

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

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I HAVE BEEN ALONE FOR A MILLION YEARS.

The night sun rises, and I am off, moving through the grass like a snake. I am up a tree, and over the fence, and in your backyard looking for the scraps you left for me on your patio, where I also catch lizards and mice.

Before the day sun rises, I lap water out of a stream. I catch a water bug between my teeth and when he shivers, I take his head off.

The Bastet queen waits for me on a broken tombstone, basking in the ray of the day sun. Her eyes are closed, and I stand ten heads away, the only sound is the sound of dry grass. She knows I am here. She heard me years ago, back when I was on the other side of the field.

Her paw is red with the blood of a blackbird, its broken body on the ground beside her tombstone.

She turns her head, and her eyes recognize me. I have known her before.

It is time, and I know her again. She hisses and shows me her fangs, sharp and glistening.

I don't think I will see her again for a million years until next time.

I go to where you are. Your many feet thudding over the pavement in a million directions. Your voice shuddering above me, its many pitches falling off your mouths onto the pavement and exploding around me. I navigate my way between the blasts.

I pick up the scent of a quiet street and lay my head down next to the fish heads swarming with flies. This is where I meet the night sun and close my eyes.

The day sun is many years away, but I am up and running from you. Your hard-shell body bludgeons me, and my blood runs thick and red. You molt your hard shell and lean over me, your hands gentle, yet firm.

I awaken in your den.

Here it is bright and putrid. I am in pain.

Your face hangs over me a million times over a million years. Sometimes it is you with short fur, sometimes it is you with silver fur, sometimes it is you with long fur. You touch me and give me food and water and you call me "Kitty."

I have been with you a million years now. I know every corner of your den now.

The all-seeing eye resides in me so I can predict the future from night sun to day sun. At day sun, you take me with you and put me on your lap in your hard-shell body. Your breath smells of yesterday's mashed potatoes and fried meat. You smoke cigarettes and drink Coca Cola. Your hand is on my back, and sometimes when I need a scratch, I like it, and some-

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times when it's hot, I don't, and I show you my fangs. We drive on the road inside the hard shell, the hard shell shaking over rocks and bumps along the pavement. You sing next to me, and you sing out of the radio also.

I am with you when you stand on the street corner and sing. You wear a black cloak and a top hat, and you scream "gather around." You have cards and hats and scarves and fans. They fly above me like firebirds, and my claws are out, and I am on my back paws, hunting, because your birds give me hunger. There is laughter and you who are the spectators say, "he is the cutest little thing!"

Now I know what you are: Reggie.

At night sun, I sleep at your feet and wake up at your head. Your breath smells of mildew and you are warm when I am cold. There is milk and chicken and livers and fish. My stomach never growls.

You put me in the hat now and you lift it just above your head and you say, "abracadabra poof" and you turn the hat to show the spectators that I am gone. I climb down your back, hide inside your black cloak, thrust my claws into your vest and I hang on. The spectators laugh and clap and ask, "where did he go?"

A million winters and summers and springs and falls come and go.

You and your Bastet queen bring another one of you. You, Clara, are small and wailing. I look down on you. So easy to break you neck, to scratch your eyes out, to take a chunk out of your cheek.

You put me in the hat now and it's different. You look me in my eyes for an eternity and I hiss, and you smile. You place the top hat on the ground before you, and my all-seeing eye instructs me to leap out of the hat and run. But there is the milk and the chicken and the livers and the fish. I hiss.

You raise your silver wand, its slick long body hissing back at me, and you grab your black cloak off your back and whirl it over me and then hide me from you who are the spectators.

My heart stops beating.

When I hear its rhythm again, I open my eyes and smile at the crowd. I take a step toward the people and open my arms to take a bow. I look at Reggie, his eyes wild beneath his shaggy brows, his forehead in a film of sweat, and I am puzzled by how much taller I had gotten. Before, I looked up at him, just to see his protruding belly, now I am looking into his eyes without effort. We are the same height.

Our eyes meet and he crosses himself, looks at the crowd, lifts his arms toward the sky and takes a bow.

When we get to his car, I lift my leg to sit in his lap, but he says, "you are too big, my boy." He pats the seat next to him and rolls down the windows. We listen to the radio playing the whole way back home.

"Sandy, dear," Reggie says to his wife, his hand on my back. "This is Kittredge."

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She is small and fine with sandy hair and sandy eyes and sandy freckles. Reggie pushes me toward his wife, and she says, "come on in."

The house is just like I remember it but smaller. If I stand in the kitchen and spread my arms, I can touch the opposite walls with my fingertips. Sandy hands me a plate with mashed potatoes and fried meat and I grab it and run and sit in the corner to eat.

"Kittredge, dear," Sandy says, "why don't you join us at the table. There is an extra chair for you."

I spend most days on the street corner with Reggie. Now both of us have top hats and black cloaks. We do card tricks and make rabbits disappear and reappear. I am his apprentice. Sometimes women spectators say, "He is so handsome."

I spend most evenings outside, walking along the perimeter of the city. Sometimes I chase rats, but I am so much slower than I used to be and they laugh at me.

I spend most weekends by the window watching the leaves flutter and the squirrels run along the grass and the bugs fly back and forth. Sometimes Clara stands next to me, her hand next to my hand, but her hand is smaller and more beautiful. I don't look at her, but my heart beats quicker, and I hold my breath.

Time passes quickly now.

Clara holds onto me as we walk down the hospital hallway. The walk is long, and Clara's tears run down my arm. We look at each other and she reaches up and wipes away my tears.

Sandy is in the hospital room at Reggie's side, she is holding his hand and our hearts beat as one and our heart is breaking. I fall to my knees and place my head on Reggie's chest.

I don't stand on the corner anymore. I don't do card tricks.

I watch Clara come and go. She is happier now, her cheeks are pink again, and her lips are smiling. She likes to spend her evenings at the movies or the cafes or the theater. Sometimes she brings me with her, and her girlfriends put their arms around me and lean into me, or whisper something that makes me smile. I watch her put her arms around men and lean into them, or whisper something that makes them smile. And her girlfriends look up at me and say, "Why do you look so sad?"

One year passes and Clara lets out a long sigh, looks around the room and says, "I can't take it anymore. This small town. These small people."

I watch her pack a suitcase. I sit at her feet and she walks back and forth until her room is not her room anymore.

She sits down on the floor next to me and kisses my cheek. "Here is my address. Promise me you'll write." She hands me a folded piece of paper.

I look down at the smudges her fingers left on the white paper until they blur and my eyes brim with agony.

"If there is one thing I will need," she says, her palm on my cheek, "it is companionship. But not human. All they do is break hearts. I will be in

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a new city. I will be alone for some time. I want a dog to love. They are so sweet and loving. Not like people. People are cold and devious.”

I carry the suitcase to the bus station. The walk is long down a dusty road. She hugs me goodbye and she is gone.

I walk back home slowly. I watch the birds in the sky and smell the reeds and listen to little girls play hopscotch.

I chew on my knuckles until they bleed, and I cover my face with my hands.

The attic is full of cobwebs and bird mites. Reggie’s magic box is in the corner, its red hue under a thick layer of dust. I wipe the box with the sleeve of my shirt and open it.

My intuition instructs me to slam the box shut and run. But there is Clara.

I raise the silver wand, its slick long body hisses at me, and I grab the black cloak and whirl it over me and then I hide myself behind it from the spiders and the bird mites.

My heart stops beating.

When I hear its rhythm again, I open my eyes and listen to your scent.

Your scent is thin and long and stretches into a million years and I push through between thick scents of new and old, scents that don’t belong to you, before I reach you.

And you look down at me, and your hand is in my fur and you take me into your lair, and you tell me you love me.

Your scent mixes with my scent and you give me food and water and together we stroll the streets into the darkness.

The days grow brighter, and the sun shines higher. I wait for you for a million years and you don’t come anymore. It is just me in your lair now. He comes with a thick scent of poison ivy and dry wood and he fills my bowl and gives me water. “Alone again, my poor lad,” he says and leaves.

When I finally scent you, I dance for you and I will do anything for you, but you walk past me, your hand brushes my crest for just a breath. And you say, “hello there,” over your shoulder.

A million years pass slowly while I am alone, and you come sometimes with laughter and out of breath. But often you don’t come for a million years and I howl, and he comes and says, “Enough,” and fills my bowl and gives me water. He touches me but he is not you and I show him my fangs, and he mutters and slams the door shut.

It is easy to have nightmares when you are alone for a million years.

Mine are about the Bastet queen.

The Bastet queen waits for me on a broken tombstone, basking in the ray of the day sun. Her eyes are closed, and I stand ten heads away, the only sound is the sound of dry grass. She knows I am here. She heard me years ago, back when I was on the other side of the field.

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The balcony is two floors above ground. I pace back and forth, your absence calling me back inside to sit still and wait for you for a million years until we are both old and shriveled in time.

I leap over the railing. The ground is below, dark. The Bastet queen's oval eyes beckon me.

There are spectators in the windows, in the glow of living room lights. "Oh, God!" you the spectators scream, pointing at me as I fall. Hiding your face in your palms. I pant and I howl, my barks rolling through the empty streets in wave after wave.

My heart stops beating.

When I hear its rhythm again, I land on the ground on four paws with just a purr. My body small and tight and lithe. I don't know where I have been and what I have left behind. I trot to the rhythm of my heart, strong and constant, not looking back, moving forward and away, down the dark, lonely street.

I don't think I will see you again for a million years until next time. But maybe I will.