

FICTION

FREDERICK WARD

Two Narratives from *Waiting to Be a Crow: The Testimony of Alma Lee Carruthers-Jasper Cousins (A Conjuror Sitting by The Creek)*

1. Crystal

THERE'S RAINBOWS TRAPPED in the crystal hung from the ceiling”

It's true. That's what his mama told him—a little boy, like he were, believes things. He fixed a way for himself to see the rainbows all his life. Took a broomstick, taps the crystal to make it move and watched the rainbow string streamers around the whole room. His mama never tell him it took the sun to make the crystal to work and when on one day it clouded up outside, the boy said:

“I can't see the rainbows.” His mama were put to another tale about their loss. Say,

“O, here comes Old Mother of the Winds, it's her what push a cloud afore the eye in the 'WHERE'S' and chase the rainbow from the ceiling crystal.” She say,

“You lucky, child, you got the rainbow in your house on your ceiling on a clear day,” say, “You even not could put a flashlight on the crystal and keep your faith cause the rainbow would be there for you—yet, then you couldn't move it with the broom-stick and have hold-steady the flashlight. But if asked nicely, that old woman'd do a turn for you and blow the clouds away.”

His mama say this whilst looking through a window too high for the boy to see out—just put together the things come'd in her mouth and say them.

Now this boy would ramble a lot, going off into the woods ‘exploring’ and such ... trying to go further himself—learn things—plus, he had a natural kind of tendency to simple get up and walk away. Since he couldn’t see out the window, he got to the back door, opened it and peered out trying to see an old woman in the Winds. He squinted a lot, and when he were sure he couldn’t see her, he have a reason to go look. (I like to think he looked back for his mama afore he took his decision.) He stepped out into the winter to find Old Mother of the Winds. He crept off the back porch, and crunched a tiny path through a light autumn snow neath a clothes-line of sheets, into the open field back of the house and off towards a barbwire fence at the edge of the field. He run’d calling her:

“Old Mama Winds, come, so I can ask for the Eye in the ‘WHERE’S,’ let me please have the rainbow back.”

He ask it so nicely. And he seen her. Seen her—her hair! The old woman, in hair, would leap afore him every time he called her, “Old Mama Winds!”—leap white and silvery from within the little whiffs of breath that come’d from him with the called. He circled her hair, caught the old woman by the hair and danced till she’d slipped away from him. He called after her and her hair were there again what he caught, danced with and followed till he come’d an echo.

On Sundays the leaves are burned in the fields. It’s say, the child lost Old Mother of the Winds’ hair in the smoke of the leaves, and that the Eye in the ‘WHERE’S’ come’d out and give’d him peace same time as his mama stood the middle of the floor, tapping the crystal in the ceiling with a broomstick, and calling him to come see the rainbow come’d.

At the edge of the field it’s say searchers found a crow hooked and twisted in the barbwire fence, ‘haloed in the sun,’ its oily-looking black wings have rainbows in them.

And further, *The Spirit Sisters*, Ruth and Roselie, have kept this tale alive. That:

*That child carried a small invisible flute,
or ‘flageolet’ tied about him with
rawhide, be for sure. The ancients put it
there so he might find his way back to them.*

*Zuffulo it's called, and used in teaching
birds to sing.*

*"Split the tongue of a crow, Ruth, and it even not
can learn to speak."*

"Go on, Roselie! It will hurt the crow."

"It will not hurt the crow, Ruth."

"You sure, Roselie?"

"Just."

"Continue then."

"It's say a crow come'd up to him whilst he were playing his zuffulo—drawn to the sibilance from the instrument—come'd up to him, in the smoke of the leaves, where he lie twisted in the barbwire. Say, the crow took on the hiss and whistle of the flute and come'd to singing joyfully. In this respect, the Eye in the 'WHERE'S' come'd open and the Mother of the Winds blew the child into it, leaving the crow twisted in the barbwire as a sign."

2. Midoasis Moon (a.k.a. Sockfoot)

THIS PART OF THE ROAD were the darkest. I'd walked it many times afore ... run'd this part of the road laughin' and giggling at my fears ... but ... not that night. The road were full of myself ... every thought I had come'd alive Come'd ... come'd to mind, Sockfoot: tipping all around me touching me and have me itching and scratching.... I wished it were the police near. Huh. I still believed they could be of some service. Old Pointing say, "Reason we as a people be where we be cause we the last people to believe in 'their' justice." It were the first time the Freebridge Police had ever come'd to our community for a wrongdoing afore ... come'd looking for Sockfoot. Sockfoot were a creeper about, and as smooth as what calm water would mirror ... could come-get by you whilst you're *watching* ... *get* intween your hand and the back of your neck whilst you're massaging it ... steal the rings off your fingers whilst you're scratching yourself, steal everything ... take all you got. It put a great fear in the minds of the Freebridge residents. People up all night ... would hide what they have, wouldn't make no difference ... hide it in their hair! Sockfoot'd get it. People so nervous they lie. Say they seen him. He were: crippled hunched have a long hooked crooked body blond curly straight longish short red headed hair (sometimes bald) oval skinny thin robust obese rotund round-shouldered potheaded! potbellied pigeon-toed porcelain dimpled porcupine mustached elfishly tall ... *reach up to the sky, hide in the wind* ... a man (that much they know'd) but never black and never/until the night (full moon it were) when a Freebridge woman boltupawake sit-in-her bed ... seen ... thought she seen, and screamed:

"IT'S A"

"B'hahahahaah! Can't be,"

the Freebridge Police say,

"Tip around like that? Besides, them peoples out there sleep by nine, ten o'clock. Hell, we'd have known it ... smelt it!"

(*Great laughter*)

The woman's husband say nothing ... smother stuff.

"Ceptin, the woman were sure. Mmmm."

Mother Moon run'd up the road to Thomas Bates' home, have it all in her head ... she mumbling, how her child innocent/ disappeared ... the means and the meaning of the means were locked in her mind ... kept a perpetual giggle scattered in the roof of her mouth ... a pigeon cooing.

*Dribbled on her lips
It come'd a smile
I wonder if you know*

Cordon off our road, the police done. Over the crossing come'd a crowd from Freebridge. They noisy as no other noise ever come'd to us from way off ... sound like the opening of the Salvation Army Store early in the morning when the women are standing out front socializing, then the door opens: they come'd *things starved* ... *bens!* squeezing each other through the door ... flying at the tables, tearing at the clothes. That's what the people sound like coming over the bridge up/to and then stood stopped/ crested about the barrier the police set up. In silence they crested.

"KILLER! ... Killer/Killer/Killer,"

somebody spoke up,

"Kill her!"

Most the crowd as one voice say it, but stragglers made it clear,

"KILL-HER!"

We weren't allowed out of our homes. The police come'd up from and through the fields back of our community. *Sprung* on us, same as if we all were a Sockfoot ... walked in on us. Scared the children. They say Sockfoot hid out at Mother Moon's home. Say, Midoasis Moon, Mother Moon's daughter were Sockfoot.

The Freebridge Police: brave men they were, squat in a circle—surround Mother Moon's place. The biggest mongst them stood—approached-the-house-kicked-the-front-door-in ...

... Waiting ...

... Waiting ...

... Waiting ...

Then a shot shot: LORD! *jumpflyaway my heart!*

... Waiting ...

The policeman come'd out of the house holding a dead crow by its feet ... say: "It's all that's in there." He held it high, say: "Sockfoot?" The circle of policemen, slow to rise but done, started in laughin' ... roared in agreeing laughter, answered him: "SOCKFOOT!" ... passed the crow around the circle ...

*Two humming birds
Got close enough
To see*

SOCKFOOT!!! were the cry-swelled come'd from the barrier.

The police burnt the house down ... just in case Took the crow body over by the barrier ... tied it in a kerosene soaked cloth ... tied a tiny noose around its neck ... tied the full noose to the end of a long maple branch ... used Bic lighters to light it, and swung the body over-across the barrier ... just for fun. The crow 'come'd alive in fire!' Swooped-swooshed-crackled—silent, its shadow, parting from it took flight sucked into the lungs of the crowd below it, and released *Free!* in screams ... our old folks (to remember) called us to circle-round (circle-round) in the parlours of our community.

The police slung the crow out into the ditch by our road. The Pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*) screamed as the crow landed mongst it, as done the Moneywort, Yellow Loosestrife, and the Key of Heaven on seeing it bounce by:

Bounced as it might fly ... little
Jumpflapaway-land-in-place
Bounces

The crow come'd to rest in weeds up gainst rocks in the ditch. Some men at the barrier throw'd beer bottles ... made a game at throwing at the rocks, see who could break the beer bottle closest over the crow ... broke so many bottles, they buried it in amber.

The Swamp Candles
(*Lysimachia terrestris*)
Shuddered

Midoasis Moon were gone. Were she Sockfoot?... The women in our community were anxious and eager to point up things:

"Midoasis Moon were a hollerer of the blues."

“She weren’t no Sockfoot”

“Stealer of men ... other women’s men, yes.”

“Have her ways, yes.”

“She sure could holler ... yes.”

“Trainwhistlelonesome-holler ... yes.”

“Steal men’s souls-holler ... yes!”

“Have her troubles”

Mmmmmminm-mmmmm-purr were in her holler.”

“Come’d in the world hollering like a hound with no roof in its mouth.”

This talk started on our road a week after the police come’d looking for ‘Midoasis: a.k.a. Sockfoot’ (that’s how she were known in our community for a while) and continued in the kitchen of Mother Chisholm. The hiss from the hot curling irons on the petroleum jelly in our hair crowded us ... our thoughts: we thought of her in Freebridge ... in doorways ... pictured:

*Half again she
Touched after her heart
Rub on the pain men’s words
Left there near-up round her
Shoulder*

We made excuses for her:

“Abuse! (abuse).”

“Shaped a brute for her soul to dwell-about.”

“Abuse squeezed weeping through the brute’s self.”

“Made Midoasis hoarse like she were.”

With the hoarseness she wove the holler ... holy. Sweat come’d on the kneecaps! Madam Cummings brought us back, say:

“Why we talking about this woman as though we making offerings? After all, ain’t we always thought of her as in the alleyways up gainst the bricks, walled up in the breath of somebody else’s man?”

Were she Sockfoot? No proof. I were losing the curl in Bertha-til’s hair. The iron were a bit cold. Princess C.J. Walker had a softer tone on the woman:

“Midoasis Moon weren’t no Sockfoot ... out there stealing that woman’s man, that’s what.”

“And Sockfoot ...?!” snapped Madam Cummings, “I guess has no reason to reappear since they thought they got Sockfoot!”

And indeed, the Authority believed so. I stepped away from my recollections of the women curling hair and continued walking on the road.

I wandered in my thoughts on something I'd heard: The Authority claimed they'd got Sockfoot ... no details were ever given ... the Authority say they killed and cremated the thief. No proof. Ceptin, two humming birds say they seen a Freebridge policeman come carrying an urn to the bridge what run over the river. Say, when got there he were very nervous and the wind blowing about upset him ... but he seemed determined. He went to the centre of the bridge, took the urn and unscrewed its lid ... he sniffed at it but showed no signs of smelling anything ... put the lid in his pocket. There weren't nobody around to see or upset, yet the policeman tipped to the railing of the bridge. He said a dutiful silent prayer, and holding the urn up, he raised-leaned it on the railing ... tipped it and poured somebody's ashes over the railing. But just suddenly, the wind come'd high and blow'd the ashes back up and into the policeman's countenance. He dropped the urn, grabbed wildly for what ashes he could gather ... nothing ... nothing. He stood in hesitations and shudders, pinching at his suit for what ashes come'd off in his fingertips. He massaged his fingers into his thumb heels and palms ... dusted his hands on his suit. He stood silent then took the urn lid from his pocket and tried to skip it on the wind.

No proof. Our community were treated as a *cloud outside of* Freebridge, and we *moved along its walls* when we went there to shop. No proof ever come'd of what happened to Sockfoot ... nothing believable. The children come'd with/had an inspiration, made a little dance to go along with it:

Sockfoot were
 Long enough long enough
 Gone
 Mothers' chatter
 In the marketplace,
 Hurry home
 Hold their husbands' countenance (so glad)

To their breast
 Cupped the back of their son's head
 Drawn-smothered
 Their child's face
 In their thighs
 Sockfoot were
 Long enough long enough
 Gone

The crows went about expressive. Flapjumpaway from the other, laughin', and land in place serious. Say, of Midoasis, a.k.a. Sockfoot:

*Come'd bruises, the natural openings to her face
 Flies (buzzaround-buzzaround)
 Dust ...
 Sucked-up rising
 Oval!
 Into a shaft of sunset
 From a hole shot in her brow
 A spider worked an amulet from her nose
 Diamond-crossed her mouth
 Anchored it to her ear
 Dogs found her!*

Some folks say to Mother Moon: "Midoasis ever with us!" Say, they seen her on the fields at night: Her mouth come'd a scarlet 'O.'

*O, she seem willow
 Seem: bent-some
 Weeping wind*

LADY SUSUMA say: No! Ain't nobody seen her. Swore it by her profession as a conjurer. Say: No ... Midoasis Moon stood up from her place in mongst the living and went 'fishing' ... say, she (Susuma) walked upright with her in a dream ... real as life. Say, she stared hard! at Midoasis, trying to see if any of where she been be on her countenance. Lady Susuma say:

“Midoasis Moon were a wonder when I seen her afirst She'd stop and sing with the cicadas. Come'd here forty year ago to visit her Aunt Roselie, what passed after, and Midoasis stayed on. Moon ain't her real name, Mother Moon weren't her real mother ... adopted her ... legal ... never know'd where the girl come'd from or where the girl were most times ... she run'd free. Sweet! and contrary as a pink rainbow, she were. Have a countenance of flirt-with-you-brown eyes struck above cheeks of a silky peach-sepia wash and rouged ruby lips. Her smile have a wink in it and broadened on salt-brushed teeth.”

Lady Susuma say,

“No! Ain't nobody seen her What she come'd to, O my. An evening gal. Walked the roads *moving way from shadows*, slapping at her thighs, dusting her dress from behind'd *back the mist off the creek*. Got to blushing over a traveller at my door who come'd for directions a day she were visiting me. Caught him for a day or two, she done, and got caught. Everything were, 'Too, too ... O so so,' and, 'I took my braids down in the creek reflection but I can't get at him yet.' She nerved up enough to ask me for help. I says: 'If you can just mostly have a devoted mine, you will make it.' She were. And for a time she'd have me interested ... confided things to me. She'd hum, hum it like it were a sweet secret ... tasty... to herself, say: 'He is my carnival! The barker,' and she'd sigh ... kind of breathing in the colours, the noises, the great rides, the shooting games, the carousel ... its music, and all the smells ... O the smells: cotton candy ... she held it all in her cheeks and smile, and went back to humming. All the time she humming this, she forget she'd won the moment (his moment) for a while, with a potion of mine. But he left and she thought of me as a mountebank after lost respect for my abilities as a conjurer cause of it.

“Poor thing, got bedridden with him on her lips. Stayed there for near two year or so. I'm telling her he carnival folk, what can he mean to someone sitting whilst he on the move? Closed her eyes to everything but what reminded her of him. Even not her prayer beads were him in her fingers. The beads' world dried up in her. She held herself in knots ... doubled up fists, her elbows stuck in her sides, her lips folded in on her teeth and got lost inside a pinched crease across her face. Sometimes she'd sit up rubbing her kneecaps, cursing hiccups and spitting at shadows, say:

“He never waits with me, go on by himself,’ like she seeing him every day afore her, and, ‘Who’d believe I’d ever lose my charm ... who’d believe it, even not in the evening,’ or she’d comb her hair in a hand-held mirror, holding herself up through tears afore her in it. ‘If a crow would bear me to the “WHERE’S,” I’d go,’ she’d say, ‘Take me up by my face in it talons.’ Late at night she’d pat on cologne and after echoing her words, she’d scream: ‘EVEN NOT IN THE EVENING! I’d go.’

“COLOGNE ... lots of it. For him maybe. She’d sniff it in and come’d a memory, she’d ease into bed ... laid wrapped in a sky blue nightgown and neath a *Grandmother’s Fan* quilt what be a great field of patches needing patching. She’d ribbon the scalloped border intween knotty fingers and clutched it in her hands. Then she’d sing some.

*At her singing,
Crows, alarmed by the asperity in her song,
Spread-flapped and spring-away
Rose out of the patches in the quilt
Rose out of the fields of ringed Phacelia,
Gray Beardtongue and Blue-eyed Mary clusters.*

“The carousel music come’d, drifted through her window. She were lifted on the 3/4 of it, and danced in the centre of her bed ... but she shouldn’t have done that. She faltered and fell there ... never left the song in herself though. It held her gainst the echo of the robes dragging on the leaves. Her eyes (rolled-fluttery white up neath her eyelids) were in the darkness of her ears what hung off the bed and hugged the floor, then the wall ... water rushed in her stomach. She hiccuped and went to kicking. Then she sprang-sit-up! in the middle of the bed, ceptin, she weren’t: *Sprang intween the worlds!* she done The *Elsewhere!* sitting in a windy day, she were, on an off-ramp of the River Road. Sit there eating a dead porcupine. Eating it in a rapid-furious-snatch-away (as if she were ninety-nine and she’d discovered soft toffee for the first time and tried to eat it all afore she got to be one hundred) eating it afore *something* invisible what stealing at the porcupine from her. She cursed the *beat*. Her tongue, slid from intween a yellow beak, were filled with idle ... idled out into her left claw and shook off

some quills onto the curb next of her. She forced her jaws ... recaptured the quills, and when she'd eaten them all she nodded inside of her swallowing ... she cleared her throat: 'Akfak.'

"The voice in her gurgled, hissed and slurred from chatter to babble over a cocoon of saliva round her tongue, and the moment were gone ... she'd come'd back, sit the middle of her bed. She wiped her tongue off on her sky-blue nightgown in a sort of palm-smear-to-pinch-twist-tween-her-fingers fashion, then gestured: sweeping as to press back her hair along her head but not touching it ... although, maybe patting it some as a period to the gesture. She leaned some and vomited, and rolled over in a pool, wiggling in a fuss afirst like she were drowning ... then, easier, the look as if she were to settle in it ... yet, the afore alteration (*leave-taking*) took place in herself again, and she rose to the surface of the vomit ... come'd buoyant. She spread wings ... crow wings, and flew away."

This were what Lady Susuma testified.