

DIAPERS FOR HORSES: AN AUBADE TO A LOST COCKATIEL

by Doug Martin

Elizabeth, I have waited until now to write. Daylong in the hunting grounds between seasons, the trumpet flowers are small twisters finally quitting this world, afterthoughts in the cornstalk shade of October. The townsmen, out of work, have started a day in advance cleaning shit from the horse-drawn street. They are working this morning for money to buy family-bread when the weather turns bad. In front of the widow's house, her same blue Orpington hen squawks at them.

The widow has aged since you left. I know you probably don't remember her exactly. But lately she's favored her husband who died last month of cancer—the same skinny faces and bald heads like two dung flies caught mating in a trap. They say that true love does such things.

Last night, the peas I cooked made me ill. And I've been drinking too much, and taking the medicine. Still, I predict that in days the snow will land itself near the trellis-vines which sit in the yard like the rumps of old women across town, parabolas with the edges of lawnchairs. Those women think the end of the world is near. They should be with the widow, giving comfort, but they're not. And besides, since winter is coming, the dying clammy ground cherry makes a good Pilgrim hat for the fieldmouse. We found one the day after you left, at moonset, in the garage, building a nest with toilet paper in the air filter of the car. William said it meant that heavy rains would bring an arsenal of warm weather, and mist like compost in the trees. I dared not tell him he was wrong, or that the Dutchman's Breeches are really misnamed. Those flowers are bats

hanging upside down from a small limb, and are almost dead, too, Elizabeth.

But darling, do be careful. Yesterday, we almost lost Wilbur. William was drunk on Old Crow and accidentally cut his bloodfeather while clipping his wings. I thumbed the feather out and dabbed with flour the broken body. There was blood everywhere on my fingers and face. You should see him—when Wilbur leans to his waterbowl, his face is Maximillian's Sunflower reflected in a cool stream; he doesn't know if he is a cockatiel dreaming he is a man, or a man dreaming he is a cockatiel. Sometimes he flies too close to the lamps, crazy boy that he is. He is more like William than you were, and very mean. He loves William; most of the time, I can't even touch him.

So you say that you still find me lovely? More than William does, I bet. That one day when, with vomit, you courted me on the sofa when no one else was around, I thought you were dying. I looked it up in the book, and the book said you loved me. I scratched your pinfeathers with the goo all over me.

All William does is stay inside all day and complain about the weather. He still calls Wilbur by his wrong name. And Elizabeth, sometimes it's as if I have known no one. And the arthritis is really bad nowadays.

William is inside the townhall with the townboard now, drafting a bill to make the Amish horses wear diapers. Their shit washes down the storm sewers when it rains. Still, it is no great deal. These people....

I pray that you have found another owner, and are living indoors. The snows are expected anytime. Watch the spider plants, if he has some. I know how you love to eat your fill of such things. Tell him to get you some new friends to make things better, and to be sure to clip their wings. Let's pray that you can hide from the cold draft seeping into your fruitbowl; to catch cold now is not a good thing.

With all love from the other cockie, I'll end by saying this—to say that there is no God is to say that we've never been born.

Maybe the end of the world is coming; it's not a good world to be living in, anyway.

Elizabeth, I'm so sorry that we're dying.

I hope this letter gets to you. I've tried to quit smoking since you flew away.

