

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

Ann S. Epstein
Space Cat

Bonjour. Je ma'appelle Félicette, mewling for my due. Laika has her statue in Moscow, a dog atop a rocket; Ham, a.k.a. Astrochimp, his plaque at the New Mexico Museum of Space History. But I, the first (and only) cat in space, languish unknown. You might say it is because a repeat attempt to launch a cat ended in disaster, and France abandoned its space program thereafter. I protest it is because science denies the possibility of training *Felis catus* in the rigors of space exploration. The time has come to acknowledge and memorialize the intelligence of our species.

Admittedly, there was an early attempt to honor me. One month after my capsule traveled 100 miles and landed safely in the Algerian desert, but prior to being euthanized for study, I was invited to visit the French embassy in Washington, D.C. Alas, the assassination of the American president rendered the U.S. in no mood to celebrate, notwithstanding his widow being a Bouvier.

You'd expect the accolades in my own country to flow as freely as *Veuve Clicquot*. Mais non! All that France produced was a tea towel with a bad likeness, and a commemorative stamp issued in the name of Felix. Mon Dieu! No one confused Laika with a male dog named Lev.

I was in every way as capable as a male. Take Ham, whose mission was two years before mine. He was originally called No. 65; officials thought that if the experiment went wrong, the outcry would be worse if he had a name. A neuroscientist trained him to push a lever within five seconds in response to a blue flashing light; failure resulted in a mild electric shock to the soles of his feet; a correct response earned him a banana pellet. Ham performed his task only a fraction of a second slower in space, greenlighting Alan Shepard's mission four months later. Resistance to my monument is based on the claim that unlike Ham, I was a passive passenger. Pas vraiment! I performed a task too — a taste test, differentiating brie from processed cheese — proving that space travel did not compromise gustation. Ergo, long distance missions could be undertaken at no cost to quality of life. Alas, Tang was the first evidence of utter disregard for my discovery.

Scientists also implanted electrodes in my head to measure the impact of space travel on brain activity. Along with my fellow felines at space school, I was whirled in boxes while they took preliminary measurements. There is a discrepancy about why I was the cat ultimately chosen for the mission. News reports said it was because I weighed the right amount. Mais non! I was selected because I was the calmest. The tomcats were too excitable, which puts the lie to sexist aspersions. Laika is further evidence of female superiority. (Nevertheless, to distinguish myself from that bitch, I must point out Laika was a stray on Moscow's streets. My Parisian pedigree is considerably more refined; my grooming impeccable. Aussi, Je suis beaucoup plus jolie.)

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Consider that the root of feline and Félicette is the same as felicitous, meaning well chosen or suited to the circumstances; pleasing and fortunate. I was well chosen for the mission, my mental and physical properties suited to the task. Hélas, I am displeased by the unfortunate circumstances of being overlooked for my significant contribution to aerospace science.

Down on Earth, a Kickstarter campaign by Matthew Serge Guy, a Londoner, has raised £43,323 (\$57,000) to install a bronze sculpture, in my honor, on the Place de l'Étoile in Paris.

What do I want as a fitting tribute? Je veux what all cats want: A place in the sun.