

*The*  
WRITERS  
STUDIO

*at*

30

*Fiction and Poetry from the First 30 Years of the  
Landmark School of Creative Writing and Thinking*

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FOREWORD BY PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING POET  
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# FIRST GIRL

*Elizabeth England*

*(From The Journal)*

That spring when my mother left him, my father would choose a path off the Appalachian Trail and, every Friday, after a few drinks, he would call me in Maine where I was in college. He would leave on my answering machine the start time, the length of the hike, trail conditions. Our goal was simple: to climb mountains and point out things below that were familiar. Despite the slurring of his voice, I always understood my father perfectly. This time, I was to take Barkers Road to the fork and make a right; he'd be waiting at the trail head. It was expected that I would meet him.

My roommate that particular year was Victor from Cuba, Victor with the sleek black hair hanging like a dog's tail down his spine. He was a friend of a friend; we had nothing else in common. Besides studying, I spent most of my time doing what my mother often did: quietly putting down the toilet seat, slipping old-fashioned coasters under glasses, finding pennies between cushions and pocketing them. Victor rarely studied. He slept and baked fruit pies with lattice tops. When he heard the message from my father, he asked if he could come.

"Would you mind?" Victor was physical and, often, he would pick me up and flirtatiously throw me on the La-Z-Boy. If he hadn't been gay, we would've been sleeping together.

When I told my father about Victor, he said, "Is it serious?"

On Saturday, the morning sky was dark purple. Victor and I drove over the Maine border into New Hampshire and then across the White Mountains. Victor said once or twice, "Would you look at that?" The mountains still had snow on them, ringing their tops like halos. We passed covered bridges with

small signs telling us their ages. "That, I cannot believe," Victor said about a distinctly old one.

When we stopped for something to eat, the waitress said, "What can I get you two lovebirds?" I turned red and Victor said, "She's just my kid sister." The waitress rolled her eyes and walked away. "You are the most beautiful thing, sis," Victor said, putting his hand on my thigh. He left it there until the check came. We could've been statues; we were that still.

Victor said that there was no way of seeing the opossum before I hit it. I felt the thump and pulled over quickly, without signaling, without looking behind me. "Breathe," he said. "It wasn't your fault." I imagined something large, a buck, a moose even. "We would be dead if it was one of those," Victor said. I got out first and looked. "Tell me, tell me," Victor said. When I didn't say anything, he too got out of the car and looked at the opossum with me. The soft belly pulsing, the skinny bald tail limp on the road, one eye blinking. Victor said, "Thank God, it is only that."

I had only one orange emergency cone and a large flashlight in the trunk to put near the opossum until we came back with help.

"No one will see that," Victor said, taking off his orange ski sweater. He put it on the pavement. It looked like a shrine, the cone, the flashlight, the sweater.

"Perfect," Victor said. He put his arm around me and squeezed. I was close enough to smell his patchouli oil. "Let's go find someone."

At the first gas station we came to, I stopped and told the man behind the counter what I had done. He said, "What do you want me to do about it?" He wore a checkered shirt with squares only slightly larger than the opossum's eye. I paid for gas and some gum and said thank you. "For what?" the man said.

At a payphone, I called my father. I left a message telling him we were still in New Hampshire and that I had hit an opossum. I said I was uncertain whether we would meet him at the designated time. Victor was sitting on the hood of the car when I came out of the phone booth. We smelled the yeast and flour of a commercial bakery, which, Victor found out, wasn't open on Saturdays. "This makes you feel as though you're eating," Victor said and put a piece of gum in my mouth. "Don't worry, I can't leave the little guy lying there either." From his front jeans pocket, he took out a cloth handkerchief and wiped my eyes, first one and then the other.

We got back in the car and drove slowly down the Main Street until I saw a store that had signs for missing kittens, unwanted puppies, pony lessons, fresh goat's milk, posted on its bulletin board. The woman filling a red cooler with

Dr. Pepper and chocolate milk told me to take an empty cardboard box from outside and slide the opossum in it. She gave me the name and number of her vet, Dr. Lesley. If I brought the animal to him, he would call the game warden who would take over from there.

"Use these," she said, handing me rubber gloves. "Save you a lot of trouble."

Victor was still in the car. His knees were wedged against the glove box. He was the longest man I had ever known. When he smiled at me this time, he looked different.

I drove slowly. I searched the road for animals. Victor turned on the radio. "There is no disco music around here," he said. I was holding the steering wheel tightly. Victor put his hand on my neck, his fingers resting lightly like a necklace on my collarbone. I pushed my shoulders down, I rolled my head in a circle, I inhaled. "You must exhale," he said. "Breathing is the only thing that works."

As soon as we found the opossum, I parked on the side of the road and put on my hazards. They made a ticking sound that reminded me of the metronome my mother used whenever she wanted to get our attention. The even, persistent click would make my brother and me stop fighting. It also made my father look up from the papers he graded nightly. We would all stare at my mother until she turned it off, said what she needed to say and left the room. I told Victor to get out of the car and stand watch. If a car came, I instructed him to motion it wide around the opossum and me. He practiced a few times, exaggerating the movements, until I laughed. "That's better," he said.

I searched the side of the road until I found a stick that was impressive, thick, smooth and easy to maneuver. I touched its blunt tip against the opossum's side and all the muscles in the animal's torso contracted. He tried to curl up like a caterpillar. I imagined his wounds were internal, a kidney that no longer worked, intestines that refused to function. Apart from the smashed right eye, he looked peaceful on the outside.

"Your mother," Victor said. "Is that who you look like, or your father?" He had his hands tucked in the pockets of his wool jacket. It was April but that day, it felt like February. I watched the smoke come out of his mouth.

"Depends on my mood," I said. The opossum was drooling. White foam curled on the road. His one good eye stayed closed now more than open though when I came near him, he strained to watch me. I wanted to see his tongue.

"I think he's a child," Victor said. He was squatting next to me, his knee resting on mine, his eyes fixed on the opossum. He handed me the rubber gloves and kept the cardboard box.

I slid the opossum and Victor held the box. Whenever the opossum twitched, Victor said, "Watch it." He told me about his uncle who got bit by a rabid dog, the fever he got, how his wife couldn't take it so she left him. He lived, but then died young of a stroke. As Victor talked, I used the stick like a spatula, half-lifting the opossum, half-dropping him. Finally, Victor said, "Let me try." He put on the gloves. His face was serious, no smiling, no softness to his cheeks. His eyes looked first at the opossum and then at the box. Then, he picked up the opossum with both hands, one in front of the other as in tug-of-war. The opossum twisted his head around to bite Victor, showing his teeth, hissing and finally pressing down on Victor's hand, but not piercing the rubber. "Have you ever had a pet?" He asked me. The opossum was in the box, twitching.

"Dogs," I said. "Crazy ones."

"Why crazy?" Victor said.

"My father hit them in the head with the car," I said. "They would get in the way whenever he backed out of the driveway."

"At least it wasn't you he hit," Victor said.

This time, Victor drove. I rode in the backseat with the opossum who made a purring sound. He began to scratch the side of the box, his nails sliding back and forth against the cardboard. "He's nervous," Victor said. "Sing to him. Everyone likes a song." I hummed "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." "That must be American," Victor said. It was repetitive and I could keep it going for a long time. "That's nice," Victor said. The box bumped into me when Victor turned into the vet's office. The opossum's eyes opened, even the hurt one, and we stared at each other until Victor parked and opened my door.

Dr. Lesley wasn't in, but his assistant took the box and said, "What is it this time?" She had long nails, which she protected, using only the pads of her fingers to write our names and addresses, the time and place of impact. I told her it felt like something larger. "That's when they hit both tires, not just one," she said. She then gave the opossum a shot and both eyes closed. "Sign here," she said. "He'll be fine."

I drove the speed limit. Victor said he had never seen a place as big and lonely as New Hampshire. "Where is everyone?" He said.

We crossed the state line into Vermont, and when I got to Barkers Road, I took the right and saw my father's Buick empty and locked under a tree. Victor tied his sweater around his waist and I took off my sweatshirt. Both of us changed into our hiking boots and looked for the trailhead.



At the beginning, the ground was as muddy and slow-moving as my father had described. There was a small stream to cross, a few logs to climb over, but otherwise the walk was easy. Fiddlehead ferns were beginning to unfurl, bluebells were sprouting up through the mulch. "So this is spring," Victor said.

We made it to the clearing at the top of the mountain with few stops.

"The payoff," Victor said. "This view of everything." He was breathing hard, but there were no sweat rings under his arms, no large effort expended. He pivoted, looked out and down. There was a breeze, which we hadn't felt in the woods. Victor's hair had come out of its leather tie and now blew around his face, sticking to his skin. "So where is this father?"

I circled the top, looking near a cluster of rocks on the east side and then checking a path on the west side. I called his name. My father wasn't there.

On the way down, I called out a few more times until Victor said, "He should've known better."

"But we were late," I said.

"About the dogs, I mean," Victor said.

When we got to the trailhead parking lot, my father's car was gone. "Waited four hours, guess it's serious" was written on an old A&P receipt tucked under the left windshield wiper of my car. Victor didn't ask to read the note. Instead, he picked a violet, smoothed my hair back and stuck the flower behind my ear. I closed my eyes as his fingers touched me. He said, "You are the first girl I ever wanted to kiss."