

fiction

# Sealskin

*Tessa Wetherbee*

IN THE MORNINGS, Karin combed the shore for rocks and shells. She finished before the sun rose above the blue horizon, brushing flecks of sand from her fingers and shaking the salt from her tangled hair. She enjoyed the weight of her treasures in her pocket, but she liked taking them out later, one by one, even more. Her favorite finds weren't shells or stones but people things: a delicate silver thimble or a matchbox with a lithe white cat painted on the front. She liked to imagine to whom they belonged, a pretty gold necklace for a mysterious young woman and a broken doll for a careless, ruddy-cheeked boy. Sometimes she wondered what she left on the shore and what it said about her.

When Karin was twelve, her father got a new job on another island almost an hour away. Before he took a boat to work each morning, he woke up to drink a coffee at the kitchen table, the steam from the cup curling over his lowered face. It put an end to Karin's walks, as there was no opportunity to sneak out before school, but she kept her collection of treasures in a rusty tin box with an old picture of her mother. She never mentioned the outings to her father. His job kept long hours and he came home each evening worn and quiet. Though he looked neater than he had in years, with his crisp suit buttoned up to his neck, his eyes were tired. It would only worry him if he knew, and the shores around Mikladalur were not well suited for walks. It wasn't all that uncommon for ships to go down on stormy days, and mothers warned their children away from the treacherous paths along the cliffs.

There had been a time, though Karin could hardly imagine it, when her father was a fisherman and not a concierge in a stiff gray suit. He'd met Karin's mother then, when his hair was still red and his hands were still calloused from labor. One autumn night of that same year, when a glass of whiskey had thawed his usual silence, he told Karin about her mother.

"What did people think of her?" Karin wondered, leaning too far forward in her eagerness and almost unbalancing on the chair. Her father steadied her with a hand to her shoulder, but his eyes were distant and foggy. He traced his finger around the edge of his glass, disturbing the amber liquid.

"She was different, your mom. I guess most people didn't know what to do with her."

Karin couldn't help but smile at that, though it was strained and bitter and pulled at her cheeks. "Like me."

Her father tipped his head in acknowledgment. "You're more like her than you know. You keep to yourself, and you're so stubborn." He paused to take a slow, considering sip of his whiskey. That was more like the father she knew, the man whose every move was as ponderous and deliberate as the tides. When he next spoke, the words rumbled under his breath. Perhaps he didn't even mean for her to hear, dulled as he was by alcohol. "It scares me, sometimes. What this town could do to you."

Karin sucked in a breath, but kept her face smooth and free of the curiosity bubbling up inside her chest. She was a trespasser tip-toeing on unsteady ground, anxious with the knowledge that the wrong move could shatter the delicate tension.

"But Grandpa warmed up to her, right?" she prompted, frowning.

"I suppose. He and your Grandma both made more of an effort after she had you. But they were never close. Didn't see eye-to-eye. They were too set in their ways, and she was never one to fit in just because it would make things easier." His face grew wistful. "After she got sick, my folks didn't even go to her funeral. She didn't approve of hunting, you see. That bothered them the most. I know it bothered your Granda lot."

"She liked animals?"

"She liked them more than anyone around here, at any rate. But that wasn't hard. 'Specially in those days. Animal rights weren't exactly in fashion."

Karin tried to picture this. She tried to imagine a woman she'd seen only in photographs as someone with opinions strong enough to alienate her family. "Maybe she had a point," Karin blurted out suddenly. "That's why you didn't take over Grandpa's business. Mom talked you out of it. That's why they didn't like her. She said something they didn't want to hear."

Her father leaned back, eyes sharpening, and placed his glass back down upon the table with a quiet click. It was as though he had just awoken from a dream with the sudden realization that he had made a mistake. Karin watched as he scrubbed at his face with one hand. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this right now," he said finally. "Just... leave it for another day, ok?"

"But--"

"No, Karin."

Her father's voice was too loud in the close, dark space of the kitchen, and Karin flinched. Her father flinched too, as though he had not meant for the words to come out so forcefully, his frame collapsing inwards and a look of immense weariness flitting across his face. "I'm sorry. I'm too drunk." Her father's voice was thin. He pushed back from the table with shaking hands, making Karin jump. "I'm going to take a walk. Sober up." He paused before he made it out the door. There was a tightness around his mouth like he was going to apologize again, but then he shook his head and stumbled out into the night.

Karin stayed seated after the shock and disappointment left her system. Pressure mounted behind her burning eyes, but she wouldn't cry. Not about this. She scowled at the glass of whiskey on the table. It wasn't fair.

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Karin wasn't sure what compelled her to go to her father's room after he left, whether it was curiosity or anger or something else, but soon she stood in his room, her hands clenched into fists by her sides. The chamber was spartan and neat. The walls were painted a crisp white and a double bed was shoved like an afterthought underneath the single window. Her father's extra suit jacket hung in the corner.

A shape underneath the bed caught her eye, and she dragged it out into the light, curiosity coiling in her stomach. It was a large wooden chest, fashioned from solid oak and covered in intricate carvings of flowers and animals. Red undertones glimmered in the wood as Karin raised the lid. Inside were photo albums layered over letters, newspaper clippings, and old tickets. She thumbed through the photographs first. She found one of her father with his arm around a smiling, dark-haired woman that she recognized as her mother. They looked young and confident, like people from a magazine with their bright grins and rosy cheeks. Karin stared at the picture for a long time.

Underneath the photo albums were stacks of women's clothes and then, beneath the clothes, a neatly folded square of brown and grey material. It felt like silk beneath Karin's touch, covered by short, closely-packed fur that felt almost oily to the touch. She laid it out across the ground, surprised by its significant weight, and watched it pool like a spill of ink across the wooden floor.

The edges of the material were ragged and unfinished, but the shape of it was recognizable. She had thought it was a blanket at first, but she could see now that the material was fashioned into a long, crude, winter coat. If she shrugged it on over her shoulders, she imagined that it would reach past her feet to brush the floor. The coat was light grey with warm undertones, the fur turning golden in the light, and clustered across the back and down the sleeves were darker spots mottling the coat like clouds against a stormy sky. When Karin leaned in to get a better look, a dry, sharp smell met her nose. There was something wild and almost dangerous about the smell, something that cut through the dust and musty scent of the old chest, but it was the delicate scent of the ocean clinging to the fur that made Karin realize what kind of coat it was.

It was a sealskin.



Karin didn't mention the sealskin coat to anyone. Talking about it would mean admitting that she had broken her father's trust. And there was another, selfish part of her that needed to keep it to herself. Karin didn't truly have any memories of her mother. Sometimes she thought she did, when she caught the scent of crystallized sugar from the bakery or watched a woman shake out her long hair, but the associations were so vague she might have imagined them. No, Karin didn't remember her mother, but the villagers did. Rumors were like that, grabbing onto the slightest weakness and holding tight.

The rumors went like this: the day after Karin's mother had passed away, when Karin was just two years old, the island had experienced one of the worst storms in recent memory. A fishing boat was lost at sea, and the shores had been destroyed beyond recognition. There had always been something strange about Karin's mother, it was said, but it wasn't right that a healthy woman should take ill so suddenly. People wondered about Karin's father, also, who had always been a little too quiet and withdrawn. And ever since the storm, they spoke of Karin's mother whenever the weather worsened or a ship went down. Whether her death had been from natural causes or not, she had left a grieving husband and a baby behind; that was more than enough unfinished business to fuel a curse. As the years went by and Karin grew older, the story faded to nothing but a vague legend. Yet the memory of the tale was always lurking just beneath the surface, ready to be drawn out again.



Ten years after the death of Karin's mother, and a month after she found the wooden chest beneath her father's bed, a drowned man washed up on the rocks on the western edge of the island. For the first time in years, the village was lit up by stories and rumors once again. There was no point in explaining that the man had slipped and fallen and that the ocean had done the rest. It was much more interesting to believe in something more.

Karin didn't trust these stories, or so she tried to tell herself. She didn't believe that ghostly sailors marched out of the ocean on moonless nights, or that seal women danced in the caves beneath the headlands, their skins left in a pile on the sand. She certainly didn't believe that murdered souls lingered to exact revenge. Folk superstitions like these were popular throughout the islands as unsettling stories to be told around the fireplace, but that didn't mean that they should be taken seriously. Yet the feeling that rose in Karin's stomach when she left school that evening was like one of those tales, out-of-focus, strange, and dangerous.

The feeling lingered until she made it down the winding stone steps to the cove beneath the village. It was quiet there save for the sea lapping against the shore. The lights from the houses above were hidden by the mossy cliffs, giving the place a remote and sheltered feeling. Karin tossed her backpack into the sand by her feet, sat down, and curled her arms around her knees for comfort. The cove looked strange and unfamiliar in the twilight, the fog broken by the shadows of fishing boats.

When Karin was much younger, she used to come down to the cove with her father. He would sit for hours on his little folding chair with his eyes fixed on some indeterminate point just off the shore while Karin poked through tide pools and turned over stones. She wasn't sure when he had stopped, but it hurt to think that it may have had something to do with her. That she might have made it happen just by being herself. Maybe she was the one who was cursed. Her hands curled into fists on her knees as she tried to push down the ugly bitterness burning in her chest.

A splash interrupted her thoughts. Looking up, she saw that a sleek brown head had broken through the water just off the shore. Karin jumped to

her feet. Her heart pounded in her throat. She'd seen seals during the hunting season, of course, but she'd never gotten this close to one. They usually stayed away from the village cove, preferring the rugged inlets around the western edge of the island. Karin and the seal watched one another for several minutes before it disappeared beneath the water. A grin tugged at the corner of Karin's mouth. She imagined, for a moment, that there had been a spark of understanding in the seal's black eyes. Karin sucked in a mouthful of the bracing, salty air, lungs fuller than they'd been in months. She spent the next few hours wandering the shore hoping to catch another glimpse of the seal, but she never did.

When Karin returned to the house a few hours later, the hem of her pants damp with seawater and her pockets heavy with treasure collected from the shore, the lights were off and the house was quiet. The smoke rising in a lazy spiral from a cigarette burning in a glass was the only sign that her father was home. Karin paused in the hallway outside his room on the way up to bed and watched the sliver of light that escaped from the crack under the door. She waited for a pause in the steady ruffling of pages, conscious of her disheveled appearance and fever-bright cheeks, but the door remained shut. Eventually, she tip-toed past, pretending the hollow feeling in her stomach wasn't from disappointment and that she hadn't wished, just for a second, that her father would have noticed that she had been gone.



In January, a few days after Karin's thirteenth birthday, a woman from the mainland took the empty room in the house. Emilia was tall and willowy and smelled of books and mint toothpaste, but she paid the rent and got on with Karin's father, who had met her at the hotel some months back. They often talked late into the night, their voices floating up through the floorboards of Karin's room and sending her to sleep.

Emilia was an ornithologist. She wasn't unkind, but Karin found the combination of her moth-eaten sweaters and expensive shoes a little ridiculous. She never got used to hearing the insect-like clicks of Emilia's shoes on the hardwood floors, or to passing her in the hallway in the middle of the night. But her father was happy, perhaps happier than she had ever seen him. There was a new energy to his steps and she even caught him smiling now and then, furtive grins half-hidden beneath the shadow of his beard.

The months passed uneventfully, and the silver winter thawed into a pale blue spring. Karin no longer came home to an empty house. Emilia was there now, ready to greet her or to ask her if she needed help with her schoolwork. Sometimes, she pried Karin for stories about the island. "I've got a real interest in folklore, see," she would say earnestly, hands clasped under her chin, and she wouldn't even get upset when Karin would just shake her head.

Karin heard them talking about her one afternoon, about how she wasn't doing well in school and how she never brought home any friends. About how she wasn't coping. "I'm doing what I can," her father said. "Holding down the hotel job, keeping my head down. But it isn't working. There's been bullying, I think." He had sounded awkward talking about it in his gruff

and simple way, like he couldn't find the right words. Karin had stayed just outside the door. The same dangerous feeling she'd felt that day after school had come over her so suddenly that she had felt sick. After that day, it had been weeks before she could look her father or Emilia in the eye.

Later, on a fine weekend in May, Karin and her father took Emilia out to the headlands so that she could photograph the petrels nesting in the cliff-side. Karin walked next to them on the narrow, seaward path, keeping her hands warm in her pockets. The salty, bracing wind stirred the grass next to the trail and whipped her dark hair against her face. She watched Emilia's delicate hands flutter around the strap of her binoculars like curious birds, the light bringing out glints of gold in her curly hair.

"This is incredible. Just incredible," said Emilia. She waved her hand at the landscape.

"First nice day we've had in months." replied Karin's father in his soft, incongruous voice. It surprised people to hear that voice come from such a large man. "It's rained a lot this spring."

"Well, it's lovely. It's funny, but I forget sometimes just how picturesque it is." Emilia said. "It's good to be reminded. I'm sure you are used to it now, having grown up here," the last bit she said over her shoulder, looking at Karin expectantly.

"I guess so," Karin allowed, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. She tried to remind herself that Emilia was trying, and that it wasn't her fault that they had barely spoken, but it was rather hard. There was a moment's awkward silence, and then Karin's father cut in, steering the conversation to the bird perched on a fence post a few feet off the trail, a topic that quickly diverted the attention away from Karin, much to her relief.

A gust of wind chose that moment to sweep across the bluff. The breeze carried with it a sour, decaying smell, a scent that made Karin's eyes narrow and set the hair at the back of her neck on end. Neither Emilia nor her father noticed, too caught up in their conversation, but there was a subtle pall in the air that hadn't been there just minutes before, and she frowned. Karin had the strangest feeling, then, a subtle prickling at the base of her skull that made the little hairs there stand on end. It was like a loose thread in the back of her mind, ready to unravel completely at the slightest tug.

Karin tuned back into the conversation, watching as Emilia opened her mouth to reply. However, she stopped before the words escaped, her eyes going glassy and vacant. Karin followed her gaze. The sea had drawn into view over the bluff, and she saw a wash of color staining the sea scarlet. Karin didn't have to look down out to know what she would see just below, but she did anyway, morbidly curious despite herself.

Some fifty feet beneath the bluff was the shore, a spit of gray sand and rocks. For about fifty feet in both directions, the bodies of dozens of seals were laid out across the sand in neat rows, their guts washing into the sea, while jacketed men picked through the carcasses like brightly colored ravens. The shallow water was packed with the boats that must have driven the seals to shore, battered white fishing vessels and trawlers mingling with smaller skiffs and personal crafts. Arranged in an unbroken line, the boats were like a net drawing in on the island, slow and purposeful.

Karin registered the wet, thick sound of retching and turned to see Emilia crouched by the side of the path with her hands braced on her knees. "Sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't expect that. Christ."

Karin's father frowned. The lines on his face stood out in the harsh sunlight. "I wouldn't have brought you around this way if I'd known. They don't usually start this until midsummer, or June at the earliest. The fair weather must have pushed it forward." His voice was steady but his hand trembled when he ran it across his chin.

Karin patted Emilia's back. Perhaps it was because Karin felt a little sick herself, but she felt suddenly sorry for her. "You okay, Emilia?"

"I'm fine." Emilia said, though she sounded hoarse. She straightened, adding, "Really. It's a tradition, right? I read about it before I moved out here. I was just surprised. I've... never seen the ocean turn red like that. And the smell--"

"—Never mind that, now. Let's go home," said Karin's father, but he looked over his shoulder one last time before they turned away from the sea.

By the time they made it back to town, the streets were bustling with people. The scent of blood, sharp and metallic, persisted in the air. Shouts echoed up from the shore and mixed with the general clamor. Seal hunts always did carry an air of festivity about them. Emilia had recovered from her earlier sickness enough to smile around at the crowd, her brown eyes bright and curious. Once, she looked over at Karin's father, put a soft hand on his arm, but his whole body was tense and he did not return the gesture. Karin thought that she understood. She could not get the image of the seals out of her head, and the bustling noise of the crowd had taken on a discordant, too-close quality that made her head throb.

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That night, she lay awake thinking of hidden chests and curses that sent the men of Mikladalur to watery graves. When she fell asleep at last, she dreamed of sealskins and a scarlet sea.



The end of the seal hunt brought a string of terrible weather on its heels. For several days, huge waves crashed against the cliffs. There was no question of making it down to the water, and Karin's father was forced to postpone work rather than risk the journey by ferry. The house felt almost too crowded. Karin passed the time in her room, reading and rereading her books. Sometimes, she took out her old collection from the tin box on her shelf but she couldn't find the same joy she once had in trying to match stories to the objects. The rusty matchbox was just that, and the silver necklace that had once been so fine now just looked cheap and water-damaged.

There was an air about her father during the week that she did not recognize, and it left her bereft and unsure of how to read him. There was a warm, fond quality to her father's gaze whenever it fell upon Emilia, and Karin noticed smile lines at the edges of his eyes that had never been there before.

They were too private and intimate, these glances, and it made Karin feel like an intruder whenever she was in the same room.

So, she avoided the warm glow of the kitchen whenever she could and shied away from her father's clumsy attempts to talk to her. In the comfort of her own space, insulated by the rain tapping against the window and the distant crashing of the waves, her thoughts turned hazy and indistinct, a disjointed river of memory and daydreams. But she always came back to the image of the sealskin coat locked away in the carved wooden chest beneath her father's bed. She wanted to see it again, giddy with the knowledge that the coat had belonged to her mother.

A wild, dangerous story formed in her mind, a story that harkened back to the tales she'd heard as a small child, tales of seal women and curses and magic. There, in the silence of her room and with nothing but time to spend with her thoughts, it didn't seem ridiculous at all to believe that the sealskin coat could be the key to her mother's death.

When the storm finally broke five days later, and the day dawned cold but clear, the light threw everything into stark relief. The villagers emerged from their houses with haggard, nervous looks, as if they expected another storm to sweep in at any moment. There were murmurs at school again that afternoon, of curses and revenge, which Karin tried her best to ignore, but the slow, burning anger she felt indicated that she was not successful.

When she got home that evening, slamming the door behind her with touch more force than necessary, Emilia stopped her with a hand to her arm before she could make it upstairs and into the comfort of her room.

"I need to talk to you about something." Emilia wore an odd, too-bright smile, but her eyes were tight, almost nervous. It put Karin on edge, and she tensed. Emilia barreled on, as if determined to get it over with. "I know this is going to come as a shock, but your father and I have been talking. He means a lot to me and, well, so do you. I hope you know that."

*She laid it out across the ground, surprised by its significant weight, and watched it pool like a spill of ink across the wooden floor* ❧

"I don't want to talk about this right now." Karin said. She rocked back on her heels.

Emilia sighed. "I know. And I'm sorry. But this is important. I don't want you to think that we went behind your back. I know things have been hard for you, since your mother, well... I just wanted you to know that you can talk to me. I want to be here for you, and I hope that I will be now. You see, your father and I have decided to get married."

At this, Karin's mouth opened, perhaps in protest, but Emilia spoke again before she could find the right words. "I know that it's sudden, but we've been talking about it for a while. Your father wanted me to go to you first, but he'll be home any minute, and then we can all have a conversation. I just want to make sure that this is alright with you..."

But Karin stopped listening. Her ears buzzed and energy coursed through her. Before Emilia could react, Karin pushed past her and sprinted up the stairs, taking them three steps at a time. In her father's room, she dragged the chest out from under the bed, wincing at the screech it made against the floor. Her hands shook as she riffled through the contents, not stopping until

she found what she needed. When she came back downstairs, she held the sealskin coat to her chest. Her father stood just inside the door, hanging his grey suit jacket on the hook. Karin didn't know what Emilia had said to him, or what he was thinking, but it didn't matter. What was important was the way he gasped when he saw her. Saw what she was carrying.

"Wait," he started, holding out a hand.

"No. I hate you, I *hate* you. You kept me from her, I know you did." Karin said, the words tripping over themselves. Her anger was too thick for her to explain that he had kept her from knowing the memory of her mother, but it seemed she didn't need to, because her father stumbled back against the wall as though she had pushed him. She saw all the confirmation she needed in his eyes; they were full of a guilt so strong that she felt it, too, in her head and in her chest, making her nauseous. "I should have had this the whole time. I should have kept it. It's mine, and you kept it from me," Karin said, clutching the coat to her chest with shaking arms.

"Karin, please wait." her father started. She had never seen him look so panicked, and that more than anything else made her feel unmoored and lost. "Just let me explain--"

But she was gone before he finished his sentence.



Karin ran. She ran until her chest was burning and her feet were sore, until the wind whipped her face raw and froze the tracks of moisture on her cheeks. She hadn't realized she was crying. The sealskin coat was heavy and so she pulled it on, the heavy pelt draping over her shoulders. The soft, dappled sleeves were so long that they fell past her wrists. Disappointment rose in her like a wave when nothing happened; when she glanced down, her hands looked just the way they always had: small and human with purpled, bitten nails. She wasn't sure what she had expected. Karin tried to remember all the stories she had ever heard about seal women, but she didn't know where the daughters fit in. The stories weren't about them.

She didn't notice when the weather changed, the wind picking up and turning the tips of the waves to froth. It started to rain fat drops that ran down the coat and splashed into the sand. Karin edged closer to the water until it soaked through her shoes. The steps leading up the cliffs were shiny and wet from the sea, and she blinked, unsure of what to do next. Surely her father and Emilia were looking for her by now. Suddenly, she felt foolish and lost and exactly her age, stuck with her feet sinking into the wet sand, the sealskin coat a freezing, sodden weight across her back.

Before she turned to make her way over to the stairs, a wave caught her in the back and sent her sprawling. Her mouth fell open in a shout of surprise as she disappeared beneath the surface. It was so cold that she couldn't breathe, couldn't even think.

The ocean was always hungry. People often forgot this, those who lived by the sea most of all. Karin wasn't prepared for the sheer force of the current or how it crushed the air from her lungs. She shivered, flailing and clawing through the water. Her chest felt as though it was being squeezed by

a giant fist and her vision turned dark around the edges. Just before she lost consciousness, though, something strange happened; there was a seal in the water next to her, swimming under her arm and supporting her weight. Her head popped above the surface and she gasped in a lungful of the freezing air. The rain was falling so hard now that it caught in her lashes, blurring her vision, and she could make out little more than the dark shapes of more seals swimming beside her.

The sealskin coat weighed her down, soaking up so much water that it nearly dragged her below the surface. A wave hit her face, choking her. In her panic, she wrestled her arms free of the coat. She intended to hold on to one sleeve, but her numb hands wouldn't obey. Karin stretched out an arm, trying to reach the coat before the current dragged it away, but it was no use. It was all she could do to keep herself afloat. She made one last, desperate lunge, the movement driving her away from the seal, before she was sucked beneath the water again.

Opening her eyes to the sharp sting of salt, Karin stared into the depths. It was dark there and oddly peaceful, an enchanting blue-green world shot through by twisting strands of kelp. Her body ached, exhausted from the stress of trying to stay alive. Karin curled her numb arms up to her chest. Bubbles drifted lazily past her nose, rising to meet the faint light from the surface. Some twenty feet below, she caught sight of the dark shape of the sealskin coat, growing smaller and smaller, until she couldn't make it out at all. Perhaps the lack of oxygen was affecting her perception, because a sense of calm was spreading through her limbs. Karin drifted. It wouldn't be so bad to stay here, she thought, where the water was so cold that it blotted out everything else.

She was pulled from her paralysis by a tug on the back of her windbreaker, and she gasped out another mouthful of bubbles. The seal towed her up and out of the water, until her head broke the surface and she could take in a breath of the bracing, briny air. She wrapped her arms around the seal's powerful neck, shivering violently and blinking stinging seawater from her eyes. Two more seals drew up next to her, and together they swam with Karin past the edge of the cliffs and beyond the jagged rocks, until she could drag herself hand-over-hand through the shallows. The seals stayed beside her, penning her in and so close that she felt the puff of their breath against her hair, only moving away when she finally reached the shore.

Karin collapsed in the gritty sand, pulling in great mouthfuls of oxygen to fill her burning chest. Tired and soaked, she hardly reacted when she heard the seals begin to swim back out into the ocean, their departures marked by quiet splashes. Just before they left, Karin swore that she felt the gentle touch of a wet, freezing nose against her temple. A sharp smell, a mix of animal and the sea, prickled her nose. Then there was nothing but the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks, and Karin was alone.

Lifting her head from the sand, she let out a wobbly, incredulous laugh that quickly turned into a hacking, violent cough. The sky was still leaden and overcast, the spring air bitter and sharp against her bare skin, but the rain had abated to a light drizzle. Taking a deep breath, she brushed her soaking hair back from her eyes and silently willed her hands to stop shaking. The win-

dows of the houses up on the cliff winked at her from the mist like ghostly beacons, and after a minute, she forced herself to her aching feet. Karin started walking, leaving behind her the hungry, dark sea and the vague shadows of creatures moving just below the surface.

# Hill Country

*Tessa Wetherbee*

*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit [www.honorsjournal.com](http://www.honorsjournal.com).*

NORTH EMERGED FROM a bend in the wooded road, his gait confident and unhurried. Tall and thin, he wore a tattered suit and an expression of polite interest. His hand turned over at his side, unspooling the dark red yarn so that it trailed off into the woods behind him. There was no obvious point where it ended, just a scarlet thread disappearing between white birches.

You could follow it for miles and still not find the end, and there were people who had attempted that before. Not North, for he had no use for looking back, and his youthful curiosity had all but fled him. Turning to the dog trotting dutifully at his side, he struck up a conversation. "I haven't seen a forest this nice in a long time."

The small white dog had no reply for his master, and truly, he was not the talkative sort. North was, but he respected an animal who kept his cards close to his chest, and so he wasn't offended by the silence. The dog was raggedy around the ears, unkempt and shabby but proud of his scraps and scars. In that way, the pair suited one another. They were confident travelers, but like anyone who spends their life on the road with no set destination, they carried a heavy weariness visible in their dusty coats and set shoulders.

As they walked, birdsong filled the woods, night calls of thrush and redwing blackbirds mingling with the croaking of frogs and the rustling of the underbrush. It truly was a beautiful forest, perfect for having a smoke and a cup of tea as you balanced an open book upon your knee. It had been a long time since North had spent a whole afternoon at such a task. If he hadn't been busy, he would have wandered off and found a cool, shady place by the creek where he could sit and spread out his lunch. Feed the dog slices of apple from his palm, talk about anything that he wanted.

Sighing, North cast another appreciative glance around. When he approached the single-lane, rural highway, he turned and followed the gravel shoulder to wherever it would lead him. Soon enough, he came upon a little boy where he was huddled on the side of the road, one hand raised to protect his head.

Looking up at the sky where it hung low and brambly gray above them, North nodded in understanding. His eyes lit with respect. "You're a smart kid, aren't you?" said North. "I'd give it about ten minutes until it starts pouring." The boy didn't notice North or the white dog; he just kept his head turned down the road as he shuffled from foot to foot in the chilled air. It was almost fully night now, and the trees were crisped red around the edges, the

season of decay beginning. It was perfect timing for North. He'd always enjoyed traveling in the autumn.

"I hope for your sake that you won't be out here too long. Looks like it might get kind of cold tonight. This should help, one moment," he said, bending down until they were of a height as he unspooled the yarn. He folded the red thread into a loop that he tied carefully around the boy's finger. The boy didn't react, which was to be expected. North was good at this part, one of the best. He knew all the tricks to being discreet, and he could tie a better knot than just about anyone, the kind that wouldn't unravel after the years and distances wrought their damage.

*His voice broke on the name,  
and she remembered  
thinking how absurd it was to  
have a grown man breaking  
down on her porch ❧*

North exhaled, watching the boy with a frown. The child's posture was closed off and wary, and the way he was protecting his head made North a little sad, seeing so much awareness in such a young person. And the boy was unimaginably young compared to him. Not that you could tell that by looking at North, as his face was unlined and smooth. It was only his eyes that gave him away, clear brown in color and filled with an intelligence that suggested there was very little that he hadn't seen.

"It's nothing more than a connection. Don't worry." assured North, face softening with concern. His words fell on deaf ears, but he wasn't saying them for anyone but himself so it didn't matter. "I just need to tie off the other end. When I do, someone will come and help you." He cast a wistful look down at the thread where it disappeared into the woods, the deep ruby color standing out before being swallowed by the forest. Until he found the person who was meant to hold the other end, it could be anybody. It was a bit like walking a tightrope in the dark, except that North knew enough to keep moving forward, knew that there was someone waiting on the other side and when to stop looking for them. He smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners, and he patted the thread at his side. "These things always work out, somehow."

Turning away from the boy, North whistled to his dog. It was time to move on.



Eliza sat on the front porch her old white farmhouse, sipping a steaming cup of tea. She liked wide porches like this one and considered no home complete without one. She needed a place to just sit and contemplate, to cast judgment on the comings and goings around her. It was a lovely evening, freshly minted and soft, the air filled with the smell of leaf mold and hay. The yard was peaceful now that the noise of the busy afternoon was over, and the calls of the last summer crickets were only just dwindling to a gentle hum.

Talking the latest news from town was a big bellied man named Bob Jones. He was sitting in the other lawn chair, airing his feet out by dangling them from the edge of the porch. Jones liked hanging around Eliza well enough, even though she could complain about anything, including him. Mainly it was his tattoos and rural accent that she took issue with, which was ironic considering she had same accent and had been on the sharp end of a needle at a few points in her life.

"There's an Amber Alert out," said Jones. "Some kid from down in Logan, I heard." "That's awful." Eliza replied. "I swear, the police around here have got a dreadful incompetence to them. They need a fire to waft smoke up into their Goddamned noses before they get anything done." Her voice rose at the last part as she worked herself up. She could ramble on unstopped when she got going on the topic of how the facilities in Hocking County didn't run like they should and how everything was just about going to shit these days.

"They'll find him. Kid probably ran away from home. God knows I did that a few times as a kid."

"Well, me too. But it's different nowadays." Eliza said, pulling the pale blue quilt up underneath her chin. There was a thinking quality to the slow breeze playing with the stiff curls around her temples. She stared out across the darkening yard, the familiar dips of the land and the red barn where it crouched low over the field. "Used to be so nice this time of year. I don't know what it is, but I don't wanna go look 'round like I used to. Don't much want to get up," she said. Jones swiveled his head to look at her. In the dim light, he appeared hewn from stone, wet mouth the only supple line on him, his cheeks furred with sparse reddish hair. He took another swig from the bottle resting against his thigh.

*They could sense how much history lay mired in these fields, sitting deep in the furrows of the earth. So many strangers waiting to meet and tragedies yet to come, resting in a bed as innocent as the folds of a child's sleeping face ❧*

"Used to be? It's still nice out here." There was no response, just Eliza twisting the quilt in her worn-down hands. It was nice, she knew that. Even now the sight of the home she knew so well was a warm hand against her forehead. And yet she was tired, bone tired, as though she'd been working her entire life. The thought of walking out between the sweet-smelling trees held no appeal. The barn, once her favorite place, was too thick with nostalgia now for her to slip in between the heavy doors.

Eliza did her best, and no one could say she didn't work hard because she'd kept Skipping Stone running all these years out of sheer stubbornness. She'd never move away from Hocking County, for all that catching a glimpse of the same horizon out of her window each morning made her throat tighten. Her son, Trevor, used to talk about moving away to Cincinnati or some other city, bragging about how he'd get himself a good job and maybe try things out on his own for a while. Of course, he hadn't grown up the way that she had so it was easier for him to imagine a future that wasn't tied to Skipping Stone.

It was different for Eliza. She felt the land like it was a giant turning over and bearing her up. On good days, she sat out in the air and felt it breathing all around her, and during the bad times it was a weight bearing her back down into the bedrock. She had tried explaining it to Trevor once, but he'd just blinked his large brown eyes at her and laughed, saying that she was too stuck in her old ways. He passed away before he got to prove her wrong.

*Five Years Earlier*

She heard about the accident on a Tuesday in August, the morning only just beginning to grow hot and stagnant. She was startled out of her sleep by a knock on her door, and blinked in surprise to find Sheriff Malone

standing there, feet planted and face grave. She knew something was wrong immediately because of how diminished he looked in the half-light, his khaki hat clutched to his chest with one trembling hand. His shoulders were bowed inwards and his lips were pursed, blue eyes fixed somewhere over her shoulder. She'd known this man since she was a little girl, used to beg for rides on his shoulders, and now he couldn't even look at her.

"What is it?" she said, her voice still thick with sleep. It was early, too early to deal with whatever was happening.

"Eliza." Malone scrubbed a hand down his face, eyes hollow. "It's Trevor."

His voice broke on the name, and she remembered thinking how absurd it was to have a grown man breaking down on her porch.

[...]

# Best Friend

*Patrick M. Heffernan*

THE BOY, WHEN he was young, younger than you or me, received a gift. It could have been a ball, a water gun, a compass, a bike, or anything else really, but it does not matter. It does not matter because the gift was easily discarded into the garage to gather dust and deflate into a forgotten land along with all the other gifts he had received over his lifetime. Gifts were almost always useless to him. If he got a ball, who would he play with? If he got a bike, who would he ride with? If he got a book, who would he discuss it with? The boy had a problem: while he wished to explore the world and engage in its many pleasures, he could not do it alone, and alone was all he had.

When the boy was young, younger than you or me, he received a gift. The gift itself does not matter. What matters is the box it came in. The box that housed the ball or the bike or the compass or the water gun. The box made of cardboard, a dull brown. The box that, in absence of others, became his friend.

In the boy's opinion, the problem with the world was that it was already full of amazing things. It had waterfalls seven stories high and mountains full of elk and bears. It had cities with millions of people and ranches with only three. It had games and books and movies and paintings and language and rules. It had rules. Rules that kept him from exploring on his own.

The box had no rules. It had no color. It had no books or movies or paintings. It had no language or people or cities. It had no mountains or waterfalls that were seven stories high. It, in essence, had nothing. It, in essence, was entirely his.

After opening his gift, he ran to his room with the cardboard box, folding it into things of wonder as he went. He folded it into the cape of a musketeer as he zoomed up the stairs, feet pounding on the hardwood and hair blowing in the breeze. He ran along the tops of buildings and leapt across bridges, searching for his next adventure.

He folded it into a helmet as he dove into his bed, hiding behind his blankets as if it were a bunker and he were at war. He peered over the bunker and recoiled instantly, scared of the enemy to come. He was trapped there with no place to run, no ammunition, and no support. In his world though, he needed no support. He took off his cardboard helmet and folded it into a katana. He leapt into battle, dodging bullets here and there, swinging his sword wildly, and slaying his enemies one by one. He fought until they were no more. He fought until that world was no more.

He folded the sword into a cardboard galleon on which he braved the stormy sea. Salt water splashed into his eyes, stinging like nothing he had ever felt before. He was the captain, spinning the wheel round and round, fighting for survival. He was also a prisoner below deck, scared out of his mind, fighting for survival. Water began to leak through in the cracks of the hull. He was trapped with no chance of making it out alive. This was it for him.

So, he folded the cardboard so his cell was on land, not in the stomach of a ship. He tried to escape but the bars were just too strong. He tried to slip through the bars because he was small, but, unfortunately, he wasn't that small. He needed something to cut the bars. He folded the cardboard back into his sword, but alas, it was too large to fit. Needing something even smaller, he tore off part of the sword, forming a small file. That seemed to do the trick! He sawed until the bars fell with a satisfying *clank*. He escaped past the guards and into the open air. The world was his.

The boy continued in this manner for as long as he could, folding and tearing the piece of cardboard to fit his world. His parents called to him to come eat, but how was he supposed to leave the ice palace over which he now ruled? He folded the board into a snowman and a toboggan. He tore the cardboard until it became the tusks of a walrus and many itchy-bitsy pieces of snow. He laughed as his sled flew down the hill, spraying ice crystals into his face. He went over a jump and crashed onto his floor. The snow fell from the sky and covered the hardwood with little brown scraps.

The boy continued in this manner for as long as he could, and so more and more little scraps fell gently to the floor.

When he reached the top of his sledding hill once again, he noticed his sled was gone. He frowned as he looked around at the snow-ridden land, searching for something, no matter how small, that he could fold. He found nothing of this sort. He only found little cardboard scraps.

His parents called for him again. This time, after he searched through every nook and cranny he could, he listened and went to dinner with his shoulders in a slump.

As he left the room, he slammed the door, sending the little brown pieces flying high through the air, crystallizing into intricate little flakes and falling back down onto his sledding hill, ready for another run.

# Worship

*Kira Altman*

THERE WAS A man who played with stones. He meticulously smoothed them with his fingers and set them in a circle around his crossed legs, ever growing and expanding and spiraling away from the solitary figure in the center. The man had hunched shoulders and sat rocking back and forth in his circle of stones – endlessly polishing until they gleamed. Water dripped around him, the sound echoing off of the stones and propagating through the atmosphere until solemn silence once again took hold in the still, breathless air.

He was covered in dust.

There was a girl who played with fire. She danced in the sparks and turned her small face towards the heat and closed her eyes and tilted her head back and hoped that someone was watching her. She hid her smoke-drawn coughs with her hands and grew increasingly bold as the sky grew darker: she drifted towards the center of the inferno and darted in and out of the flames and wove her hands together as her fingers entwined with the tongues of flame in a frantic dance. Her hair flew behind her as it struggled to keep up with the vigorous power of her movements. Heat suffused her golden skin.

Occasionally, she would look over her shoulder.

There was a boy who played with feathers. He found them among the dead leaves and carried them by the stem and placed them gently in the sack made from the fold in his too-big shirt that he clutched tightly with his fists. He brought the softest ones to his cheek for a brief caress before his eyes opened. Endlessly he gathered those that he found and he was careful to glance behind him for the smallest tufts that succeeded in making an escape from his grasp. His gaze drifted to the tops of the trees, his eyes straining to catch movement among the canopy.

His footsteps made no sound upon the soft ground.

There was a woman who played with sand. She cascaded the ever-shifting dust over shaking hands, smoothing the wrinkles in her skin with the fine grains. Soft sunlight glinted off of the whites of her eyes, and though the sand swirled around her face, she made no attempt to close them. She sat, a pillar that remained motionless amid the dance of the wind as she slowly sank into the warm embrace that promised sleep for her restless hands.

Drops of blood painted the sand a vibrant red.

There was a bird that flew endless circles in the sky. It paid little attention to the shriek of the wind, or to the feathers that were torn away as it soared, or to the rise and fall of the sun. Cold eyes with a gaze sharp enough to break mountains scoured the endless surface of the world with unceasing vigilance. Its hunger insatiable, it soared ever onward, possessed by a singular desire to survive; and it cared not for the creatures far below that spent their lives playing.