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THE FUN OF CATS

You are in another time. You are the
owner of a closed field, like a dream.

Borges "To a cat".

I

Like every day, I jump from the cushion to the chair in front of the computer and in competition with the silence in the mirror I go, with exuberant parsimony, from the hallway to the room. With my swanky feline lineage, I stand looking at the bed, making it wait for the privilege of accommodating my noble body. For better or for worse, I jump and curl up on the mattress. It is time to plunge into the eternal feline oblivion. Just then I remember my unanswered emails and return to being a pathetic human who unsuccessfully tries to lose himself in the far away mooring of cats.

I go back to the remote control, to the television, to the dead at the doors of the government palace and to the faces that cast blame with howling jaws.

It is so hard to be like Hugo and Anita, so complicated to act like pets, alien to a world where this human is in despair in the middle of a national crisis, jobless and broke. The solitude of the apartment is witness as I try to abandon my despair in the wake of pending electricity and phone bills; the shame of being unable to manage as the man of the house; the tedium of sending résumés and the faraway calls to old acquaintances that greet you affectionately, that will tell you how good you are at what you do and that will ultimately never give you work.

I envy my cats, so rudely placid and eternal. Sometimes I lean toward being like my ashen colored cat Hugo, so very hairy, obese and with the face of an ill-humored English lord. For me, he lives on an island abounding with velvet furniture; a safety box of shadows and silences, of moderate temperatures and the scent of cypress, chocolate pipe tobacco, caviar and smoked salmon. On occasion, I feel such spiritual aristocracy is more of an obligation than an advantage; then, I imagine Anita's exotic oasis, black stray cat with bat ears and bright green bottomless eyes. She is the queen of tents, of Persian rugs, of water pipes and ostrich feather cushions. Her big island in the desert also smells of smoked salmon; but it could smell of chicken and sardines, because when it comes to food, she is not picky.

If I only knew how to get to those feline islands, to rest my eyes on an ethereal Ganges and come back only when Taya arrives. Taya and her boat filled with

love. I want to rub up against her, meow for my food, cuddle up next to her, press my small paws on her tummy and purr; I only want to purr. But today, like every afternoon, when she calls out to me clicking her keys and closing the door, I will barely tear away from the TV set and apathetically go to meet her. Taya tries to hug me, but I blatantly avoid her. “Man, you are getting like your cats!” I think if I were one of my cats I would purr, happy to see her and seek her approval. I ask her how her day went; she says fine (she does not tell me much, avoids making me feel bad), and then she asks me about mine. I answer that I made a few calls, sent some resumes over the Internet. I say no more and go to the bedroom, turning my back on her compassionate silence. From the arid steppe of the bed I hear her rattling around the kitchen.

A few minutes later I hear her voice at the door. Do you want something? I want to answer yes, that I want her to quit her job, to stay here with me, that we can let ourselves die in bed, holding each other, surrounded by cats who bite our fingers, take out our eyes, devour us in the heat of death... “No thanks, I already ate something, I’m not hungry”, comes out of my mouth, and Taya goes back to the kitchen, sullen, dragging her love and pity.

II

Another afternoon, Hugo and Anita are out in the balcony sitting on their hind legs, rapture in their eyes and instinct in their tendons. A small bird fidgets on the railing and sings a high and intermittent tune; perhaps it is trying to transmit a hieroglyphic emergency signal, or is just making fun of the cats with paroxysmal movements.

Hugo jumps. The bird is faster and escapes. The cats remain on the balcony, waiting for the jester to return.

Around 6:30, Taya bursts in. She tells me that in the building stairs she found a little bird; it’s sick or hurt. Could it be the one from the balcony, I ask myself, or could the cats have mangled it? Taya orders me, begs, despairs.

The small bird can’t stay there; a neighborhood dog or one of the poodles from the building could find it and hurt it. Come, come! I look for a blanket and go to the rescue. The bird looks so small, so fragile. I don’t know if it is the same one from the balcony. This one looks like a chick, perhaps the other one’s baby. I toss the blanket over it. I now have it in my hands. Taya begs me to be delicate. We go up. I check it out, extend its wings, look under it; I’m no bird expert but I pronounce it to be well. Taya decides to put it in a shoebox and give it rice and water until it can stand up on its own two feet hidden in the swollen plumage. I admire the certainty with which my wife speaks of the bird’s recovery, admire her faith in life, her Samaritan will. On top of the box we place a yellow plastic mesh, the kind oranges are shipped in. In order to avoid a mortal feline intervention, we put the box in the shower of the guest bathroom and close the sliding door.

The rest of the afternoon moves without major events. We have dinner, wash the dishes and go to the bedroom. I turn on the TV; it's on the news channel, the same one I was watching this morning at noon and when Taya came home from work. An opposition spokesperson says they have proof that snipers that shot at the peaceful demonstration belong to the government. I switch to the state-owned channel; a government spokesperson says they have evidence that the snipers shooting at the demonstration belong to the opposition. Taya gets upset, and begs me to stop watching the news so much, that I am going crazy. I feel tempted to answer bitterly, but I avoid conflict and look for another channel. I stay with Seinfeld. The episode is just starting. The comedian, standing in front of his cabaret audience, ask himself why pajamas are shaped like a suit, with cuffs and even a pocket on the front; he also asks why we need to go in the coffin with a suit and tie, why must we be buried in formal dress.

I don't finish watching the episode, I fall asleep and dream of wild cats running through the thicket and coming to a flat field, covered with cemetery holes. As soon as the cats arrive, an avalanche of canned laughter can be heard as in a TV comedy set. The cats sniff at the holes, smelling the birds that flutter inside open coffins. A shot explodes in the air, more laughter, now crazed clown laughter; the birds get agitated and flee from the coffins; thousands of tiny feathers that wound the sky like machine gun fire (hyenas under the moon laugh). Inside the coffins, the dead smile in their formal suits (laughter like desperate suicides). The cats lie on the grass, ears fallen and eyes lost in the distant sky (laughter like a mocking brass band).

I open my eyes in the dark. I feel around the night table. I find the remote control; I turn on the TV. A blast of light stuns my eyes. Taya moves restlessly, mumbling the sleep speak, but does not waken. I surf the channels. I don't feel like watching anything, I don't feel like being human. (And think about the limits to the desired universe at the other side of the guest bathroom door).

III

As soon as she wakes up, Taya leaves the room. It's easy to know what she is up to: the sliding door and her lack of voice give her away. She comes back twirling in happiness and tells me the bird looks recovered; he is not swollen and stands on his two feet.

Afterwards, she goes happily to the kitchen to make her lunch. In a while she gets in the shower. I turn on the TV. I push the mute button and surf. I stay on a documentary about the poles, or at least that is what it looks like. I don't activate the volume and I let myself go with the drone that makes me float in front of the image of a man walking through a frozen region, towards a snow covered faraway point.

I seem to be reading subtitles of twilight: "A one lane path, a path that doesn't climb or descend, that does not depend on and only has a monstrous logic". Taya comes out of the bathroom and I wake up. She gets dressed and asks me what I want for breakfast. I knead my lack of appetite with sleep. To gain credibility and be

consequential to the plan y turn off the TV, pull the blankets up to my neck and turn my back on her.

A few minutes later she comes back to the room. I don't know if she thinks I am asleep, but she brushes my cheek with a kiss and leaves for work without a word. Then, I jump out of bed. I move with feline dexterity, with aristocratic arrogance. I open the door to the shower; the victim is in front of my nose. I turn back the mesh and put my hand in. The prey tries to escape but the space is very small and my hand doubles his size. I take it out of the box; only the little head is seen above my fist. I observe the beak, the restless eye, the tremor of the tiny terrorized creature. It is time to complete my transfiguration project, to do what cats do and enter that pathless region that perhaps the primitive man shared with cats. The bird is in front of me, I raise my other hand. I see myself aim my index and middle finger, my thumb acting as a trigger. My hand is a gun aiming at the little bird. I pretend to shoot; a snapping sound comes out of my mouth. I surprise myself with this action and after I get over it, I realize I've ruined my plan. The man, always the man, ruining the fun for cats.

IV

I throw myself on the bed. For the first time in a long time I don't turn on the television. I stay watching the world outside the window: the secret wave of branches, the perfect and green geometry of the hill, it's playful, endless paths.

Anita climbs up. She approaches with a low meow; she lies down next to me, glued to my leg, and I scratch her behind her ears. Then comes Hugo. He rubs his face against my palm; he lies down looking at me. I scratch his chin and he raises his nose to the roof in appreciation. We fall asleep and meet again in our dreams. But this time Hugo and Anita are human. He is a tailored English lord, she a black African beauty. I am a large yellow cat.

—Mister Cat, tell us, how does it feel when you are lying in bed?, they ask and point at me with their fingers coming too close.

But I stay still and take my time, my feline time, with no beginning or end, lazy and padded.

I finally yawn and answer:

—Like it smells before the rain, like a Sunday afternoon, like the first kiss, like the smile of a newborn, like the wind blowing by the sea, like washing your face in mountain river water. Alas, like when someone you love hugs you and tells you they love you.

I wake up. Hugo and Anita are still by my side, awake. I pet them; they look at me with a Cheshire cat complicity smile.

Later, I shave, I take a shower, and I make dinner. I go on in an unreal dominion, without memory. A bird's song flows like threads of light through the afternoon shadows.

Taya finds me smiling, setting the table. With crystal clear surprise she comments on the setting and gives me a kiss. Without further ado I tell her the bird

recovered completely and sang this afternoon. Only now, like a sharp and transcendent revelation I realize the bird did indeed peep, full and real, from each vein of its throbbing anatomy.

We slide the door and look at the bird; Taya is happy. We take the box out to the balcony; we take off the mesh. The little bird takes a while before taking flight. Then Taya hugs me, tells me I smell good, kisses me again, caresses me... And I feel alive, my whole body purrs.

Translated from Spanish by Gabriela Gamboa