

## Familiar

Traipsing around the city centre, I let my paws soak up the sun. Beams of ray, on beans of toes, three claws thrumming with rhythmic ease. A leisurely stroll, a pace and at peace, whiskers gliding. The hairs at the back of my neck welcome the heat like the curl of familiar fingertips. It hurts where my fur thins, but I purr into the pain. Vibrations releasing the tension my innards can hold, anxiety taking grasp of me like a chastising mother.

Wet tiles twist in the mist of water, fountain sprays sparkling, an imitation of coastal waves crashing against rough cliffs. I knead the marble. Above me, golden hour. The sun, on its way to roam free, paints an iridescent crown over my head. I imagine myself the ruler of my time, with the freedom to decide about my own routines. My day, as it were, takes place in the comfort of customs. Sylvia taught me that to follow orders is to embrace the slight deviations we allow ourselves. That's how you make sure the thrill of it stays with you, she said, with her cracked lips pressed into my head, as I protested non-committedly.

My inner clock runs on warmth, my passions rising like bread, never quite sure if they will sag or set in presentable shapes. Shops close around me, though Sundays are no promise for commercial gain in this town. Save for the church and the bakery across its street, no buildings serve their purpose that day but remain ready. Sylvia prohibited me from going to church, its tower askew and statues brittle with age. She said its leaning on the credulousness of the crowd.

Marmoured faces judge the tilt of my head when I stumble past closing doors. Omens converge when I jump onto the font, tongue dipped into holy fluids. Blessings make my spine yearn when I take another sip, chasing. Pain around my throat as an angered man of God throws me back onto the street, more true to his maker in wrath than on his knees.

Cobbled roads in mosaic with asphalt. The town's minimal effort to fix its mistakes by putting a plaster on its seeping wounds. It commemorates my existence. A paw, set in drying matter, as temporary remembrance of me. Sylvia, who was laughing through her irritation, picking out the bits that dried between my nails. A putrid stench, some ointment she concocted in the depths of her basement, with Azreal watching in childish wonder as I gagged.

There is a kiosk in town, shuttered close at this hour. Rusted bars and tinted windows hide away today's news from disinterested passersby. International affairs, national conundrums, changing like a fickle game of musical chairs. Sylvia's thumb, always ready to change the station at the mention of something other than the discordant sound of music, overlaid by static. In that way, I take after my keeper. In my mind, there is wonder to be found right at home. Enough hysterics of our own. Put a comb to the head, brush it softly, and with care, Sylvia said, that's how you unearth the nits and the gritty bits, the secrets that fester behind closed curtains and cracked

windows.

A woman, flabby, hurries along out of our shared space. A soft hiss accompanies her step as if I were scared off by the faux-sounds of my people. If Sylvia were here, I could smell her palms perspiring, clenching in deferred anger. I would ready myself for a lecture. An invisible auditorium yawning to humbug and superstition. Instead, I handle myself with grace and hobble along, swaying, clipped tail swinging. Its tip still sore in ghostly memory, abandoned cells crying for attention.

It was an unfortunate incident. Sylvia's spawn training to shear, and I, his humble subject. The tool was blunt, made for the hands of inexperienced humans, Sylvia assured herself as she handed them to her child. She was right, though what the scissors lacked in efficiency, the child made up in spirit. There is a stain, as big as my body, transplanted into the carcasses making up our hardwood floor. Scarred, Sylvia locked away anything sharp and discarded what she could not take. It was the second loss of the day, my claws hitting the carpet with soft thuds. They would grow back. Until then, my mind stayed sharp, perhaps the sharpest thing left in the house.

Down the street and up my destination, by the butcher's corner, I hear little Maribel readying my order. A nip of milk to upset the stomach and a slice of tuna straight down the gullet. At home, a meal awaits, but there is a spot unfilled that can stomach an appetiser. Maribel has crooked teeth and a crooked gait but she makes up for it in frills and bows. She is wary of me. Paying for her father's mistakes, as one does, scratching my ear in reserve. A payment of sorts, reaching spots I can no longer reach.

It was right here that I died. By now, it is common knowledge that cats have nine lives. We are envied creatures, for our ability to cheat death. People think it is a skill, a change visible to the untrained eye, like a new hat you can discard at will, but it's rarely as easy as that. There is the panic and the worry that settles into your ribs from first breath. By your second, by each second, you're on your second life, organs failing as matronly muscles spasm around your sleek body to thrust you into unwanted existence.

Entering your third life hurts more because there is a consciousness to it. Sylvia's mother was a mean one, with nails growing inwards, afraid to release more of her body into the world. She took my head to the water and made me drink death into my lungs until my insides swam, like little buoys ringing in alarm. It was Sylvia who found me, gurgling on the surface, and took me in to protect me from my family's fate.

Until one day, when hunger pained me, Sylvia remained despondent, depressed, discouraged, my being ignored until she could flourish. Only an emergency of a certain magnitude could beckon either of us into town. Not even the cord, bloody and choking her screaming brood

was reason enough for Sylvia to abandon our house. It had been easier to reject her first than dare one. I, however, never prided myself in her strength. So when the pests grew smaller and the woods howled in danger, I snuck down the path, past the bushes and thorns, into the unknown.

There were feet, now part of the horizon, but back then a sight of wonder, in their sheer variety. Cloven, hoofed, limping and dragging. Reds, whites, with heels and contraptions. Slightly off-kilter, my balance lost with the tail, I wondered and wandered amongst the masses, my mews ignored and howls scowled at. Without the attachment to the house or Sylvia's abstraction, a single black cat turned out to be a minor attraction.

There was trash to plunder, with kin of mine circling. Sylvia's company had not made a social creature of either of us, so shy to make a mistake, shy to act out of nature's intent, domesticated into submission. I scurried along to find my Tantalus' punishment. A waft of air that carried me into the dingy corners of the butcher's shop. Bloodied bodies hanging from hooks like warning signs I ignored. There was no one around, the door to the back propped open by a piece of wood, wedged between its gap.

I jumped onto the counter, paws slipping in crimson. It was dinner, left for later, the clock nearing the end of a shift, but my tongue worked quicker than my mind and my hunger had been greater. So I licked, and I lapped, then I yelped as I fell. My yowls could be heard from our garden, the rose bushes waking my mother from her deep slumber to come to my rescue. Sylvia was there, my snout cradled between her bosom as she fended off the raging butcher, curses slipping from her lips like loosened serpents. That is how I stepped into my fourth life: changed, with my leg spasming at the checkered floor and the butcher's cleaver coated in fur.

Like a traumatised victim, I found myself re-visiting the scene of the crime. Exploring the village's body, getting to know the paths of its arteries and the functions of its municipal organs. After the butcher's heart seized its final pump, little Maribel learned to indulge in servitude.

Fed and fed up, I leave the girl. Maribel's teeth grind hard until her molars turn grey, her skirt bunched up in her palms. She mutters something under her breath, but my ghostly appendages deflect her insults. Unbothered, I jump onto a fence. Slip, tumble, try again. It is a dance of sorts. Makes Sylvia snort each time I climb the commode or chase a fly to burn through the fat reserves. Knock over trinkets, break baubles. Sylvia, a stout woman in age, often uneasy, let loose during these moments of bliss, her breath rattling.

Anxieties easily locked in our house. It breathed and slept in the knowledge of our inconvenience. So when the opportunity presented itself to brighten a corner, tear open a curtain to let in some sunshine, I rose to the occasion, with three paws at hand. Her giggle, that stifled laugh caught by her palm, that was the real magic, something that can not be canned. Unlike a lizard's toe

or the toddler's spittle she collected obsessively, jars stacked neatly in the pantry, Sylvia's happiness was slightly more fickle. Even more so than her words, which often spilt like curdled milk. Spoiled and rotten, jammed deep in her throat only to plop out of her mouth all at once.

From my profile, the setting sun paints an areola around the peaks and valleys of my ears. At the end of the fence, a panel wobbles and knocks me off its back, the drop cushioned by a pile of leaves, huddled together by some well-meaning neighbour. I meow in protest for no one to hear, in a way only Sylvia would appreciate. My body, still desperate for her laugh, like muscle memory.

A rare occasion comes to mind. Sylvia, coaxed out of the house, more by necessity than pleasure. Sun glistening against her skin, even though most of it had been covered at that point, shielded from the scrutiny of unforgiving rays. She needed a herb for a potion, her child growing weaker with the season's passing. Impatience grew in her heart as she roamed the brush, searching. Her calves bled and I licked her wounds, past the ripped hose. It earned me a scratch in passing.

That's when I saw, from the corner of my eye, life, fleeting, fleeing. A shape of indistinct origin. Only the high still lingers in my marrow, the bestial impulse to kill. An ancestor's breath, circulating my system, short-circuiting my synapses into action. It made me bolt, made Sylvia flinch, then jump in glee, sandals barely lifting off the ground.

Claws met bark, met tree. Cells intruded upon cells, upended life, to chase it. Before I knew it, two metres turned twenty, step turned into misstep. A branch at the wrong spot, though how wrong can it be when I was the one interfering with its gradual progression.

My fall was swift, a crack. Hollow, hard to swallow, with a tooth, lodged in my throat and my bones crunching against the heft of Sylvia's arms. Only moments ago possessed by instinct, now failing to land on all fours, all threes. Three-legged cats fall on their back, I concluded, choking. No, Sylvia corrected me, they heal.

That life took nursing, from vials and flasks. Bitterness spilt down my throat, teething at the nub of the child's bottle. Two lives were lost for laughter, one eye filled with Sylvia's drying tears. After the tooth passed my body, with my voice expelled, the two of us crowded around a fire. Trapped at Sylvia's side, I mourned the town with my wavering cries.

Now, I rub myself against the fence post, getting rid of dead leaves. She is calling for me. I can hear her voice, weary through the window panes. Though the hill is high, and my steps heavy from the fish oil, I put one paw forward. Behind me, the town is closed for business, blank eyes staring after me in warm welcome. I cross the road, from right to left, taking their luck with me for the night.

Smoke paints hazy symbols amongst clouds, carrying the promise of a warm supper. A cooked liver, maybe a dried tongue. A meal, shared in passing, like a life. My eighth, a deception. It

arrived on our doorstep at the break of dawn. Travelled with the howl of the rising sun and made me blink twice against its flames. My name on her lips as she beckoned, a gurgle of consonants. Anguish crept up the stairs to drag me into her room. Sylvia's robe, looser than skin, drooping at her sides. Though never quite pretty, grief turned her horrid.

Even late in my lives, I experienced firsts. An example: her hand, placed on me with malice. My sworn protector, a woman who did not swat a fly, but rather relished in the soft tickle of its legs, replaced by sorrow. I rubbed my head against her exposed thigh, to appease her heart, at least for a moment. I heard my neck snap in two, my body nudged into the bloodied circle, her candles flickering once, twice. When the flames burned out, I rose from the ashes and her offspring remained frozen, like morning dew. Her spell worked, but on the wrong child.

Standing outside, I note: a house is a picture, is a memory, unspooled. Its outlines blur into the weight of my paws, out of grasp. A house is a feeling. Dread, from waking in the morning to find Sylvia's chest caved in on itself, lungs deflated. Attention, to the homey disarray of our lives. My bowl, shoved into the centre of the kitchen to keep everyone around the house in motion, busy not to upset my food. Her papers, mountainous, meticulously transcribed in foreign formations of magical wonder. The child's brushes, caked with the consistency of marvel.

Scared to enter like a stranger, I limp to the backyard. There, amongst the weeds and unruly roses, a body grows. Its shoulders sag, the antlers sticking up like a leafless tree, bearing the potential of fruit, fertility. Entrails hang to the side, with flies buzzing around, a moving mess of white tumbling over itself. I lick my lips, but Sylvia calls me, her meal ready.

Where once I had to squeeze through the makeshift hole Sylvia put in the backdoor, now I slither past. The house creaks me back, smiles around my frame as it settles into my body. The kitchen hums to the sounds I bring with me from the village. Leaving it busy with gossip, I hobble upstairs, and into her reading room. Dust covers my fur, greying with each step, each passing year, each passing.

Sylvia sits in her chair. Her frame has gotten smaller over the years, so I can only see her head, colour matching mine, lifelong companions coordinating. Her slippers look war-torn around her feet. Sometimes I would slip them onto my leg, when she was in the bath, or in bed, filling her spawn's head with ghostly fancies. I would feel her dying cells melt into my paws, have part of her stay with me, forever.

On her knees, her grimoire splayed open to a page of little importance, it's spine cracked like mine. Welcome back, she tells me, as I sit on the damp pages. She reeks, but I adore her. Her floral dress is tinged with muck, a brooch missing its gem. I snuggle my face into her belly, feel it respond, move under my head, a hundred different bodies, writhing. Put off, I dig my claws, sharp

again, into her chest to raise myself to her face.

Soft spots, corners drooping. My teeth sink into her lips, the cartilage of her nose, almost gone at this point. I savoured these pieces for last, wanted to indulge in the comfort of her smile. She always promised to devour me, it was only natural to return the favour. Fill me with her, as she once did with her child, the three of us, united by a meal.

There is barely enough to last a day, but that is okay. I feel the dust, the black spores of life, permeate my body. It conquers my lungs and makes it harder to breathe. Nature, in all of its elements, taking us back, in a sort of biblical form I know she would despise.

Abandoning the scraps of her earlobes, I lick her lips one last time and settle back into the cushion of her rotting thighs. I, a child, Sylvia. The rush of leaves like a fountain in the distance. I feel my iridescent crown weighing down my eyes, as I soak up the sun. Beams of ray, on beans of toes, on soft palms, a smile.