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# Table of Contents:

<b>Editor's Note</b>	3
<b>Hyena, Hyena, K.C. Mead-Brewer</b>	4
<b>The Fortissimo Peacock, Caleb Echterling</b>	17
<b>Coldcut, Lisha Ruan</b>	23
<b>The Elixir Witch, Rachael Sterling</b>	24
<b>Pollo: 43<sup>rd</sup> and Chestnut, July to October, 2015,</b> Jane-Rebecca Cannarella	28

## Editor's Note

The pieces in our eighty-fourth issue are beautiful and brimming with power. Pull up a cushion and prepare to read your future in this misfit tarot deck of wonders: K.C. Mead-Brewer's Ravenous Hyena, Caleb Echterling's Singing Peacock, Lisha Ruan's Enchanted Meat, Rachael Sterling's Vial of Forgetfulness, and Jane-Rebecca Cannarella's Chicken of Mystery.

— Laura Garrison

## Hyena, Hyena

K.C. Mead-Brewer

The hyena arrived with the moon.

“For the last time, Libby, there is *no* hyena.” Mark told her this again and again, but Libby knew the truth. As soon as she got home from work, shut the garage, and locked the door, she heard the animal’s trilling laugh, at once sharp and musical, as if it’d swallowed some poor dancer’s castanets. She well knew that all kinds of African animals could thrive on the Texas plains, all the space they could want, a kinder climate, and none of the major predators to contend with, save human beings. Why, it was only two counties over that a ranching couple owned a pair of zebras and three camels in addition to their cows and goats.

As a girl, she’d loved these exotic neighbors. And as a girl in rural Texas, so much had seemed exotic: the cute Jewish boy down the street, the new sci-fi section at the school library, the sushi joint that’d opened up in Peytonsville. The idea that someplace like Africa, someplace so different from where she was, so far away, might still be a little like home—it comforted her. It didn’t make her feel larger so much as *less small*. More whole. Her grandmother understood it, even if no one else did. Her grandmother was a woman who’d traveled. A woman who’d gone places.

Chasing that feeling, Libby had taken some of the more off-beat courses in college, ending up with a major in music education—what her mother so easily referred to as her M-R-S degree—and minors in just about everything else.

But even in a world so full, so whole, Libby knew the hyena was an exception. She knew it wasn’t a sign of the world being any larger or any less small. Its ragged smile. Its jutting neck. Its pointed ears and elbows. It was a sign of something else entirely.

Her grandmother believed in signs, that everything happened for a reason, and she'd long taught Libby to believe so too.

"God, Libby, would you *please* let this drop?" Mark said, getting dressed, eating dinner, on the phone at work. "There's nothing out there. I'm telling you." And sometimes Libby really did wonder if he was right. After all, not even that nut-job Ralph Saint over Lubbock-way, not even him with his tiger and his bobcats would've tried caging a creature such as this. What's more, Mark was *the* hunter, with six shooting trophies to prove it. So surely if it were real then he would've seen it, heard it, heard *about* it.

But that wasn't right. Couldn't be. She *had* heard its low cackling. She'd seen it moving in the grass. Yet still, it wasn't until she woke up one morning to discover a chunk missing from her left thigh that she was absolutely certain.

"What do you mean you can't see it?" she said, propping her leg up on the bed. The gap didn't bleed or ooze or even hurt, it simply *was*. A piece of her, suddenly gone.

"I mean there's nothing there to see, Libs — there's no bite mark." Mark scrubbed his hands over his face. Sighing, he leaned in and kissed her right where she pointed, right where there was nothing left to kiss. His mouth dipped down into her thigh, like kissing a chewed-up slice of melon rind.

Libby gaped at him as he stood back, everything normal, patted her arm, everything normal, and went back to the work of getting ready for work. Everything, everything normal, normal, normal.

Over the next three months Libby woke up first without a right ear, then without a right hip, then without a right breast, and then without a left hand. She didn't feel the creature's teeth when it came upon her in the night. It was always simply a matter of falling asleep and then waking up somehow *minus* something.

*At least it's summer now, she thought. The end of the schoolyear. The end of day after day of classes full of energetic, whole-bodied children, little voices singing so joyously-tauntingly-gratingly off-tune. The end of forcing out fake smiles and fake interest and fake answers to all the other teachers' incessant interrogations:*

*How's it going, Libby?*

*How's Mark doing?*

*We sure missed you at church.*

*Isn't this heat just blistering?*

*How's your grandmother? I heard she's sick. Cancer—God, that's awful.*

Hobbling about the house, Libby was amazed at how little pain she felt. That piecemeal emptiness . . . she was sure it must be what a long, long fall felt like. A growing weightlessness. A bizarrely comfortable sense of doom.

Libby used putty to cement in old chunks of brick where her hip used to be, just to give herself a bit of stability again as she limped along. For her breast, she stuffed an old pair of tube socks into her bra and hoped no one would notice the abrupt difference in its shape and size. She could decently cover her missing ear with her hair, the hollow of her leg with pants or a skirt, though summer shorts were now definitely out of the question. And while having only her right hand didn't give her as many problems as she'd feared, it did throw off her balance a good deal and left her with a constant gnawing sensation that she'd forgotten something somewhere, that she'd been carrying something heavy just moments ago.

Of course, for her efforts, all Mark ever seemed to notice was that his wife was moving slower than usual. That a pair of his socks occasionally went missing. That the old bricks had finally been cleared out from the toolshed.



It was a strange thing, this absentmindedness. Mark used to be a man who noticed all the subtlest details of their lives. Sweet, sensitive Mark. He commented when she wore new clothes, reminded her that she could still be a student too, to practice her own music—the piano, the harmonica—and was always quick about fixing every leaking pipe, every creaking door. He saw flowers and spotted deer on their walks that she never would've seen on her own. He remembered birthdays and wrote beautiful letters each Sunday to her Nana, sick in bed.

It was part of what had made him such a successful hunter. This patience and total presence of mind. This awareness of the world and desire to see it so fully.

It was his talent for hunting, after all, that had made Libby brave enough to tell him about the hyena in the first place. But where she'd expected concern, perhaps even some disbelief, she'd never expected for him to start disappearing right along with everything else, disappearing like her body, her mind, her Libby-ness. Disappearing into the hunt. Because suddenly when he wasn't working, wasn't avoiding her at home, he was out in the trees, killing things.

Every free morning, it seemed, he was up and out before the sun, and every evening he came home sweating and filthy, eager for a shower before carting the day's haul off to the taxidermist.

"No hyenas today either," he'd say, and though she knew he didn't mean it cruelly, she could hear the hyena's laugh curling up in the words sharper and sharper each night.

*No hyenas today either, Libby. Isn't that great? Don't you feel comforted? Don't you feel safe?*

And then he'd present her with yet another head.

Coyotes, javelinas, deer, badgers, cougars, rabbits—he filled their home with heads. Their black glass eyes gleamed down at her from every corner. It was as if he'd gone out less to hunt and more

to recruit for himself this army of the dead that now stood awaiting orders, shoulder-to-butchered shoulder along their walls.

There was nowhere she could go to be alone anymore. Not with all those eyes staring and staring. It made her feel naked all the time and everywhere. Even their bathroom was hung with a pair of slim, stuffed, staring weasels.

*They're dead*, Libby thought, and struggled not to cry as she trembled on the toilet before their sharp, tiny eyes. Struggled not to cry as she wondered if Mark had thought to preserve a bit of wall space for her as well. *Right*, she thought. As if she might ever be something so worthwhile as a *trophy*.

*My house is full of death. Everything is full of death.*

Her knees knocked together and she twisted her shirt in a clump beneath her remaining breast. She needed to pee, needed to pee, needed to pee, but couldn't with those little eyes needling into her. Couldn't with her puttied hip cracking and crumbling all over the tile.

"Please, Libby," Mark said, leaning over a plate of boxed mashed potatoes and once-frozen chicken fingers. "*Please*. We're having dinner here." He closed his eyes and looked away as she pulled her t-shirt back down, covering up the holes and pockets and pits that he claimed he couldn't see. "I'm sorry, Libs. I just can't. I can't hear any more about this hyena."

"Why can't you just admit that you see it?" she said. "Even if it's only for me, why can't you just *say* you see it?"

"If it was really out there, don't you think I *actually* would've seen it by now? Don't you think I'd have gotten it and hung it on our wall for you? Don't you think I want this to fucking end?"

He shook his head. She knew he hadn't meant to curse. He hated cursing at her. Sweet, sensitive Mark. She kept her eyes trained carefully down at her plate. The way the chicken fingers spooned together as if trying to hold one another. The way the

mashed potatoes sat white and still, looking dead. Looking nothing at all like actual potatoes.

“You need a break,” he said, gentler. “So why not take one? You know—just get the hell outta Dodge for a while?”

Neatly, coldly, Libby pushed her plate away. “Did you have somewhere specific in mind?”

“Your mother called again,” he said. “Nana’s worse. Maybe you should go down to Florida and visit her. You used to love visiting her. Go to a beach. Take your harmonica—it’s been so long since you played.”

“Maybe *I* should go down there?” Libby said. “*By myself?*”

To see her grandmother. The woman who was sick. The woman who’d been lucky enough to have a problem like cancer. Guilt grated at Libby even as she couldn’t stop the thought: *At least people believe you when you tell them you have tumors.*

Mark ran his hands through his hair. “You know I’d go with you if I could, Libs, but I can’t. I can’t take off work for that long” — *Can’t take off hunting for that long*, she thought — “and she is *your* grandmother. Maybe it’ll do you some good,” he said, and she could tell by the pleading look in his eye that he meant it. He really wanted to believe it might do her some good.

But seeing Nana was the last thing Libby wanted and, as if to agree, the old woman up and died before she could even look up the cost of plane tickets.

And what would she have said to her anyway? Nana had lived into her nineties, delivered four healthy children, seen three oceans, and died slowly, visibly, surrounded by family. No hyenas had ever come for her, Libby was sure.

The laughter skittered out at Libby from between the walls and just the other side of the door. A clicking like claws. A grinding like teeth. The sounds followed her wherever she went.

How was it getting into the house? She made double-sure to lock all the doors each night. She kept the windows bolted.

Sometimes when she washed dishes—as best she could with only one hand—Libby was certain she could see something out the window. A spotted, hunched *something* that shuddered there in the tall grass.

The first time she saw it, she dropped a glass. But then, in the space of its shattering, the creature was gone.

The second time she saw it, she was careful to keep as still and silent as possible.

The creature shifted in the sunlight, in the burnt grass, teasing her with a glimpse of a rounded ear, a spotted shoulder, a toothy grin.

“What are you?” she whispered, and for the first time she considered the possibility that perhaps it was more than simply a monster.

As a student, she’d read about all kinds of myths and stories where the Angel of Death wasn’t simply a robe-wearing skeleton. There was Azrael, the winged mountain of swiveling eyes and lashing tongues; the Valkyries riding out on their winged horses; Meng Po brewing a fresh pot of her dark Oblivion Tea; but mostly Libby remembered the goddess Hekate, the one who led souls down to Hades—the one said to be heralded by the sound of howling dogs.

How different were hyenas from dogs anyway? And who was to say that an omen couldn’t get started eating before its guests arrived?

Libby blinked hard at the bud of a fresh headache, squinted out the kitchen window, but only tall, empty grass stared back at her.

She couldn’t remember the endings of these stories, but the one bell that tolled clearly for her was that of Appeasement. What all reapers lusted after and how she might give it to them. Because hadn’t Nana always said everything happens for a reason? Repent and ye shall be saved? Libby knew she had plenty to repent for,

even if there was no hope of ever being saved. And there was still Mark to think of, after all. Sweet, sensitive Mark. She couldn't leave him with this hyena skulking around. She couldn't leave him at all, sweet, sensitive Mark, and struggled not to resent him for it. That he should still need her when she had so little of herself left to give. Hadn't she lost enough already? —*No*, she thought, reminding herself. There's never enough for an ungrateful person to give. Never enough to make up for everything she'd wasted, every opportunity she'd let slide, the money she'd blown, the friends and family she couldn't muster the energy to call or write or see. She knew she should've tried harder, been happier, been a mother, a better daughter, a better wife, better-looking, a better student, happier, a better granddaughter, the kind that was there for a Nana in the hospital, happier, a better friend, a better Christian, happier, happier, a better neighbor, a better teacher, happier, happier, happier.

She should've known from the start that this was all her fault. That this was the price of taking up so much space. What right did she have to ever see Africa? —a place, her mother loved reminding her, where people knew what actual suffering was.

*Suffering*, Libby thought, reaching to scratch an ear that wasn't there. Appeasement. Repentance. *Sacrifice*.

At first she tried placating the creature with offerings of raw meat that she left lying about the house: slabs of bacon in the parlor, chickens stuffed under the bed, even a full rack of lamb splayed out on their old wagon-wheel coffee table. But then Mark would return from the day's hunting trip and storm through the house— following the stench of whatever offering she'd hidden that day— and collect it up as if it'd been meant for him.

The smell, she couldn't argue, was dizzying. And the look of all that rancid meat soaking into the carpet was certainly revolting.

But then, no matter what Mark said, it was worth it. Because the hyena kept its distance each time. So long as her sacrifices—these fresh, curated little pieces of life—were out and waiting, the creature didn't come clawing at the bedroom door or chatter the kitchen cabinets like teeth whenever she walked by.

"Please," Mark said, he always seemed to be saying, "please, Elizabeth." He took her gently by the shoulders and looked at her as if she were still whole. "Please stop. Please listen to me: There—is—no—hyena."

She opened her mouth to argue, but then he sighed brokenly and squeezed her tight.

"Where have you gone?" he whispered. "I miss you when you're gone." He held her close, careful and reverent, as if she were an urn. He rested his cheek on her unwashed hair. "I miss you, Libby. Come back. Please come back."

She watched him from their bedroom window as he headed out to the truck. He hadn't meant to shove her. She knew that. Mark had never been violent with her before. Sweet, sensitive Mark. She'd scared him. She'd scared him and he'd reacted badly, just like anyone might if they knew their world was suffering but couldn't see why. She knew he didn't understand why she'd draped the linked sausages over the mantelpiece, or why she'd fought against his attempts to throw them away. More than that, she knew he *wanted* to understand. But he never would. She knew then for certain that he never, never would.

Looking down at him, their porchlight yellow on his back, glinting off the truck, she saw the garbage bag slip in his hands. And she wondered, not for the first time, if he imagined the hyena or her each time he pulled the trigger.

“You’re stressed,” he’d tried telling her, telling himself. “You’re just stressed. You need to relax.”

She was almost sure she could see his hands shaking as he heaved the bag into the truck bed. He was taking her offering out to the main dump, just as he had every evening before.

“We can’t leave it rotting in our trash bins,” he’d told her, and she’d heard the struggle for calm in his voice. “We can’t have it attracting animals.”

There was an empty darkness outside and Libby realized she’d never before considered just how starkly alone each star was in the sky. Hung up in the black side-by-side, too far apart to hold each other, too close not to wish for more.

Mark was out. Out driving or kneeling in church or firing blindly into dark trees. Mark was out and now was her chance. This time her sacrifice would stick. She was sure. Because this time its pieces weren’t simply cut from random, general life; they were cut from *her* life. A lonely cigar box filled with all the most precious things she possessed. And she knew just where to leave this new offering, too.

The knowledge had come to her as in a dream: *The dishwasher, a spectral voice had said. The place where eaten things go to be cleared away.*

The dishwasher. Just one of the myriad other things she’d been cut off from in recent weeks.

There were no more evenings spent staring out the kitchen window across the plains. Not since Mark had resolved to do as much of the housekeeping as possible on top of his work, work, work, hunting, hunting, hunting. She knew he meant well. But there was something in the way he looked at her afterward, his

dark eyes so sweet and triumphant—it killed her every time. *Here!* they said. *I cleaned this for you! I did all of this for you! And now you don't have to do anything.*

Things were so *easy* for her now. That's what her teacher-friends said anyway, whenever they actually managed to drop by.

*Isn't it great having such a thoughtful husband?*

*Isn't it wonderful being so pampered and taken care of?*

Libby shrank away from the black glares of Mark's countless, wall-mounted heads. They knew as well as she did what those "friends" truly meant:

*Why aren't you happy?*

*Don't you have everything you could possibly want?*

*Come on, Libby. It's not like you have cancer.*

But this offering, this sacrifice, would finally put an end to it; she was sure. She was sure.

She'd neatly packed the old cigar box with all the most cherished mementos of her past self (her *pre-hyena* self): the harmonica she'd stolen from her best friend growing up, the one that'd first sparked her love of music; the pirate's treasure map she'd made years ago for the daughter she no longer hoped for; a ball of clay from the golem she'd built as a girl, playing with that cute boy down the street; the bird's skull she'd discovered in the woods on the day her father died; and the plane ticket to Zimbabwe she'd bought and never used for her twenty-eighth birthday—a trip she'd planned back when she thought she might still be someone who went places.

She took each turn through the house cautiously, half certain the creature would be there, lurking just around the corner, waiting for her. But there was no amount of carefulness to prepare her for the sight of her dead-not-dead Nana sitting at the kitchen table. The cigar box slipped numbly from her remaining fingers.

The old woman's shoulders were slumped and her head craned downward so that chemo-thinned hair curtained her face, hair as



white and translucent as the moonlight that leaked through the window.

“Nana?” Libby said. Her vision blurred, a shaking breath.

“Nana—I’m so sorry.”

Except she wasn’t. Her chest burned and her gaps itched and she hated that old woman for every single tumor and prayer and useless letter that Mark, sweet, sensitive Mark, had written for her. Libby imagined her dying all over again. Imagined Mark dying, a hunting accident maybe. She shuddered, furious with guilt; her clothes didn’t feel right, didn’t fit right; her muscles ached and felt numb simultaneously; the linoleum was an endless winter cold against her bare feet.

“Nana?” she said again, eyes hot, blinking. But it wasn’t her.

The hyena sat at the table, staring back at her with its impossibly bright black eyes. Its powerful shoulders were sloped as her grandmother’s had been, the moonlight slanting down across it like phantom hair.

Libby’s heart throbbed in her remaining hand, hip, thigh, breast. Her breath tangled up in her lungs and sweat pumped out of her until she was slick as one of Azrael’s billion tongues. The way the creature sat there, a gargoyle come to life. The way its power filled the room and emptied it both at once.

The hyena smiled up at her from its chair at the table, and Libby realized then that it had already seized a fresh slice of her without ever leaving its seat. She looked down to see what it’d taken, but didn’t find anything amiss.

*Is it You? Are you the Angel?* she wanted to ask, but couldn’t. Something was wrong with her throat, her voice. Reaching up to touch her chin, her fingers sailed through empty air and clear into the roof of her mouth. She felt around, her fingers brushing a slick row of teeth and a moist, ribbed wall that normally stood between her tongue and nose, except now there was no tongue. No bottom row of teeth. No bottom jaw at all.

The hyena ran its tongue over the stolen lower half of her face. It crunched her round, human teeth between its jagged, animal fangs. The hyena smiled again. Three rows of toothy smile.

A scream rose up in Libby, but only a wretched gurgling escaped. She fell to her knees, casting her remaining hand through the cigar box's disparate items, searching for something—*anything*—that might fit over her face. Something that might second as a jaw, a tongue, a chin— The bird's skull was too small. Too fragile. It crumbled like eggshell in her hand. The golem's clay had long gone uselessly dry. The harmonica— She lifted it to her opened throat and, with her one good hand, held the instrument in place beneath her exposed soft palate. The metal flashed in the moonlight as she attempted a few wet, pathetic notes. But with no lips or tongue, all she had was a whistling throat. Wind pushing through a broken window.

She was never going to see Africa, she realized, letting the harmonica drop. She was never going to see The Smoke that Thunders or The Chimanimani Mountains. She was never going to go anywhere. She was always going to be exactly where she was.

A hysterical laugh burbled out of her. Nana had been wrong. There was no reason for this. No reason, no angel, no end. *Always*, she thought. The hyena would come for her always.

Her eyes drew back to the still-grinning creature. Her fingers trembled once more to her split-open head.

Her face ended at the upper lip, a dark cove for ships to sail into and never be heard from again.

*Here be dragons*, their map would say. *Here be monsters*.

**KC MEAD-BREWER** is a writer and editor living in beautiful Baltimore, MD. Her writing appears in a variety of publications, including *Fiction Southeast* (forthcoming), *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Bartleby Snopes*. She also serves as an editor with *Cleaver Magazine* and is a proud member of The Roving Writers, a small group of wild women artists who got their start together at Hedgebrook: Women Authoring Change. For more information, visit: [kcmeadbrewer.com](http://kcmeadbrewer.com) or follow her @meadwriter

## The Fortissimo Peacock

Caleb Echterling

It was 3:17 a.m. when the curtain fell on the peacock's nocturnal aria. After two minutes of silence, Hubert shifted his pillow from over his head to under his head, grumbled about ungrateful domestic fowl keeping him up all night, and fell asleep. He woke up at 9:30. Funny, he thought, I must have slept through my multi-colored alarm clock. He slid his feet into a ratty pair of all-terrain outdoor slippers.

The feed bag fell from his shoulder as the screen door slammed shut behind him. A sheet of paper flapped on the gaping-open gate to the peacock pen. He ran inside, cradling the note so none of the letters—attached with used chewing gum—would fall off. “Mildred, Mildred. Someone's kidnapped Rupert.” The note landed on his wife's arm with a soft squish.

“Whazzah?” She rubbed her eyes and propped up on an elbow. “We have to find him. He's singing the lead in my barnyard animal production of *The Barber of Seville*. Opening night is in two days. We have to find him. And why do I smell spearmint?”

“Gum on the ransom note. Thought you'd want to see it.”

Mildred's arms flailed like she'd been told to come on down for a confab with Bob Barker. The note skidded across the floor, leaving a wake of cut-out magazine letters and pre-owned Wrigley's. “Gaaa! Get it off me. Used chewing gum is a frat party for microbes. I can't get sick two days before open.”

Hubert worked at reassembling the note. “Why can't you have the understudy fill in?”

“Because the understudy is a sheep,” Mildred huffed. “It's vocal range is one note.” She snapped her fingers. “It must have been the Stevensons that did it. They've got *La boheme* running opposite us,

and they're afraid we'll cut into their ticket sales. Grab your bolt cutters."

Mildred hid behind a sapling on the hill overlooking the Stevensons' farm. A spyglass bore a ring into the skin around her eyesocket. "He's in that barn. I know it."

Hubert rubbed pebbles into the dirt with his belly. "You should find a better hiding place. That tiny thing's not giving you any cover."

Mildred's hand channeled Richard Simmons and flapped three feet above Hubert's head. "Those two are blind as bats. Did you see their costumes for *Rigoletto*? A mole could sew better than that. They must have Rupert in the barn. Let's go."

A deep-throated click bubbled up behind them. Mildred turned to see the business end of a vintage shotgun. Hubert put his hands over his head.

"You ain't going nowhere," Mr. Stevenson said from the non-business end of the gun. "Til you return my chicken chorus. I know you're trying to undercut our production of *La boheme*. With your terrible acoustics, cheatin's the only way to outdraw us." Mr. Stevenson jabbed the gun at Mildred.

"We didn't take your damn chickens," Mildred said. "We don't want 'em. They can never hit the same note at the same time. Where's Rupert? He's late for his vocal tune-ups."

"I don't have your bird. I don't care that he is the finest tenor south of Boone Creek, I'm not listening to that racket all night."

Hubert eased off the ground while holding his hands high. "If I may interject, it appears to me that no one here has kidnapped any animals. Which means the culprit is still at large. Any idea who that might be?"

Mr. Stevenson scratched his head with the shotgun barrel. "Couldn't be Zeke. He's between shows."

“And Edna said they were closing up shop for good after *Carmen* was such a flop,” Mildred said.

“Well I’ll be plummed,” Mr. Stevenson said. “It must have been them fellers from New York. Said they was prospecting for oil, but they weren’t dressed like no oilmen.”

“Maybe we need to piece together that ransom note,” Hubert said.

Thirty-seven wads of gum, each topped with a cut-out letter, assembled on the kitchen table. The letters were what was left of the ransom note, which had once spelled out something intelligible, and might do so again with the application of enough brain power. Three sets of hands scrambled to form words, snatch letters from their neighbor, or hide letters under the table. “Enough,” Hubert yelled. “We’ll take turns. Mr. Stevenson, you’re the guest. You go first.”

Mr. Stevenson cracked his knuckles. His fingers drummed on the table. Staccato blasts shot from his nose as letters danced around the table. A drawn out grumble mingled with mumbled swear words. “I’ve got it. Toot anarchy wait enjoyment. Did your peacock have problems with breaking wind?”

Mildred shoved him to the side. “That barely makes sense. Let the real detective have a shot.” She lined the letters in alphabetical order. Her elbows propped on the table. For five minutes, she stared. A preemptive shush flew at Mr. Stevenson when he cleared his throat. A fluster of flashing fingers finished her arrangement. “Done. Watchman eaten tiny joy root. Oh my god. He dug up the miniature hallucinogenic sweet potatoes and now he thinks he’s a superhero.”

Hubert put his hand on Mildred’s shoulder. “We don’t grow hallucinogenic sweet potatoes any more. Our soil’s too moist and they get the rot, remember? I believe it’s my turn now.” Mildred

stomped to the living room. The couch springs announced the parking of her ass with a symphony of squeaks. Hubert tried pushing the letters to form words. After delving down the fifteenth dead end, he switched to making shapes. Circle, triangle, trapezoid, parallelogram. He was putting the finishing touch on a hexagon when Mildred smacked the back of his head.

“If all you’re going to do is doodle, you forfeit your turn.”

“Hold on. This is an exercise to clear my mind. Like how you let your eyes go out of focus to find Waldo. Well look at this.” Hubert slapped his knee. “Mom and dad, ran away to new york to join the met. That’s what it says.”

Mildred sobbed. “Rupert wouldn’t run off without saying goodbye. I know he wouldn’t.”

“He also can’t spell,” Hubert said.

“Or use scissors,” Mr. Stevenson said. He popped two shells into his shotgun. “Rupert didn’t write this note. I believe it’s time for us to pay a visit to some bird-nappers.”

Backstage at the Metropolitan Opera, Mildred, Hubert and Mr. Stevenson strutted through the hallways jammed with singers and crew for opening night of *La boheme*. “We don’t blend in at all,” Mildred hissed. “Everyone else looks like they’re in an opera, and we have outfits that look like they were designed by blind, drunk labrador retrievers.”

Mr. Stevenson swiveled around to face her. “I’ll thank you not to speak of my wife’s *La boheme* costumes that way. If we used your rags from *The Barber of Seville*, we’d stick out even worse.”

A man carrying a clipboard rushed down the hall. His eyes locked with Mildred’s, and he skidded to a stop. Mildred ducked her head to fiddle with the pocket of her jacket. “What are you doing here! All street vendors are on stage in two minutes.” The man hooked a hand around Hubert’s waist and shooed the group toward the sound of singing.

“But we’re not . . . ”

Mildred clapped her hand over Hubert’s mouth. “We don’t want to be late, do we?” They turned a corner and dove into a mob of 1830s Parisians. They wriggled free from the clipboard handler and moved through the crowd.

Mr. Stevenson pulled a shotgun from his jacket and used it as a pointer. “That there’s the man what stole my chickens. The tall one.” A man stood between the scrum of actors and the stage, his upper torso protruding above the garden of heads.

“He’s not tall,” Hubert said. “He’s standing on a chair.”

“Maybe so, but he done stole my chickens.”

“Get him!” screamed Mildred. Her elbows turned into crowd control weapons, clearing a path through the crowd. She tackled the man and pinned his shoulders to the floor. “Where’s Rupert? You kidnapped my baby. You give him back right now.”

The man struggled against Mildred’s grasp. When Mr. Stevenson arrived to model his vintage shotgun, the man went still. “I can’t give him back. He’s on stage.” The eardrum scraping sound of peacock cries reached Mildred. “And I didn’t kidnap him. He came of his own free will when I said our tenor sprained his pulmonary artery. Your bird has a remarkable voice, you know.”

The shotgun scratched the man’s nose. “Then where’s my chickens?”

“Rupert insisted we bring them. We cast them as working girls. The free eggs almost make up for their inability to sing in tune.”

“There’s our cue,” someone shouted. The mob lurched toward the stage, sweeping along everything in its path. Mildred caught one glimpse of Rupert before the stage lights blinded her. She staggered between street vendor props, swerved to avoid a tumble into the orchestra pit, and wrapped her arms around Rupert’s neck. Rupert’s tail feathers spread into a stained glass semicircle. Mildred burst into tears. The audience burst into applause. Rupert squawked.

“Oh, Rupert,” Mildred said. “I always knew your voice was too good for our barnyard. You follow your dreams as far as you can. I’ll miss you.”

**CALEB ECHTERLING** lives in Richmond, Virginia, where he fights with the squirrels over who gets to bury acorns in his yard. His short story “Haikuzilla” won first prize in the 8th Annual Bartleby Snopes Dialogue Contest. He tweets funny fiction using the clever handle @CalebEchterling. To find more of his writing, visit [www.calebechterling.com](http://www.calebechterling.com).



## Coldcut

Lisha Ruan

The apples drip like paper  
onto a bony stomach

The throats whirl like seas  
or locks or red hooks

Elephant-spun webs  
fall like rain onto the grass

The diamonds whirl like tanks  
in a blurred kitchen

We spill wine  
over a list in neat letters

The stars glint like oaths  
inside insects and cold meat

**LISHA RUAN** is a Computer Science major and writer at Princeton University. When she's not writing poetry, she likes to learn languages, and she's also curious about philosophy, the future, and artificial intelligence. Her work is forthcoming in *Sweet Tree Review*. She grew up in Rockville, Maryland.

## The Elixir Witch

Rachael Sterling

The Elixir Witch only accepted three forms of payment: IOUs, heirlooms, and secrets. I'd heard the stories—how Mrs. Johnson paid with an IOU and the Elixir Witch collected her left pinky finger a week later. How Mr. Figueroa paid with his family's Virgin Mary oil painting and afterward, how his abuela haunted him nightly, painting her naked body and crying over his paralyzed form until dawn.

I knew the risks.

The Elixir Witch didn't have a shop. No storefront full of clinking potion bottles or bubbling cauldrons. She had to be summoned. And thanks to Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Figueroa, I knew how. The Elixir Witch could be summoned, quite simply and efficiently, by declaring one's intent to provide any of the three forms of payment.

"I wish to pay," I said to my bathroom mirror, "one secret."

"Maya," the Elixir Witch said, pushing the shower curtain aside. She stepped out of the tub, balancing her tray of potion bottles on one hand. She wore black, but not in the gothic Wiccan way or even in the traditional Halloween way. It was the classic, little-black-dress way. Clean lines and sharp stilettos.

"Elixir Witch," I said, "thank you for coming." It was good manners to thank the Elixir Witch before a transaction, but also just good sense. She tapped her metallic nails against the countertop.

"Maya," she said again, arching her manicured eyebrow. "Which elixir would you like? Cupid's Arrow? Hell Hath No Fury?"

"We both know the elixirs don't work on you," I said. "What would I do with Love or Revenge potions?"

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "So what then?"

“Ignorance Is Bliss.”

Her eyes glinted and her lip curled in disgust.

“Only the weak wish to forget,” she said. But I knew she couldn’t refuse service. Not if I had adequate payment.

“You think I care what you think of me?”

“Tell me your secret,” she demanded. I opened my mouth to speak, but she cried, “Wait!” and for a split second, I let myself hope. “All sales are final,” she said with a cruel smile. “No refunds. No exchanges.”

I nodded and looked her straight in the eye.

“I faked it at least three times with you.”

Her eyes narrowed, but when she spoke it was clipped and business-like. “Your secret ranks 2 on measures of Shame and Consequence—well below adequate. But it ranks 5 for Cruelty.” She handed me a tiny crystal bottle of cloudy liquid. “Payment accepted.”

Then she was gone. Technically, she stepped back into the tub and pulled the curtain shut with a flourish, but I knew that if I were to pull the curtain back again, she wouldn’t be there.

I held the bottle up to the light and watched the forgetfulness swirl.

Lorena was surprised to find me on her doorstep. She shifted from foot to foot and her eyes darted down the block. Still, she invited me in.

We sat on her lumpy mustard couch. I refrained from wrinkling my nose until she left the room to get drinks. She came back with two glasses of Coke and set them on coasters. She didn’t even roll her eyes when I asked for more ice. She just got up and went back into the kitchen.

But she still broke first. “What are you doing here, Maya?”

"I came to warn you," I said, sipping my Coke. "She's dangerous."

"Of course she is," Lorena said. "I like that about her."

I laughed. Lorena scowled.

"She used to tell me the secrets people told her," I said. "We'd laugh at how pathetic they were."

Lorena pursed her lips. Her glass began to sweat.

"You bought from her once, didn't you?" I said. "What was your secret... that you sleep around to feel powerful? Bet you feel more powerful than ever."

Lorena said nothing. A peacock feather tattoo peeked out from under her black top as she reached for her glass. She wore black jeans, too—probably a sad attempt to match the Elixir Witch. As soon as I had the thought, I said it aloud. I told Lorena she couldn't come close to the Elixir Witch's dark beauty. I told her that by wearing black, she only highlighted the disparity between them. I expected her to scowl again, or cry. But Lorena just smiled and brought the glass to her lips.

"Cruelty isn't the only way to get her attention," she said.

All of a sudden, I felt naked. Exposed. It was as if Lorena could see right through me.

My resolve wavered. Maybe I didn't have to do this. I could knock the glass right out of her hand.

I reached toward her, but I was too late. She drained the glass.

Lorena's face contorted with pain and confusion. She shifted from panicked to serene, until she looked only vaguely curious.

I left. There was no point in saying goodbye.

#

At midnight, the Elixir Witch appeared in my darkened living room. Her slender fingers closed tight around my throat. The points of her nails dug into my skin.

"You bitch," she growled, her breath hot against my ear.

"Purchase Forget-Me-Not and give it to Lorena immediately."

"Do it yourself," I sneered.

“You know I can’t.” Her breath was ragged, her eyes bloodshot. And I cared.

This is what she did. She made me weak, then hated me for it.

“I’m out of secrets,” I told her. “You know them all.”

It was true. I didn’t own any heirlooms and there was no chance in hell I’d indebt myself to her. Not after everything. Did that make me cruel enough?

She shimmered. Sparks burned black spots into the upholstery, raised shiny welts on my skin. She was angry, but she wasn’t disgusted. Not anymore. I reached up to take her curls between my fingers and pulled her down to me. I tasted the tang of her magic, pushed past the shock of it. When we broke apart, she was gone.

**RACHAEL STERLING** lives in sunny Santa Monica, California, staying indoors or else seeking shade. She teaches music to preschoolers most mornings and writes most afternoons. You can find her playing music on the internet under the name Rae Sterling or very occasionally, performing at real live locations around Los Angeles.

## Pollo: 43<sup>rd</sup> and Chestnut, July to October, 2015

Jane-Rebecca Cannarella

Behind the Dialysis Center in the lawn, across from the Shoppin' Bag that all of the cool kids in West Philly still call by its old name, *Supremo*, my boyfriend told me he saw a chicken. Just wandering around. It was Fourth of July and he had smoked a bowl, so I thought he meant those big turkeys that come back every summer. The wild turkeys we once saw a UPenn cop spend almost twenty minutes trying unsuccessfully to knock out of a tree. We always liked those wild turkeys.

*You mean one of those turkeys?*

*No. A chicken.*

*Nah, it was probably a baby turkey.*

But a few weeks later, I went to the laundromat near the Chinese food place I never go to and there was a rooster—his gait a clipped strut. Stopping. *Peck. Peck. Peck.* Then more strides, walking directly toward the back of the Restaurant School. Like a dare. Like a challenge. A rebellious rooster, tail feathers swinging like a popular girl's ponytail in middle school.

We told our neighbors about him, the summer everyone sat on the stoop drinking Scotch from coffee cups filled with ice. We called him *Pollo*, a name we pulled from a comic we picked up from Locust Moon, the comic book store down the street where all the local kids would hang out. It shut down that same summer—Penn properties raised the taxes. The night of the closing party for Locust Moon, a young boy asked me *What am I gonna do for friends if they shut us down?* I bought him as many comic books as he wanted that night, because I couldn't offer the friendship of a 31-year old woman to a 10-year boy and I couldn't cry in front of a child.

Sometimes Pollo was in the lot near the mural, the one that has mosaic tiles on the building that caught fire in 2012. Right by our

apartment Pollo would hide in the bushes and make chirping, dinosaur sounds. Whenever we walked past his hiding spot I'd grip my boyfriend's side and hiss, *It's him! It's him!*

We kept listening for Pollo when he went missing. Swore we still heard him hiding in the bushes. Mourned when we thought one of the feral cats got him.

He reappeared a day in early October, running triumphantly across the seeded lawn of the same Dialysis Center. His tail feathers streaming behind him. But that was the last time we saw of him. Someone, maybe a neighbor or really any number of the people in the neighborhood we told about Pollo, swore he entered the opened door to the crumbling Christ Memorial Church. The one that everyone says is going to be rebuilt someday soon. That year Pollo made all of us believe in transmogrification.

**JANE-REBECCA CANNARELLA** is the editor of *HOOT Review*, a genre editor at *Lunch Ticket*, a cat lady, a contributing writer at *S&S music*, and a candy enthusiast. She received her BA and M.Ed from Arcadia University, attended Goldsmiths: University of London, Sarah Lawrence College, and is an MFA candidate at Antioch University. When not poorly playing the piano, she chronicles the many ways that she embarrasses herself at the website [www.youlifeisnotsogreat.com](http://www.youlifeisnotsogreat.com). She occasionally drinks wine out of a mug that has a smug poodle on it, and she's not wonderful at writing in the third person.







## On the cover:

### “The One That Got Away”

Driving past a brown house that sat in the middle ground of the main strip in Redmond, OR **COYLE PARKER** (in child form) fantasized about his career as an inventor. He grew up making plans to build wooden robots and attempted a WWII replica out of Popsicle sticks. He later won best-looking car



in the pine wood derby (with a little help from his brother), and won a blue ribbon for best original artwork at the Oregon State fair in High school. His desire to create something from nothing never died and his vision to have a career as an inventor came to life but in the form as a visual artist. The now all grown up, Coyle Parker resides in New Orleans, LA. Here he has developed greatly as an artist and has moved from the kitchen slinging food to the streets slinging art. There is no other place that Coyle would rather be than engulfed in the richness of culture, diversity, and overflow of spirit that New Orleans offers. His work is at [coyleparker.com](http://coyleparker.com).