

CATHLEEN CALBERT

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*Living with Monkeys*

It's not a nice thing.  
Not a nice idea. Or it might be  
a nice idea. Who knows? King Kong.  
Mighty Joe Young. Cheetah.  
But it's not nice, not really.  
Living with monkeys is not pretty.  
Beside the quart of chocolate milk  
(which had to be divided equally,  
my brothers and sister slowly measuring),  
live worms in plastic containers  
were kept bean-dip-style in the refrigerator  
because a monkey likes to eat such things,  
and it pleased my father to please a monkey.  
They were all his idea, after the guinea pigs  
had eaten their offspring, and we had  
lost the parrot, abandoned the alligator.  
Sometimes they can die pretty quickly.  
One did of TB, all animal ethereal,  
looking like Mother Theresa, like Gandhi,  
swaddled in white towels, and rocked  
to its end by my mother who hated it  
and who couldn't stop from weeping  
over this, her last and strangest baby.  
The other thrived on special treats.  
Sometimes my brothers gave it something  
dazzling to eat (a locust or a lizard)  
and would watch happily  
as the littlest hands in the family  
ripped up little living things.  
Oh, they had little hands, little nails,  
eyelids, eyelashes, and their eyes  
beyond reason, human, inhuman.

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Do you know what it's like  
to look a monkey eye to eye?  
A real monkey who likes to bite,  
who will challenge you to fight  
for your food or your right to pass by?  
Why would anyone think this was good?  
How long could this life be withstood?  
When my father parted ways with the family,  
we knew what to do: leave that monkey outside!  
In his cage, he stayed, cold and unclean,  
as we went on our desperate first dates,  
coming home to smoke dope as we sat in the swings  
of the rusty swing set left by a younger family  
in the rented backyard full of yellow thistles  
and anonymous, vicious little dogs  
who liked to fly up and bite  
down our clothes from the clothesline.  
And when the last monkey finally died,  
and the dogs had run away,  
and our cat had run away,  
we knew what to do: we changed  
jobs, changed schools, left friends,  
and moved closer to the ocean,  
so we could start all over again.