

KYLE HEMMINGS / CAT

PEOPLE / GOLD WAKE PRESSE

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## Star Mother

As a child you clung to walls, stumpy fingers turning to claw-and-ball or cautious paw. Running your hands over walnut wood, its veneer and lacquer, you traced the curves of scallop shells, scrolls in Braille, Ping dynasty servant girls serving tea. What you didn't know, your father, master and commander of sash windows and gingerbread calamities, filled in the blanks. Then, one day, you couldn't hear your mother scream from her version of darkness. But you had a cat's sixth sense of events on the horizon. Your father placed your fingertips over his cracked lips, explained it like this: *Your mother was a faraway star, perhaps, the sun. The sun fell into the sea.* All the things you said to him in the dark turned into a tall stranger who had no concept of light. When you turned beautiful, your sight partially restored, he followed you everywhere, groping like a fugitive. You turned and asked him *Are you my father, the one I had before the house burned down, the one I cried over for years?* He turned and stumbled. You helped him up, noting the terribly scarred one eye, the splat black. From that point on, you became his walking cane, as he walked in reverse. Until you became his last words.

## Magicians

As a magician she was never lovelier than when she sawed you in half and never returned your parts. One part always longed for the clarity of winter. The other grew nostalgic for hissing summers, children selling lemonade on manicured lawns. Or the time she changed your blind turtles into laughing rain. Then you read in the news that a man cut his wife down to size, divided her. The right hemisphere kept in  $\frac{2}{3}$  vinegar solution, the left in formaldehyde. When questioned by the police, he said It was the first idea he ever had of something being "clear and distinct." For years, you imagine someone outside your house throwing stones at your window. She demands you put her back together or at least give her what she once had. But children never really grow all the way up. And magicians never reveal all their secrets. You think about your wife in the basement, shining a flashlight on the cement cracks, the black water rising, caused by the neighbor's tree roots spreading under the foundation. After you open the window and yell out that you're married to someone else, to please not come back, you realize there is no one there. Just a black rain and this hard shell of a house where everything slowly disappears.

## Noir

I wake up screaming. I can't remember the exact content, only the gross shadows and the girl falling from the wharf. She was young with a voice that could charm dolphins, kingpins. Was that girl me? I'm bleeding. I always cut myself when I dream. It's my way of telling myself: Hey, wake up! You're nowhere in sight. My white Persian with the blue eyes no longer answers to her French name: *Jolie fille*. The psychiatrist who speaks in shades of monotone, whose eyes scare me like ravens, says It's all the result of stress. Stop working so many hours he says. But I tell him: There's a war. There's a war going on. I suspect that in secret rooms with fly-a-way women, he's a fascist with dead-end eyes. The phone rings. It's the same man I met yesterday at Frankie's diner. He said his name was Dana Andrews. He handed me his card. He said tailing people was his specialty and asked whether anyone was giving me a hard time. I watched Frankie sling some hash, yell out to 86 the ham steaks. Now I remember. Dana Andrews was the man in my dream. He pushed me in. I believe he did. Then he swam after me. On the moonlit dock, I was shivering. He held me, kept calling me by my childhood nickname: Bleu. His eyes looked through me. Hooked through me. He had the eyes of my cat.

## Tell-Tale Nights in the Heart of the City

At the club, we're knee deep in dusk, pockets of post-despair. The D.J. is spinning a remix of Cash's Ring of Fire. But I and my cat brother, with his genius love of green, have already fallen in. We have codenames: He's Puma Boy; I'm Lucky Cat. Later, we'll rip off the straights, air brush tiger insignias on their leather jackets, now ours. Nothing is really ours unless it's under the skin, like connective tissue, like memories of disco strangers in my bed, my false confessions to them. Was it quick-spit love? All friendly fang and chipped tooth? I use to flatten their tires so they'd remember me. Later, Puma and I will have sex in Soho's back alleys. The pigeons will drop us condoms. We'll blush before strangers. The city is a tea cup that leaks us. I need some coffee. Deep, dark, Columbian. On the subway, girls without claws, ones with hollow eyes, stare out of windows. I study the curl and length of their fingernails. Not enough city love, too short, too pale. I need to paint them a green that glows in the dark. Long enough to scratch against the night.

## This Ain't No Cathouse, Sugah

She lives in a flapjack house over a fault line, not exactly her fault. Had no say in the construction of the walls. They're made of Monterey Jack and a childhood goo called Dream On which rhymes with Klingon. Even though her TV set is fuzzy, she loves star gazing at reruns of William Shatner giving lip and smooth face gloss to a princess of galaxy feminists, their captive hominoids high on brown sugar, comets careening through deep sleep. Her husband leads a double life, teaching Melville and pantheism but at home, practices a tight claw version of this-panther-wears-the-pants. She dreams of being Lady G or having the perfect S curl, but so far she's only succeeded in making a bald spot. Lately, she's been reminding him to fix the hole in the ceiling from which she sometimes ogles the blackness of night, stars as superscripts, the universe capable of many interpretations except that Matter matters. At times, after discovering a new scar in the mirror, one left by a dream of comets, she asks her bubble of a hubby if his mistresses wear panther pink or leopard spotted underwear. He retorts that at least he brings home the bacon and she's already lost three babies to various sucking wounds of depression. As a universal form of humiliation to jaded cats, he makes her iron their best bras for a low plunge. Then one day, it happens. The ground shakes, reminds her of a fibrillating heart. Past her window, rumble all the amorous animals from the zoo. Run to the basement cries her husband who once promised her a Katmandu but the mice chewed up the map. But it's too late. The house collapses, over the edge, her husband swallowed feet first, she, belly side up, into a void darker than black, which goes to prove her previous theory that the world and what all the Deputy Dawgs and Sylvester Strung Out Cats made of it was really flat all along. *Do You Still Love Me, Daddycakes?* her words fly out like splashes of hot grease, hands sinking beneath soft dirt, a shade darker than maple syrup, while in some pit stops across the country, mind you, they serve pancakes until three.

## Marry Me

My mother told me never to trust girls who speak from the side of their mouths. But Kat, with her rainbow bracelets and flat vans, can't speak any other way. A creature of A.D.D. and zip up leather, studded belt and the next No Wave, has mistaken me for the last fuzz boy guitarist who dumped her over a groupie into Goth and 50's horror films that are HYSTERICAL. So it's Saturday afternoon in a life of endless afternoons, waiting for balloons to fall, or poppies to emit milky juice through terminal pores. I mean I'm bored. So Kat calls and says what's up and yadda yadda yadda and I'm definitely leaving for school at the end of the summer and yadda yadda yadda and why is love such an ugly brute and yadda yadda yadda and I'm like Why not? So we're standing in the throng of a Central Park crowd, sweating in our skinny jeans. It's a free concert--Blackie Stark and the Undertones-- who are from the Michigan area and formed as a high school band back in '64 and who have since recorded three singles but can't get picked up by a major label. And Kat is looking too cute with her chubby thighs and Ultra-glow pink lip gloss and I'm thinking of flowers falling but are they free? An announcer enters the stage and lists upcoming acts for the summer. Kat is whispering some crazy shit in my ear, like how she would marry a boy who was her best friend or some lines from her poetry like how the sky raped her but she lusted for the sun, or how the mushroom is not a symbol of the penis, it's just a vegetable that grows in her poems and I say, Kat, like you're tickling my ear. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Blackie comes on stage dressed as some glitter cowboy with shades. I'm starting to think what the Fall will be like with Kat gone. It was always a thing of Almost Love or there's somebody else just a notch above you. Kat is bobbing her head to Blackie's tune about devil women. Kat is holding my hand. Kat tongues my ear and smiles as if to say Fuck it, right? Blackie asks for a volunteer for his next song. But where is Kat? She's joining a commune. She becomes a shadow underneath your everything. I'm having flashbacks of Kat on a tricycle. We even shared raspberry popsicles at the age of eight. Was it so wrong? I'm raking through the crowd. I'm interrogating faces. Where did you hide Kat? My mother's voice answers: *She will not be the girl you will marry. Honey, She's Been Around.* No, mom, she's just a showy girl

with too much black eyeliner. Inside she's crumpled petals. I was always unripe. I push my way to the stage. There is Kat belting out a Blackie tune. There is Kat on stage, outrageous and flirting with the crowd, making them beg for her smile. There is Kat looking down at me. I love you, Raspberry, she sings. Marry me, I shout back. She throws her brassiere into the crowd and I jump into space like the guitar solo I never could play.

## Love Story for Cats #1

In city windows, our bodies look supersized, our faces, sad steroidal aliens. To whom does each one belong? It's 5:30 a.m. and wet. Sidewalks are wet. I want another cup of coffee, black, no sugar. On a dance floor of spilled liquor and sweat, Kat and I acted out our fantasies of new wave love and white swan heartbreak. But now the streets are empty. Echoes are not possible. It would take a person or an animal blinded by loss. Beyond the immediate boroughs, Kat declares that the rest of the world is melting, lovers are turning one-dimensional or flat. She's still working on that sci-fi story. We pass an oyster bar, then a small gallery featuring Cezanne and Man Ray photos in a magenta-hued light. I try catching the light rain on my tongue. You don't love me yet, says Kat, because I am too many people. I am every reflection I look at. I am every character I create. No, I say, I don't love you because you're a reflection I've already caught. You only love what you don't have. It's like the rain. Try holding it and it becomes a thing of the past. Kat covers my ears and says Shhh. Do you hear them? She asks. Behind every door, you can hear the lovers, and in every lover—a secret. Every lover tries to destroy the other because it's a piece of themselves. Then they try to get it all back. A puzzle for two, all jagged spaces intact. Kat walks backwards shooting me a queer gaze that is forced, that tilt of the head that is uniquely Kat when she is philosophical. A car rushes by. She loses her balance, falls from the curb. I rush to grab her. We're both wet, I mean, wetter than what we were in a simple drizzle. With jutted jaw and wide dandelion smile, Kat looks back at me, into my eyes that she always describes as little Neanderthal men who can't make a fire. I smile back, then focus on my hand gripping her upper arm. It must be some kind of love. I can't let go. Not in this story.

## Blue Hearts

Whenever Pixie-Bob and Kat get into an argument and a bubble-burst, he will tear his pillow with a Shonen knife. He will threaten to love girls who work in bomb factories. Or he will sleep under the house with the goat-boys, made homeless under the city's new urban renewal program. They are dreamless and have no sense of mute beat. If things get too heated, Pixie-Bob will get lost in L-shaped rooms under streets and gear-grind, doing the Trip Hop before hookers having ticks and herniated discs. When he returns home, he will be in a trance. For days, all doors will be closed. But Kat being a girl-rapper trained in classical, will stand in the rain. This is not to say that every time Kat and Pixie-Bo argue, there will be rain. The rain is not logical, and contrary to popular opinion, has no musical sense. The rain does not say Take off your hi-hat and dance with me. The rain may not be there at all. It's just that in the absence of the other, Kat loves to stand in the middle of a street, oblivious to sky peddlers and pimps on parole. She will throw her head back and open her mouth. She'll convince herself that it's pouring--it's there. She loves to taste the meltdown of reflexive clouds, their nuclear sadness.

## Calico Girl Cats Never Cry

So putty kat, they flattened your tail and ran a big ass truck over your legs. In your bedridden existential state, you vow to become the terrorist of all pizza trucks, mousy men, all air gun and trap doors for brains. You'll find a way to sneak into their bedrooms, piss on their sheets, put crop circles in their rectangular dreams of false gods, valleys of nil rivers, dead dogs. You'll multiply like a songbird on pellet aphrodisiac. Someday a young girl with a strong streak of Mother Hubbard will take you in. You'll no longer wish to choke on fish bones, a starling's claw caught in the trachea, or die in a cat's noose, hanging in this blind alley called life. She'll rub your back and sing you nursery rhymes. With ears perked, you'll follow her everyday to school, protecting her from the mice under her feet. Never once do you tell this hard-earned secret: In the end, we all fall down. No, this mama with hands sleek as fins will love you to death. It's the best metaphor you'll ever carry into endless sleep

## Broken Shell

In the rain. In the mix of rain and oil slick that coats our lives, the oil spill that spreads to everywhere. After green becomes merged with black menses flooding the tunnels under the streets. Sisters, there is no time to breathe. I and Molly Goo carry Kat in from the sea, another self-downed girl. Our makeshift family of burned girls lives under the amusement park, under the candy wrappers and paper cones, under the summer footfalls that still echo in our ginger hearts. Remember, Sisters, back in 72? We were the hot sonority girls of Greenpeace U. We infected our mothers with a new liberalism; gave our fathers a new skin. Our lover boys had seaweed in their eyes. We were their black tang. We watched their bones grow in their sleep. In F.B.I. photos we looked incredibly foxy, the smiling eyes of a minx. But now the sea is crashing against our little wooden house built on sand, shale, walls of moss. The sky is wearing dirty underwear and the sea cries *Kat! Give me your tired shell of a girl. For I have new owners, and they only get high on what sinks.* I and Molly Goo lay Kat on the table. Our heads are dense with fog. Soon dying fish will thrust themselves through our windows. The air will become thicker than love. We will suffocate while holding hands. Our eyes are turning a poisonous red seaweed. Our bodies hum and the hum is a koan that no one will ever hear. Kat is dead. Kat is dead.

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