



A CAPPELLA ZOO

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Selected as especially noteworthy contributions to this issue:

Fiction: *Phantoms*, KATE VELGUTH

Poetry: *Eohippus in the White Cube*, MEGAN BOATRIGHT

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Zoomorphism, or the Fur Hat

IVY GOODMAN

It happened downtown in December, the cold shopping season. At the entrance to Palmer's, glass doors fanned shoppers inward to the bright perfumes and out again, into the traffic exhaust. On the sidewalk, a volunteer in red rang a maddening bell, swinging his forearm, urging passersby to fill his kettle with coins. The city's steam heat rose through the sidewalk grates as if from kettles boiling underground, and I was almost hot, standing there in my winter coat and arguing with Joanne. People bumped us with boxy shopping bags and scowled. "Girls! You're in the way!" But we weren't girls.

I was twelve, she was sixteen, and she was wearing the fur hat she had just bought.

"Let me see it."

"I said no."

"Aren't you sweating?"

"Not at all." She raised her chin and preened, stroking the fur on the side of her head.

You can't change back, but I didn't know that then. I was changing, too. The process doesn't happen all at once, like defloration. It's more like puberty, with which it coincides. It's also lifelong, intensifying, concentrating, until at your peak, in middle age, you have never been more like yourself. You are. Ferocious, let's say. Or terrified. But that December afternoon, I thought I saw Joanne changing right in front of me.

"You're just jealous," she said.

"I'm not."

"Right. Save up and buy your own."

At Palmer's hat counter, I should have discouraged her when she admired herself. But I had turned away from the display case and Joanne's dizzying reflection in the swinging oval frame. The elegant clerks said, "Oh, that one suits you. Very becoming." Afterwards, hadn't they snickered together at the cash drawer? Wasn't the man in a topcoat who angled past us just then also laughing behind his hand? The hat was a thick hood, padded inside, covering her ears and tying beneath her chin in a ribbon bow. On the outside, every hair in the coarse brown fur stood outstretched, as if hypnotized by a static charge. She looked like an animal with a naked human face.

"Please, Joanne, take it back. Get a refund now." I couldn't tell her what I saw. She wouldn't have believed me if I did. I would have just hurt

her doubly with an insult she would have accused me of making up. "Don't prance like that. Don't pretend."

"Pretend what?"

I couldn't explain. Pretend to be pretty when you're grotesque? Not that I was pretty, either. But I already knew that being visible was my greatest vulnerability. How different we were and are. And yet we share a resemblance. In the style of rudimentary cartooning, an inverted triangle can be used to represent us both: sharp chin, breadth across the eyes and forehead, ears more prominent than most people's. But we were also different, of the genus *Canis* and the genus *Mus*.

Dogs, mice, and *Homo sapiens* share many of the same genes. I guess that's why, when our mother deflected us, we easily found other creatures. Our father vanished when we were very young. In my clearest memory of him, he's frowning at Joanne and me as if we were specimens under glass. He didn't seem to realize we were sentient and staring back.

"It isn't dog fur, is it?"

"What? Of course not!" She twisted her lips and made them thinner. Her human hair, which might have had a softening effect, was hidden, and there was fury in her fur-framed face. I had broken the rules. She must never be offended or opposed.

"Joanne, no, I didn't mean it." I reached out, but she shrugged backward. "I'm sorry. Please, forgive me."

She reared up in her haughty way. "I'm going home."

"Wait, Joanne!"

I suppose I spoiled her with my appeasements. But anyone who came to know her would soon learn that she attacked in rage when threatened and attacked joyously in jest. You had better appease her or give in and play dead.

I hurried after her, slipping between adults in their bulky shouldered coats and running faster through the pockets of fusty heat because the clattering grates below frightened me. Her hat bobbed on, up ahead. At the Market Street crosswalk, where she had to stop, I caught up with her. "Joanne?" Out of breath, I was at her elbow. "Please, Joanne. I'm sorry. Just listen." I tugged her coat sleeve. "Remember that cabled knit hat? You almost bought it, right? Didn't you like it?"

She dignified to turn her head. "Wool? You're such an idiot on fashion."

Mocking me, she was always happier. She had a special mocking pursed smile, as if she were hiding a morsel in her mouth. She would have laughed harder if I'd explained I was trying to save her. She was the carnivore who'd had me in her jaws countless times and by her grace alone let me live. After all, the Greek root of "sarcasm" means to tear flesh like dogs. Dominate, dominate, dominate must have sounded in her head like that awful handbell, ringing near the door to Palmer's, the same bell that made me more and more afraid.

"But your hat is dangerous."

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"You really are crazy. It's a hat."

I thought I loved her. I was bound to her in the backwards sense of a child's forever, back before I remembered. She cared for me, I know she did. When Mother left us so often alone, Joanne had nurtured me, though understandably, at times, with a rival's malice and impatience.

Other pedestrians had gathered near, also waiting for the signal to walk. Below the curb, in the street, I saw a trickle darkly pulsing toward the storm drain beneath a whiter layer of ice. Could I grab the hat and stuff it down the drain? Even if Joanne grabbed it back in time, she wouldn't want it, wet and bedraggled from the gutter. I reached up. The fur, unexpectedly soft, confused me for a moment, as if I shouldn't hurt it, as if it were already rooted in her scalp. But I was rougher than I realized. Joanne's head jerked sideways, and she jerked it back, shouting, hitting me, bending near, her asymmetric nostrils breathing on me when I fell. To the people pushing past, what a pair we must have been, the angry one with a fur head and the other crying on the sidewalk with her skirt rucked up and a naked tail almost visible under her clothes.

It was already twilight. Joanne had run ahead and left me. Oh, I knew the way. I wasn't afraid of that. I was afraid of the dark, as I'm still afraid, not of the dark comfort behind walls or obsessively near the baseboards but the infinite-seeming dark, out in the open. I didn't know yet that darkness flatters me. Against the dark pavement, my tail, if noticeable at all, is no more remarkable than a torn shoelace or a bit of twine. The intense inner vibration of my fear camouflages me as a moving blur, invisibly pulled along, like a ball of fuzzy dark gray angora yarn.

Down the blocks of narrow houses, closer to home, I was both less and more afraid. But no one saw me, and I was spared the queries, the curiosity and distaste of any neighbors. As usual, Mother would be very late. So I only had to answer to Joanne. She had left the kitchen door unlatched. In the alcove, I hung my coat beside hers. I could see her through the kitchen doorway, standing at the counter, peeling off the foil on that night's food. Her back was to me, and the back of her furry head. "Joanne?" But she refused to speak to me for days.

With every offense, I had to make things all right again because the disequilibrium was like a frenzy inside me. Back and forth, back and forth, I ran after her through those few small rooms where she would locate me precisely, in order to glance away, over my head. I pleaded, I flattered, I declared love. "You're beautiful and so is your hat." Was she fooled? I quivered, watching her. "You're so good, Joanne. Why can't you forgive me?" Her chin was up, but at last she tipped it sideways, made a kissy mouth, and pitied me with soft, forgiving eyes. She, too, played the trick of "love."

The problem was, I couldn't endlessly spin that wheel. I grew up. We both grew up. By nature I am wild and foul. I tear cellophane with my teeth and scatter droppings and grain behind cupboard doors. In attics or

basements, where loose bits of yellow fluff suspiciously blow about, a homeowner might lift a length of batting, tucked for insulation between the joists, and find the underside all roughed up, soiled, curdled, burrowed in, kicked and scratched by tiny paws. That is evidence of a mouse enraged.

We both are mortal, but I am more mortal. A mouse can be stomped, beaten with a broom, baited, snared and starved in glue, or killed traditionally by the wire, as if by guillotine or garrote. Let's say the trap flips, catapulted by the energy of the spring. Up close, the overturned oblong of wood is like a miniature fallen door, knocked off its hinges during an earthquake or an explosion. In the aftermath, the mouse lies in shadow, propping up the door. Its body can't be seen. All that's visible is one extended tiny pink naked nearly human foot.

"Give me the hat!" I'd said. But I couldn't save her. Because she didn't need to be saved.

At night in a distant suburb where half acre lots border the woods, she emerges from around the back of a big dark house and descends the steep bank of the front yard, scuffling for balance. She has the ribs of a whippet, unless she's hungry. Her muzzle has whitened, and bits of dirt and leaves dangle from her legs and underside in tufts. But she's alert. She twitches her ears and turns to stare, unafraid.

A couple out walking has stopped in the middle of the road. There are no other people around, no cars, no street lamps, but at this distance from the city's haze, the sky is lit by the constellations. The woman says, "See that dog? Oh, she's been neglected." She crouches forward. "Here, girl. Aren't you a girl?"

Roughly, the man grabs the woman back. "Don't be stupid. You don't know what she'll do."

The dog lifts her chin and looks away. The couple yield to her; she makes them wait for her to cross. Her high haunches swagger slowly, slowly, and then she vanishes between the trees.

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