



CASSIOPEIA

by Rowan Beard

MOTHS lie flat as a shadow on the screen that wraps around the back porch. Susan takes a sip from her Coke and rubs the cool aluminum along the loose, tanned skin of her upper arm. She'd flicked on the overhead light a few minutes before, the sky having dimmed and darkened, the outlines of her unpainted fence, her lone elm tree, her coop only visible because she's seen them everyday for the past seven years. To a guest they'd be the pulsing purples and blacks of a bruise, but Susan sees every curve and right angle. Sometimes the familiar is more familiar in darkness.

The peacocks are at opposite ends of the yard, the male's feathers fanned across the summer grass like hair on a pillow. The peahen is inside

the coop, resting atop her three eggs, each as large as an apple. She is unremarkable, like all peahen, her feathers winter brown and white but for the ruffle of iridescent green at her neck. The pair have been silent all evening, and for once the neighbors aren't yelling from half-open windows for them to be quiet. Some people say a peacock's cry sounds like the wails of a child, but Susan never hears it. It is the call of a bird, pure and full-throated, consuming the air like a lit match.

"Some mother and daughter got killed over on 290 near Elgin. Swerved into the divider," Heath says, opening the door from the kitchen. Susan doesn't respond. He remarks on deaths from the local news like other people remark on the weather. He's wearing his University of Texas t-shirt that's always bothered her, as he's never taken a single college course.

"Well, what are you going to do all week?" he asks, sitting next to her, patting her thigh as if she were a horse.

"I have no idea, no i-de-a," she says, draining her Coke.

Susan is on holiday, nine days of nothing rushing towards her like the tide. She works for the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, transferring phone calls. She is fine at her job—it requires little more than dexterous fingers, though she's unable to pitch her tone to the same level of

cheeriness, the same exaggerated Southern charm as the other two women in the operators' room. Her days there are a chorus of strangers' voices, her mind sporadically sputtering as she says the same sentences over and over again. Sometimes in the lull between rings she pictures the map of phone lines roping through the state like electrical wires, sparking at each 'Good morning' or 'Hello.'

Susan and Heath were supposed to be seven hours outside of New Orleans, but the peacock's eggs had appeared like spring buds on the trees, both expected and unexpected. This was the third time the mother had laid eggs. The father, Paul, killed the previous seven children within hours, possibly minutes, of their birth. Susan had found them the morning after—small nests of feathers and blood. She remembers the first time clearly, finding the mother, Joanne, perched on the wood beam at the top of the coop, her head bowed over her chest like half of a heart. Paul pecking at a dandelion, the yellow petals speckled across his beak like paint.

In the distance someone is setting off fireworks, a smatter of sharp cracks and bursts. Paul struts over to his feed dish and eats with quick jerks of his neck. With the new eggs they had placed him outside the coop in a desperate act to save the unborn chicks. They half expected him to have disappeared by the next morning, but Paul never even left the yard. Paul for

Paul Newman, Joanne for Joanne Woodward, beloved by Susan for their decency, their love, their lack of nonsense. She used to savor telling guests their names, back when they cared to have guests.

“At least he’ll leave them alone this time,” Heath says.

“Yes,” she says. “If he was still in there I might as well crack those eggs into our frying pan for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Peacock omelet,” he says.

“Peacock egg sandwich,” she offers.

“Peacock Toad in the Hole.”

Even at night, the mid-summer heat is thick as fog. Susan wants another Coke just to hold the cool can in her palm. She notices the petals of her orange calla lilies are beginning to fall on the narrow strips of garden dirt. Suddenly, the idea of tomorrow, its emptiness, its vast expanse of summer daylight, overwhelms her.

The last vacation they had taken was to Mexico, three or four years back, the plane tickets a misguided, inexplicably generous gift from Heath’s sister. They went to the Gulf, to beaches spotted with kelp and plastic bottles. Their hotel room was barely big enough to fit the bed, its small fridge buzzed like a fly right next to her ear. Heath watched soccer games

in a cramped bar where the only noises were the clank of a beer bottle opening, the heavy swish of metal fans. Susan walked around the markets, buying nothing, strolling across the beach and occasionally walking out into the water, tepid as a bath, fully clothed. Heath didn't comment on local deaths; there were too many.

“Well,” he says, rising with the slow, strained movements of a much older man. “You better start thinking of names.”



Susan wakes to the roar of a lawn mower and an empty bed. In her dreams Paul had started to kill neighborhood dogs, leaving them for her like a prize. She couldn't dig enough holes to bury all of them, the lawn polka-dotted with gaping circles of dirt.

She pours herself a glass of iced coffee in the kitchen, her white cotton nightgown billowing out around her like a bluebell. She knows Heath is out making house calls, driving his truck across Williamson county fixing air conditioners. She goes about her morning routine barefoot, her

soles thick with callouses. She's never understood why women take a pumice to their feet, making them soft, as easily pricked as a fingertip.

For the past few days, as the eggs neared the end of their four weeks, Susan has been holding her breath every time she opens the door to the backyard, turning the knob gingerly, as if trying not to wake a child. But Joanne is sitting calmly atop them, her eyes bright and black in the sun.

"Well, good morning," Susan says, believing that Joanne understands her, even if Paul cannot. She hauls the bag of feed from the shed, some loose kernels spilling onto the earth. Paul struts around the perimeter of the coop.

After the first deaths, after finding them and running to vomit in the kitchen sink, Susan was in a state of shock. She thought of prison guards, men and women who pass the hours of their lives with murderers. How could you stand next to their cells, walk by cafeteria tables teeming with the guilty, and be at peace? But soon she found herself falling into the rhythms of the mundane, looking out at the coop and wondering how to revive that dead patch of grass by the elm, how much cheaper it would be to buy feed in bulk. Her days had rippled and steadied. After the second deaths, Susan chose to see everything differently: Paul was no longer human, no longer a father, he was a bird. He was territorial; he was threatened. She read articles

online about peacocks killing chickens, peacocks killing field mice. It was no Medea, no betrayal of blood against blood. It was Darwin.

Susan returns to her bedroom after feeding the birds, strips off her nightgown and puts on a shapeless dress of flowered cotton. She had parceled out her errands for the week so that each day she has a reason to leave the house: today, it is returning books to the library, which means she has to scour Heath's study for paperbacks.

Heath's study was not a study—it was just a room where he kept boxes of unorganized books he half read and maps of Bolivia. On the carpet, a coffee table book lay open to photographs of women wrapped in thick, bright fabric, faded bowler hats perched on their heads. Susan wishes she were the sort of person that could find them beautiful, but their hair reminds her of the thick strands of a horse, and their faces look too simple, rough clefts of skin and cartilage.

During a trip to South America (funded by a small sum of money he received after his father's death) Heath had been deported from Bolivia. There was a bar fight, cocaine found in his jeans pocket. Now, twenty-odd years later, he longed to return, Bolivia having become your best friend's wife, a 1963 Corvette Stingray, something you want, desperately and

completely, but can never have. Susan initially found his obsession fascinating, but now it's a weight, a story told and retold.

Later that afternoon, after taking the longest possible route both to and from the library, reading half an article on new cancer treatments and re-reading the first five chapters of *Lonesome Dove*, Susan returns to an empty house. Heath left a note on the front door saying he's getting a beer with Jim. The phone is ringing, and she finds Heath's niece, Lonna, on the other end of the line.

“Have they hatched yet?” Lonna asks.

“No, they're still nothing but eggs.”

Lonna is a school teacher in Austin, the only child of Heath's only sister—a sentimental and cloying woman, desperate for dogs and children, who approaches both at the supermarket as if she's the state matriarch of Texas. Lonna and Susan are united in their impatience with her, rolling their eyes, fists against cheeks, excuses made to go get more beers, beautifully in sync as if choreographed for the stage.

“Is the other one still hanging around?” Lonna asks.

“Paul. And yes. It's his home, I guess,” Susan says.

“I’m not still hanging around my home, but I guess my brain is also bigger than a walnut. How’s Heath?”

“Fine. Not here. He’s out there, somewhere, in the world. Somewhere with beer.”

“And you’re okay on your own? Not much of a vacation.”

“I’m always okay. I’d be okay in New Orleans, but I’m okay here too.”

“Well, call me when they’ve hatched?” she says.

“Okay then. Talk soon,” Susan says, and clicks the phone back on the receiver. A photograph of Lonna is pinned to the fridge, the magnet rusted to the spot with age. In the photo she’s on their front lawn, her arms thrown up as if about to leap. Susan and Heath never wanted children, but she was beginning to understand why people have them: children promise change, growing and fighting and leaving and returning. They had bought Joanne and Paul fully grown, and the birds seemed no different after five years. Susan had read how, in Ancient Greece, peacocks were a sign of immortality, thought to be ageless, fixed and unchanging.

Susan’s change was beneath her lower lashes, in the thinning hair at her crown. The most beautiful picture of her ever taken was on the night of Halloween, seventeen years earlier. She was Annie Oakley, her hair plaited

in a thick, shining braid, a Stetson pushed back on her head, her skin healthy and freckled. She wore the same costume: the loose white shirt, the thick A-line skirt and leather boots, for the following seven years, like a little girl insisting on being forever Alice, no matter if the blue dress hits well above her knees.

That night Susan falls asleep trying to recall the names of Paul Newman and Joanna Woodward's children, trying to remember if they had three daughters or three sons.



She's woken by the echoing spring of wired metal, the thud of a body against dirt. Heath isn't next to her in bed; there is only a mess of sheets she threw off her body in sleep. She hears voices outside of her window, and realizes someone is in the backyard. Her stomach heavy with dread, she puts her feet flat on the floor and walks to the closet, pulling the handgun from the top shelf. It is lighter than she remembered; it should be heavy as a paint can, heavy as a shovel, making her wonder if this is just a dream.

Through the kitchen window she sees two bodies kneeling by the coop, dimly lit by the neighbor's porch lights. The clock on the oven tells her it is not even midnight. Joanne is asleep, nesting. Paul is barely visible on the highest branch of the elm, his head cocked towards the intruders as if they're sparrows newly landed on the grass.

Still in darkness, Susan raises the gun, already seeing herself in the aftermath: Heath returning home to sputtering blue and red police lights, the other women at work asking her how it happened, what it felt like. Her foot swings the screen door open and the figures rise. One is already running, and the other is still, staring at her pistol.

"Don't—don't—" he stammers, his hands in front of him as if he's trying to find his way in the dark. He is no more than sixteen. There are wire cutters flat on the grass. Susan lowers her arms, the tightness in her limbs and throat melting like butter in a pan.

"Lord, I'm not going to shoot you," she says. The boy draws his hands behind his head, threading them together against the back of his neck. His relief is palpable, and it angers her. "But I am going to call the police."

"Goddammit," he spits, looking to the path his partner has taken, along the hedges and out to the darkened street.

“Don’t even think about it,” she says, gesturing with the gun’s barrel towards the house. “Get inside.”

Susan knows she will not call the police; she doesn’t want to bring those men, incompetent former classmates and checkout boys at HEB, into her home. She doesn’t want them hiding their grins at a couple keeping peacocks, aligning themselves with the boy, ever so subtly. Even old friends found the birds bizarre, something never articulated but always felt in the way they refused to approach them, declaring themselves more comfortable on the sofa, or leaning against the doorframe.

“Sit here,” she says, directing the boy to the kitchen table. She places the gun in the sink. He sits hunched over, staring at the floor, so she is able to study him: the sweat stains darkening his t-shirt, a bruise in the unlikely quadrant of his upper forearm. He is attractive—a too-full mouth, long hair—in the way Heath was attractive, in a way that reminds her of the time in her life when every interaction was heavy with sex, something she knew long before the other girls. But at some point, remarkable to think it must have been some day, some minute in the checkout line or under her bathroom showerhead, she transformed. She became both more and less a woman, and boys like this, men like his father, stopped paying attention.

“So, what the hell were you about to do? Steal a peacock?” she asks.

“No,” he says, rubbing his thumb against the table edge, “we were just gonna set them free. It was a dare.”

“A dare,” she repeats. He nods his head, still not meeting her face.

“You did notice one of them was already loose, right?”

He jerks his head towards the backyard, though neither can see either bird in the darkness. She imagines waking to find both Paul and Joanne gone, flying south to Mexico, north to Oklahoma, leaving only their children, three little boys or three little girls.

“No,” he says, turning back to the kitchen. “Why is just one of them loose?”

“None of your business.”

She opens the fridge and takes out a can of Coke, tapping the aluminum with her short, frayed nail as she sits down with him at the table, trying to remember if she’s seen him before. He is a little young to be the son of any former friends, men and women who used to come over for badminton and drunken games of gin, men who Heath still occasionally meets for a beer, women who Susan sometimes sees in the supermarket, tending to their children or talking about their children. Remarkable to

think Susan once let them wash her dishes, hold her after her mother passed, cut her hair.

“You know, I-I think they’re really beautiful,” he says, looking at her.

“Thank you,” she says, taken aback.

“I took the dare just to see them really, they’re kind of a neighborhood myth. I didn’t want to rob you or anything,” he says.

She wonders if her and Heath’s children would have ended up like this; if they would have been stumbling through strangers’ yards and jumping into blackened lakes, slipping bottles of liquor into jacket pockets, locking themselves in closets with girls they barely know, with girls they’ve known since grammar school.

“You like peacocks, then?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I used to draw them a lot, when I was little,” he says. She has an image of a young boy reaching up to touch the frill of feathers at Paul’s head. “But, I mean,” he continues, “don’t they need more room? The peacocks?”

“No, no. As long as they have enough room to stretch their feathers and their feet they’re fine.”

“But then why did you let the other one out?”

“Like I said, that’s none of your business.”

“Hmh,” he says, nodding and looking back to the table ledge.

“What?”

“It just seems cruel to separate them, is all.”

“Are you really trying to tell me how to take care of them? After you and your faceless friend just trespassed on my property and tried to steal from me?” Anger flushes red across her chest and face.

“No, ma’am,” he says, though his words now have acid in them, petulance and arrogance.

“Just go, go home to your mother,” she says, waving him away like a gnat.

He looks up from the table, his skin the pale blue of a hospital patient under the kitchen light.

“You’re not going to call the police?”

“No, I’m not. But that doesn’t mean I won’t if you or your friends ever do this again, so stay away from my house and my birds. I’m not a myth, I’m a woman with a husband and a gun.”

He rises as if unshackled, brushing past her towards the darkness of the living room. She hears him fumble in the unfamiliar landscape, a

hipbone thudding against the sofa arm, hesitant steps, an ungraceful exit, like a getaway car stopping and starting in the parking lot.

“Just a few more paces, door will be on your right,” Susan says as she stands to turn off the light. She watches him walk along the driveway and out into the middle of the street, watches him as he begins to run, his shadow lengthening along the concrete until he is tall as a house, tall as a tree.



In the morning, in the bathroom, she notices the creases that her pillowcase and top sheet had left—pink imprints on her cheeks, her arms. She always wonders why this happens certain nights and not others. If your skin occasionally thins, a piece of paper folded and unfolded.

Now out in the yard, she repeats that thought like an empty, rehearsed prayer. There are ivory shards of egg shell and matted brown feathers, blood shining like oil in the sunlight, sunlight that reveals the hastily cut gap in the wire of the coop, opening like curled ribbon. Joanne’s left wing is half-extended as if someone has been measuring her. Her body is near

the nest, lifeless as the chicks. Paul perches on the wooden arm fastened near the top of the cage, red beak and red feet. Susan looks at her spilt coffee on the grass and wonders momentarily if she should clean it, if she should blot the green spears and soil. There are new buds tipping her calla lilies.

The neighbor's dog runs back and forth along the fence, whinnying at a clear, high pitch, smelling blood. This morning she had not held her breath before she saw them; this morning she had been thinking about the boy, realizing she never even asked his name. The screen door opens behind her and Heath steps out into the morning sun.

He had bought the peacocks for her on their tenth wedding anniversary, a gesture so large and grand he never attempted romance again. On their honeymoon in Florida, a wild one had approached them as they walked back to their hotel. The sound of the peacock opening his feathers was that of a dozen birds taking flight. Heath walked around the bird, inspecting it like a mechanic. He later told her that from the back you could see the quills, strong and bright as bone. Neither knew peacocks were overrunning some small Florida towns; to them it was as utterly miraculous as being visited by God.

"I can shoot him," Heath says.

“No, you can’t, you can’t.”

“Then what?”

She watches as he lifts Joanne’s body into the thick plastic trash bag, watches as the little ones follow, his hands rusted with their blood. She watches as he digs the hole, too shallow and too wide. The neighbors look on through their kitchen windows. She rises to shake some feed through the cage, and Paul pecks at the pieces, his neck rising and falling as fluidly as a wave. He could live another ten years. He could outlive her if she goes as early as her mother.

In some way, she knew this would happen, in the way we all expect our worst fears to come to pass. The captain drowning with his ship; the soldier feeling the bullet hole, the gape of fabric in his thick, cotton uniform. All children leaving home.

The day passes. Susan never puts on her shoes. She removes a steak from its waxy white paper and throws it in the garbage, overwhelmed by the color, its heartbreaking, heart-hued red. Ambulances are heard in the distance, the bellowing, shapeless bass of a concert in the park. They don’t speak to each other, choosing to sit in different rooms until Susan feels it’s dark enough to allow herself to lie in bed. Heath comes to her after he has

showered, when he's finished the morning newspaper, something he always consumes portions of throughout the day, like picking grapes from a bowl on the kitchen counter.

She is lying on top of their thin cotton blanket, the window open, the frail body of a spider pressed against the screen. Earlier she heard him crying in the bathroom, and remembered when she found Lonna locked in the same room. She'd gotten her period and didn't even know what it was, thought she was sick and dying, and Susan had sent her off to her mother thinking *Thank God I don't have to explain this, thank God I don't have to relive those awful moments*. She had thought of calling Lonna after finding Joanne, but how to explain, how to relive.

This, she thinks, is the time for women, the time for the sturdy, whale-boned friends of her mother's that would come not to speak, but just to sit. The women who spat into their empty coffee mugs and fried eggs, not wincing as the grease popped and crackled in the pan. But those women are no longer of this earth, and she's left with those soft-hearted girls who talk about teething and their child's homeroom teachers, those she turned from before they could look over their shoulder and see her standing, waiting.

“There were wire cutters on the grass,” Heath says as he lies next to her.

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, yes?”

“There was a boy. He came last night. I didn’t realize what he’d done. But it doesn’t matter now, does it? It doesn’t matter.”

She tries to remember what she was supposed to do tomorrow. Yesterday it was paperbacks, today it was taking Heath’s old work shirts to the Salvation Army, and tomorrow, tomorrow.

“Remember on our second or third date, I asked you if you believed in heaven?” Heath says.

“I do.”

“And you said heaven is something for the living. And I said heaven to me was the Salar de Uyuni, those Bolivian salt flats—”

“Stretching out into infinity,” she finishes.

Heath picks up a paperback from the nightstand, his thumb brushing the thin pages. Another story about another man and another horse. *Cowboys don’t have children*, he had said once when they were discussing whether they should become parents. They’d laughed and she had

shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *well that settles it*. That evening they moved the mattress out to the porch because their house was thick with paint fumes, whispering to each other as if they were children themselves. She told Heath about Cassiopeia with her ropes of auburn hair, banished to the heavens. The sky was the blue of deep water, and outside the air smelled like campfire and hyacinths.

Heath turns off the bedside light, the sound a dull click. Soon he is asleep, turned from her as she lies awake listening to the familiar flutter of feathers, talons clutching at grass and dirt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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