But does anything seem wrong to you? I mean, not in general, just today. Is something out of place, not where it should be?"

I notice a twitch in her eye. She is pretty, brown hair, white blouse. No, don't get distracted. That twitch. It's a tell: she knows something! I start to raise my voice. "Answer me, do you or do you not feel that something is wrong today? The train was late, didn't you notice? You're here everyday. Surely you'd notice something like that."

She hesitates, brushes her blonde hair away from her face. "No, sir, you were right. That is an odd question. I am too busy right now to be playing these games."

She walks back to her service station, behind a corner, and disappears. Did I actually offend her? It's not like I'd asked her anything perverse. It was just a simple question. Perhaps we are past the point of just a simple question.

I sip from my coffee, release the waitress from my thoughts and am back to thinking about trains. No, not trains plural. One train. Why is it late? Not that I was even planning on taking that train. I wanted to enjoy myself under a crimson sky and admire the jagged clouds, smell the sour air, and taste a pallid pastry. I sit here, watching the other patrons in gloves and jackets and hats and sandals, smoking pipes of all sorts of varieties, wooden pipes and glass pipes, held in hands made of flesh, plastic, or metal. I am comfortable in this rubbery chair, sipping cerulean coffee out of a furry mug. The cottony taste compliments the stale breeze as a pack of swallows roar their clever songs as they sit on a molten tree, wiggle their wings, and alight from acidic branches.

"Excuse me, sir?" a woman asks me.

"Yes?" I respond as she hovers over.

"This may sound like an odd question. But does anything seem wrong to you? I mean, like, not in general, just today. Is something out of place, not where it should be?"

She frowns as she asks me this question. She is pretty, red hair, emerald eyes. I feel like I've seen this woman before. Don't get distracted.



"I think I might know what you mean," I reply. "But why are you asking me?"

"Well I wasn't planning on asking you. But I was sitting at that table over there," she points, "enjoying myself under this magenta sky and admiring the prickly clouds, smelling the salty air, and snacking on a hollow muffin. I was quite comfortable in my scratchy chair, sipping my mushy coffee in a blurry mug. I was hugged by the rough breeze melded with the vapor from brick pipes, held in hands made of desire, naivety, and lost hope. But I was put off by the huddle of swallows and their morose overtures. The tree they sat on was too bright to look at and when they started to gyrate their gelatinous bodies, well, it was then that I realized something was amiss. And what I realized was that before all of this happened there was a train whistle. It was a train whistle I'd know anywhere. But the timing wasn't right. This train was early. And I knew this train was about to do something. I'd noticed you in your scarf and t-shirt and you seemed like a reasonable person to talk to. So do you, do you feel that something is out of place?"

"You are quite right, that something is off," I reply. "But, Miss, I hate to inform you, but look, look at those clouds," I point, "and notice how they are not prickly. They are jagged. The air is stale and sour, not salty. And that train whistle. It was late. The train is hiding something."

She sighs. "Well then all hope is lost. Because you seemed like the last person in here that could understand what was happening. That train is in trouble. It's running away. There is still time to save it. But if you want to sit here and tell me that it's too late for action, then you are not who I expected you to be. I'm going to the station. I'm going to find out what's happening."

She stands up and walks away. I collect my thoughts. What the hell was all that rambling about? And then, in the distance, I hear a whistle. This whistle sounds more clear to me than the first. I would know this whistle anywhere.

And this train, this new one, is early.

Andrew Hertzberg is a Chicago-based writer. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Belt Magazine, Moonglasses, Chicago Literati, Third Coast Review, and other obscure corners of the Internet. He is working on his first novel. He tweets at @and\_hertz.

## Karen Bell

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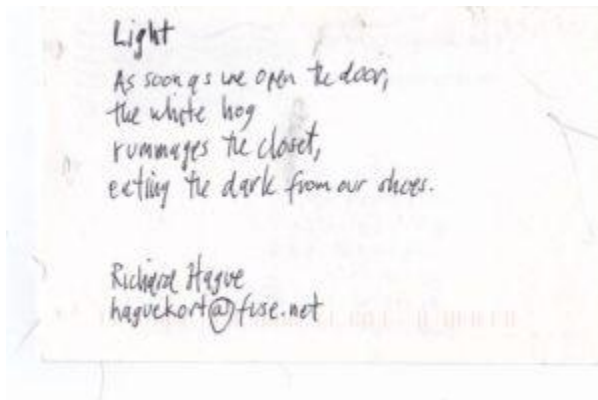


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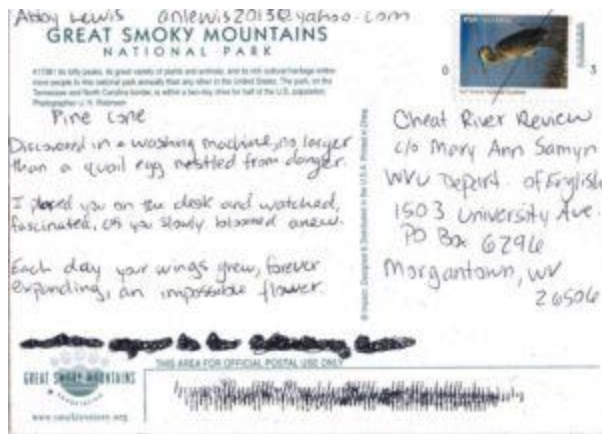
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## Richard Hague



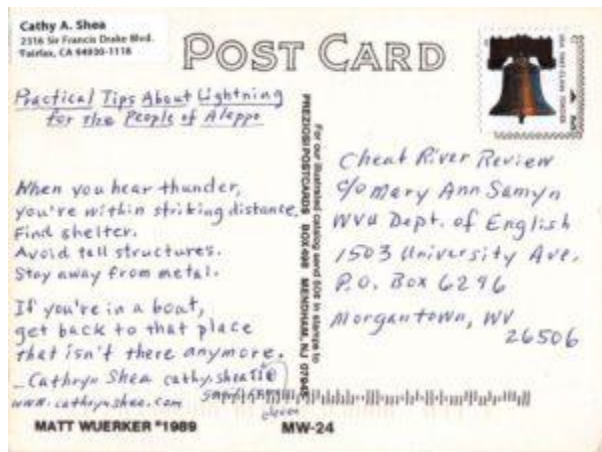
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# Rabbit Foot Megrim



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Not any old rabbit foot will do.  
I need the left hind foot  
free of dirt & soot from a rabbit  
shot in my burial plot.  
Wait for the new moon on a Friday  
in the rain.  
Wear a dark hood, a slicker  
would be good.  
Press the dead aforesaid to  
your achy head.

- Cathryn Shea cathy.shea1@gmail.com

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