

Dear England, Please Send Me A Redheaded Boy

by kate hill cantrill

Dear England, Please Send Me A Redheaded Boy I

The way things are now I face Westville when I cook or when I soak my hands to wash a dish. Never heard of something quite so wrong, quite so dreadful—one should most certainly face *water* or *home*, and I should like to face home. Turn it, Old Man, and I will find you some help for the farm.

Dear England,

Please send me a redheaded boy, fire-red, please. We have one girl aflame but the others are stone yellow or dark as the sea. The flames are so easy to spot from afar.

We need help on the farm as our girls, strong they may be, are not quite of age to lift the hay that needs to be lifted. (The one with the man-hands is just a wee kid; give her a few seasons of sun and she'll hitch a small heifer on her back just to prove to her father that she can.)

Right now, I face Westville, but soon I'll face home, if you will only send a red boy to help the old man—that stick-of-a-man I see twiggling by this west-facing window. We'll wait at the Cove for the boat to float into the embrace of our sweet treasure island. In my pockets will be food kept warm by my love.

II

My Mum calls the new boy, Henry. His hair is like sticky candy and it is coarse when I run my fingers through the curls. He calls me

Jenny-Man-Hands; I call him, Henry-Blood-Brother (B.B. for short), because we pricked fingers and touched the red drops, hot to hot, the very day he came. He's almost a man and I'm only nine. Right now I'm his sister, but I plan to be *wife* (don't mention this to him; he thinks I'm only a child).

I taught him to milk—pull the teats of the cow as if she has what he wants and he's taking it back. He won't speak of a mother other than mine. He won't tell of his father because now he loves mine, but he does talk of England, and how something so large can shrink to the glimmer of a small lighthouse flame when a boat pulls away—leaving outstretched arms of water holding on for dear life. Henry-Blood-Brother is now and forever; he is my candle, my love, my sweet brother on fire.

III

The seas are threatening to drown the land; the land is warning of quakes and of cracking like eggs only thicker—rock off a cliff—and they call it *World War*, but my wife calls it *Timely*, says the church had predicted we'd go about now. I say that the cows are not showing a bit of fear and the cows always know—they will shake all of my milk into butter inside them if they sense a mighty storm, or a world-ending war.

I say the New Scots will be surely left standing as there is something special to the ways of our land, to the up and around green velvety hills and the drop-off cliffs where we kill all our sorrows. Furthermore, I am only a very old stick-of-a-man who cannot be bothered with war or of anything outside of here and of Westville where they all buy my milk for the good look of my cows. I'm also too busy to think of such things as Henry is talking of fighting for England and I must turn this house before he sets sail or I'll never quit hearing of facing old Westville when Mum cooks my food or washes my dish. She's a woman of principle, and despite all her moaning the one I will do most anything for.

IV

I have never let go of that English light. I have dreamt, every night, of those arms of water still holding the shoreline—wet fingers clutching with all of their might. I will fight just to see the land I adore. I will swiftly return, though, to this New Scottish cove, where my new father sells milk, my new mother warms food, and my sister will grow until she can lift a small heifer above her brown-as-oak head.

If the seas choose to flood and the land starts to quake, I will think of the gloaming that covers these cliffs where true sorrows are killed. This is how I first saw this land—the waves like great fists, foaming into the rock standing tall, holding Jenny-Man-Hands high on its shoulders. Such a wee kid; she was thrilled to have a brother at last. Should anything happen, should I be taken to the next world, I will leave word that my cap with the pins stuck to it should be sent back to Jenny, with all of my love.

V

They turned me the morning of no shadows—a few days before his soldier's death. My kitchen now faces the mother's home. *My* home is Westville, where I grew to be a grand old tree, where my roots continue to cling like hands to the wormy soil, where it is warm again, moist, and safe as a cave.

As slats, I am weak; damp air makes me warp. The jostle moved my joist span; the crane cracked my beams. This new gust of wind threatens my girders. I am as ill as the mother, who, because of my weakness, has caught the pneumonia and is waiting to die.

I can only allow her to peer from her death-bed through my square bedroom windows, and think of the bright flame-of-a-boy who became a mere flicker on the seas, and was snuffed out in England—a red puff of smoke that floated back up, as up is the only direction smoke knows.

