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### **Crocodile Tears**

by Helen Fallon

Mother's crocodile handbag her sister  
sent from the States was stuffed with gloves, glasses,  
a nail file, matches, blue rosary beads,  
prayer book spilling novena cards, smelling  
of stale tobacco and floral cologne,  
suede interior smudged with red lipstick.

Sundays she strode up the steep chapel steps  
strap slung over her shoulder. It perched on  
the pew as she prayed, stood sentry by her  
seat at the parish party as she sipped  
scented tea from a delicate China  
cup with painted pink roses.

The crocodile skin blistered then cracked.  
The belly drooped, the strap grew slack, her back  
began to stoop. The seams unravelled.  
She drove a darning needle through the gaps.  
The bronze catch broke the year she had the fall,  
the shoulder strap snapped sometime after that.

I found the handbag, back clearing the house,  
flung under a scarf and the green silk blouse  
I'd bought. It was crammed with postcards I'd sent,  
tiny white tablets she took, crystal beads  
that sparkled like ice, when wiped with a cloth,  
and a rock solid pink powder blusher.

The customs officer asked if I had  
anything to declare. I shook my head.  
For how could I tell him how much of her  
clung to that skin smelling of tobacco  
and 4711 cologne.

