

OPEN THROAT

HENRY HOKE



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There is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.

—GEORGE ELIOT, *Middlemarch*

I've never eaten a person but today I might

I wake up in my thicket to the sound of whipcracks and look out and see a bulky man in a brown leather jacket and brown hat swinging the whip toward two other people a man and a woman

the woman holds a phone up and says *you look just like him oh my god*

the man with the whip smiles and cracks it again and I feel something in the bottom of my stomach that's not hunger

I also feel hunger

the man without the whip lies down on his back and spreads his legs and lifts his feet up to the sky and shouts *okay do it just flick 'em just lightly flick my nuts*

the man with the whip snaps his arm back and forward and the whip hits the dirt in front of the lying down man and the lying down man says *yes yes*

the woman presses her phone and says *be careful those are my boys*

I try to understand people but they make it hard

the man on the ground is skinny and the woman with the phone is skinny but the man holding the whip is thick and his neck bulges against the collar of his tan shirt and I can see a vein and hear the blood running down through his arm and his arm flexes and gets meaty every time he raises the whip

the whip hits the ground and kicks up dust and it sounds like the torment of all big cats

fuck this guy

I can smell his insides

my mouth waters and the drool slides down and soaks my paws

I smack my lips louder than the whip's crack and the people stop like they heard me and the lying down man stands up and the woman turns her phone in my direction and the man with the whip holds the whip at the ready

yeah I heard that says the woman like someone asked her a question

I'm not scared of their eyes

I'm the same color as my thicket and the same color as the ground

no one sees me unless I want them to

the whip makes the bulky man brave and he steps slow toward me and squints and leans in with his throbbing neck vein in full focus

my mouth opens and I judge the distance between the man and his skinny friends and try to decide if I can drag him into the thicket quick enough

I wonder if they'll chase us or if they'll run away

it's been weeks since I've eaten anything bigger than a raccoon

I think of how many meals I can get out of this man and how if I store him down in the caves the vultures won't find him and I'll be able to come back over and over to eat a little more

I think of all the nights we'll spend together

this man and his guts and me

let's get food says the man as he coils the whip around his fist and pulls his neck away from the path of my teeth

the woman claps her hands and says *yeah I thought I was totally over
brunch but I guess I'm not*

I watch them walk fast down the trail and I go to sleep because sleep takes
my hunger away

when I wake up I hear the last of the day's hikers passing my
thicket

two girls with huge water bottles that bounce the sunlight through the
branches and into my eyes

it's not easy to sleep on an empty stomach but I guess I did okay

one girl says *god I can't believe it's dark already*

I know we have to start starting earlier says the other

she takes a sip from her bottle and says *no matter how much I say no and
cancel stuff there's still no time* and the first girl says *that's just your scare
city mentality you have to work on that*

yeah I just you know this you know I don't like change says the second girl
and the first girl says *of course but we all live in scare city under capitalism
so we all have to make an effort to deprogram a scare city mentality as like
our central driving force*

their voices get lower and then I can't hear them anymore and I yawn and
stretch my paws out and their water bottles vanish with their bodies in the
sunset

I shouldn't be here and neither should they

now that the hikers are gone I leave my thicket and go down into the dry
ravine where lots of water used to flow and I eat bugs and suck at the little
trickles to make my thirst less

I remember the last rain and I remember I wasn't happy about it but I don't
know how long it's been since

now I need water to come from the sky or anywhere else

I need more than a dirty sip

I think of the girl hikers and the shiny bottles they gulp out of and I paw the dirt for more caterpillars and eat them and I know I have to find somewhere new to drink

things are changing

a while ago I wouldn't fantasize about eating a person

what the girls said makes sense

I'm not sure what a scare city mentality is

but I have it

here is called different things by different people

mostly they say ellay but they also say the park or hollywood

I hear that word a lot

I know I live below the hollywood sign because the hikers say *oh look we're below the hollywood sign* and they say *can we get all the way up there* and they ask *which letter would you jump off*

I've been up there but at night lights come on and it's too exposed so I stay down where I am now

views don't matter to me anyway

the hikers say things like *look at that view* or say things like *we have to do this more often get up here and get perspective*

what they see makes them point or stop and turn and put their hands on their hips and breathe deep but the distance they love is an out of focus blur

when I try to look where they're looking
all I can see is what's right in front of me

when the sun drops below the ridge I leave the dried up ravine and
go to town

town is where my people live

there are four of them and they have three tents set up just a few layers back
in the trees where the hikers can't see

but I see in the dark

the people in town smell familiar to me a smell like warmth or the woods
not the sweet hiker smell that makes my head hurt

and that's how I found them a while ago and found their pile of trash and
the smaller animals that come to eat their trash and offer themselves up to
get eaten by me

the people build a fire some nights and I have to stay far away from the
glow but they haven't done that in months they're afraid of the dryness like
I'm afraid of the dryness

there's a water pump in the clearing past town and that's why they built
town where they built it

it's not a bad setup

I go to the water pump and there's a deep puddle below it and I lap and lap
and lap

I'm the secret member of town

I stay on the edges and don't mess with their tents or their tarps and
supplies but I hear them talk about me

the older man in the left tent calls me puma

the couple in the middle tent call me ley own

the young man in the right tent calls me a different name every day but it always ends with cat

fucker cat or shitfuck cat or goddamn fuck cat

I can take it

he's kind otherwise and leaves his trash by a tree and tonight it's a bucket of chicken bones but at the bottom there's chicken

the meat and the bones taste like many people's saliva and my stomach gets full and I get grateful and my eyes fill

I want to thank my people but I know if they see me it'll fuck up our relationship

the first light means it's time to go and I bring a bone back to my thicket

the hikers start early and I hear voices as soon as I'm settled in hidden and gnawing

or I hear one voice a man's voice

I'm a good listener says the man and I see he's with a woman who hikes beside him

the man says *really I'm serious I want to listen you can tell me anything you want about us or me or the dinner anything I promise I'll just listen and I won't interrupt or project I'll just I can take it you don't know what a good listener I am without you or when I'm not around you when I'm with other people it's just this specific stuff with us that makes it hard so I'm ready to listen I really am I promise I'm ready*

this is my bedtime story today and I close my eyes and leave my ears open

I'm a good listener

I don't hear the woman's voice and I start to wonder what she sounds like

I wonder what I sound like

at dusk I feel alone enough

I chance a growl but the earth growls louder

the ground feels wrong my paws aren't attached anymore

they give out

my body on the ground shudders and everything shudders around me it's all moving at the same time the mountain moves I feel like I'm in water there's no foothold little rocks roll by the branches of my thicket scratch my face in a way they're not supposed to and the small sharp pain doesn't wake me because I'm not asleep

I can't get up and I think I never will and this goes on forever as the shudder ends

the stillness now is not the stillness before

I don't trust this stillness

there are small bits of blood on my legs from the branch scratches

my thicket isn't safe anymore

I step out and there's a person standing next to me

she's wearing a yellow shirt and yellow shoes and her back is turned and she's messing with her phone so she doesn't see me

I freeze and feel awful

okay okay she shouts into the air and then says again to herself *okay*

she steps back on one foot and her shoe is so close to my face I can smell it

the phone is up at her ear now and she scratches her side and leaves her hand there holding on to herself tight while she talks

did you feel that she says into the phone

no she says *no I'm in the park I don't know I walk now what*

her shoe moves away from my face and then she gets quiet and listens and then she shouts *how did you not feel it it's a fucking earthquake*

and then she gets quieter and says *babe I know you said not to call but I'm calling because look fuck it I'm coming home*

she snorts and wipes something away from her eyes with the back of her phone hand

she runs forward down the hill and dust from her yellow shoes hangs in the air along with the word earthquake

I look down and touch one front paw to the other to make sure I'm real and alive

I've felt so many shudders before but either this one was different or I'm different

now

I scrape the dirt and walk uphill but I'm worried the ground won't ever be solid again

it's dark when I reach the caves and I get lucky because the earthquake has pushed a swarm of bats out of one tunnel and they swoop and scatter above me and they're just as confused as I am

even the shudder can't destroy my nightly hunger

I use their confusion

they have no idea how high I can jump

I leap and swat one bat down from the air and crack its neck with my teeth
and then I do the same with another and another

this easy hunt is like a game and I find joy in the new moonlight

I go deep into the caves until they get so narrow I have to stop

if more shudders are coming I want to be somewhere small

I turn and lie down with my bat snack in front of me and fill my mouth and
then my stomach and there's water dripping so I wash down the wings

I've heard hikers talk about earthquakes before they say *it's a reason to get
the fuck out of ellay* or they say *they're not bad anymore* or *it's not a thing
anymore the fault totally shifted*

anyway it's better to be outside when the big one hits they say

I'm always outside

tonight under layers of rock I'm full and I can at least breathe

but even here in the cave I know I'm still outside I'm not in a tent like the
people in town and it doesn't make it better that the shudder happened and
won't make it better if it happens again

I don't know

it's hard to say how it feels

I'm looking for the words

piss splashes my face and wakes me up

the sharp smell bristles my fur and my eyes pop open

I watch the man's dangling part and the wet pouring from it onto the pebbles in front of me

the salt covers my lips and I lick it away

I'm hungry again

I turn away from the spray and my eyes must catch the sunlight because the pissing man makes a deep noise and clutches his chest and turns before pulling up his pants and he skids on the gravel and falls on his face

he recovers and runs out of the cave and doesn't look back

if he looked back he'd see me not chasing

not moving

he'd see me not giving a fuck

I've been pissed on before

I stand and leave my cranny and sniff his puddle and straddle it and piss and the puddle gets larger

I can still smell his fear

I walk over to where he fell and paw the frantic marks he made in the gravel and I think

what it would be like to hunt him

he was so close when he woke me up and I had all the power of surprise on my side

the attack could've happened right then and I could stuff him in the cranny and I'd be set for a few meals

he had a scrawny neck that'd snap in a sec

but he had no meat to him

nothing like the man with the whip

I'm only thinking all this because the pissing man is gone

and I know I won't see him again

I find his phone by the mouth of the cave

it's black and shiny and has a pattern like snakeskin and I flip it over and press on it like I see the people pressing on theirs but

phones don't work for me

I can't pick it up and raise it right up to my face or my ear and anyway

who would I call what would I say where would my voice go

I lean close and see something in the black screen

maybe a tongue and teeth

my reflection

but I don't have that word yet

my eyes

I like to think the man who ran will remember these eyes

always

I swat the phone over by the metal base of a sign

the sign stands at the entrance to the cave and when I see people here the people stop and move close and look at it and then they either turn around or go inside

I don't know what this sign is because I can't read

there are signs all over the park and I watch people stop at them and I try to figure out what the signs say by the people's reactions

sometimes people ask each other what they say like they can't read either but it's because one is always closer to the sign and then they help me by reading out loud

so I know the one that says fire danger very high today and the one that says caution rattlesnakes

I don't have a problem with rattlesnakes

the one that says fire danger changes color and sometimes the people read it and say *extreme* and then say *shit*

is there a warning sign for me

is it this one

when I leave the cave the birds are screaming and there's an ever bigger sound in the sky

whirring and grinding and moving in long circles

the young man in town calls them fucking helicopters

the fucking helicopters circle at night and shine big lights down that take away my dark and then I can't see and I can't stay hidden

the young man in town will leave his tent and scream and shake his fist and call them names like he calls me

he hates them so I hate them

the whirring and grinding sound gets lower and I hear hikers coming and run behind a tree

the hikers are looking up of course and one says *that's a rescue chopper*

yeah for the children's hospital says the other they're always going to the children's hospital down on sunset I hear them all day

oh perfect the first hiker says now whenever I look up and see them or hear them I'll just think of the bloody and dying baby in there and that'll make me feel great

I look up through the branches of the big tree but the sky is too bright for me to see anything except painful light

instead I shut my eyes and listen to the fucking helicopter sound fade

I imagine the bloody sky children

I think about blood raining from the sky and I roll onto my back and stretch and claw the air and open my mouth and think of catching all the blood rain in my mouth and it quenching my thirst and making it go away in a way it hasn't since I was small

when I'm hungry I think about blood too much

also when I'm not hungry

I lick the little scratches my thicket made on me and taste dirt and my own insides and it's not quenching at all it tastes like cat and I'm cat and I don't like cat

I stand up and spit and shake my head and grow up

I probably wouldn't eat a child

my new thicket is a nest of twisted trees above a path

hikers come by all day while I rest but I'm ten feet above them and they never suspect

from here I wouldn't even have to leap I'd just have to drop and whichever hiker I wanted would be mine

I try to keep these thoughts from my head and let the dry breeze cause sleep

the hikers talk about their therapists

they decide what is good or bad about their therapists and decide if the therapist helped them feel good or bad and they throw these two words around like they have different meanings

a therapist is something I want

I don't know if I feel good or bad

if feeling hungry is bad then I almost always feel hungry so maybe I almost always feel bad

a therapist can help me with this

a therapist can explain why I have a shudder inside after the shudder outside is over

a hiker says *I pay her two hundred a session just to talk shit about my parents*

my mother gave me a name I can't share

I'm not from ellay I just ended up here

I was a baby far away where the sun sets

a deep forest on the edge of the water where we could taste the salt carried
up by the wind at night

we

because there were many of us in the green hill where the colors were
colors I don't see here and the deer roamed for us to capture and all we had
to do was lie in wait and be patient

my mother could stay still for days and listen for the soft sounds prey
makes

my mother was very kind

her bloodthirst was insatiable

she taught me how to snap a neck with my jaws

why would I ever leave her

my father gave me a name I won't repeat

he wasn't around in our part of the forest he kept his own territory higher up
in the hillside

when we traveled toward the water we would sometimes see him lurking
and watching us to make sure we remembered to worship him even if we
were doing all the traveling and killing ourselves

my mother stood on the uphill side and blocked my little body from his
view

I grew from kitten size to my now size and stayed close to my mother while
all the other cats went away to find their own thickets and stalk their own
prey and make their own kittens

my father wanted more and so his territory grew and we were suddenly in it

he came down the hill

I was too big then for my mother to block

he attacked her first

a father to a kitten is an absence

a grown cat to a father is a threat

a hiker says *my only really good therapist was in new york*

of course says the other hiker

they talk about new york a lot in ellay

in new york you don't need a car

cars are loud metals that carry people to the park and that they leave in lines
and clusters near the paths and that they can't stop talking about needing
but not in new york

is new york where I have to go

from what people say it sounds like everyone there is coming here and
that's why everything is changing or why everything costs too much now or
why all the good things about ellay are disappearing

I want to do the opposite I want to go to a place where I won't be hated

where there are therapists running around everywhere like deer and I can
just find one and catch it and pin it down

store it somewhere safe and visit it once a week

that's the thing with ellay says the other hiker forget about therapy you have to go to the next level here

all we've got here is gurus

their smell leaves my nose

my mother taught me to hunt but my father taught me to be hunted

after the attack he chased me toward the sunrise

staying uphill from me all the time so I wouldn't forget his power

when I had to shit I'd do my best to bury it and not leave a trace

the only direction I could go where I knew my father wouldn't follow was toward the roar of the long death

every animal was afraid of the long death

even my father

at the top of the farthest hill I saw more hills hills with no green

but between where I was and the place I had to go was the long death

the long death was a giant blurry path that led all the way up and all the way down and was always blazing with fast moving cars that killed countless creatures

I traded old fear for new fear

I have trouble sleeping in the twisted trees because there are so many hikers who go by and talk loud all day

they talk about how no one in ellay has real jobs but from what they describe as real jobs I don't think they have them either

ellay is a mecca for the underemployed they say

to be employed they need skills

they say to each other *you've got so many marketable skills*

I go over my skills

my skills are hiding so long that you forget I'm there

watching and listening until I memorize your habits and your language but

killing is my job

a big lizard crawls by and I

smash its head against a rock and swallow half of it

that's trauma too that's the trauma talking says a girl on a phone *it's all trauma*

she goes silent and she stuffs her phone into a bag hanging from her shoulder and when she pulls her arm out a piece of green paper flutters to the ground behind her

I know the paper is important because I've seen people drop it before and they say *shit* and they run and grab it and they say *that was close*

the trauma girl doesn't do any of that she doesn't even notice that it fell and she keeps going and I wait and the moon appears above me

I jump down and pick up the paper in my teeth

I try to taste its importance

nothing

I decide my people will get more use out of the green paper so I take it to town

they may have made it through the earthquake and they may have tents to keep out the cold and the rain and they may have piles of trash but I want to contribute

this may be their town but we all live in scare city

there's a dog in town tonight and I stop before I get too close

dogs don't do it for me

when their people bring them up the mountain they always sniff out my hiding spots and bark

and I can't eat them because the one dog I ate once was dead already and it made my insides feel awful for days

so just the thought and the sound are sickening

this dog is tied up outside the middle tent and barking

but not at me

I'm too far away

too good at my special skills

I let the green paper fall out of my mouth

the dog is facing the other direction

in the trees beyond the dog I see three sets of eyes

coyotes are different

they run together and have a mentality like mine

if I don't eat them they get ideas they start to think they can eat me if there are enough of them and enough bites to take

these three have their lit up eyes fixed on the dog and they're ready for blood

so I get around behind them and tackle one and crunch its neck and the other two run away

I drag the skinny body to the water pump and drink from the puddle and eat from the coyote

the dog stops barking

you're welcome I think to my sleeping people

people are attached to their dogs

in my triumph I sleep and in my sleep I dream and in my dream I see the man with the whip and his bulging neck vein

the vein grows larger than me and larger than the mountain

I'm so full at sunrise that I forget to leave

a voice says *dead dog* and then the voice repeats it *dead dog*

the young man has a bottle in his hand and he's standing on the other side of the eaten coyote

there's a bucket lying on the ground

the young man says it again *dead dog* and his neck twitches and his voice changes and he says *lots of low level parking*

like he knows what scares me most is what I don't understand

he raises the bottle

would we be okay if I had the green paper in my mouth instead of coyote guts

if I had something to offer

bad cat

he throws the bottle and it hits my front paw hard and I tip sideways and he runs uphill and all the ground dirt floats in the air of the bad morning and I watch it blow away and the young man stops and turns and looks down at me to make sure I'm going

he looks at me like my father

I return to the twisted trees and the path below is busy again

I'm kind of a poet says some boy kid to another boy kid he's holding hands with

when they ask what are you says the kid *my mind goes right to poet cuz I don't ever make the obvious choice I make the deep choice I want to claim that title poet poet ha ha*

I watch their hands while they walk away

hands that could be grabbing bottles and throwing but instead are wrapped together and connected

I think I'm kind of a poet

because when I finally find a deer left behind by a herd

its leg broken and stuck in a rock

even though I know I shouldn't

know it'll make the meat spoil quicker

I eat the heart first

I drag my deer to the twisted trees where it'll be covered so I can make the meat and iron flavor that's filling my mouth last

this is a feast for a week

I won't need my people and their tents and their scraps

won't need to go to town

I can take care of myself

it's easy to lie when I'm stuffed

rest tries to find me

but the nonstop voices of the passing hikers find me instead

yeah I can't wait to see you a man says into wires that hang from his ears

so let's not wait right with every step we take with what you do when you hang up and when you dream you're moving closer to me and I'm doing the same we're not waiting not standing and waiting we're constantly traveling in time toward when we get to be together again

there's something wrong with my ears

I can't shut them like I can shut my eyes

more and more voices come and I stop looking to see where they're all coming from

we don't have earthquake insurance they say

but we've always got a go bag packed in case fire comes down the mountain

they don't know where they are

they keep changing the name

is it ellay

or is it beachwood

or is it the canyon

they call everything a disaster

I stare at the trees because the trees don't talk

this is not a big deal they all say but only before they say other things

this is not a big deal but the car's gonna need way more work than they thought

this is not a big deal but he ghosted me whatever he's ugly and all his friends suck

this is not a big deal but right now I need you to listen to me

they say I can't believe it's almost the fourth and I still don't have a check from him I've been looking at the mailbox every single day and they say you know what the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and they say yeah but checking the mail

they say ni modo and then they say it again

they say fame is a real killer all I did was one commercial and now I get recognized and shouted at god I need to go back to being nobody

they say yeah of course the project is gay everything is gay now everything is gay now it's all gay everything is gay now

they say no I'm not going to tell her

I want to devour their sound

I have so much language in my brain

and nowhere to put it

I spend half the night dragging my deer up the hill to the clifftop

to find some quiet

when I reach the top there's an owl perched on the rock across from me

it's not interested in my deer

the meat's been unmoving for too long

the owl's head turns to look at me so I look back into its eyes and I see what it sees

the bright world below the park at night is a blur to me when I try to look out over it

but if I get close enough to a creature's eye I can see what it sees and in the owl's eye I see ellay clearly

more lights than I could ever count stretch out into the darkness and don't stop stretching

I'm scared of how far they go

I get why people can't decide on one name

this can't all be ellay

with a stomach full of deer I walk uphill

there are no eyes on me anymore

I feel watched

a whirring sound pops out of a bush and I look for a bird but a flash of light hits me instead

I blink and go tear up the bush and inside is a black box standing up on little black sticks and it whirs and clicks and flashes again and this time it hurts my eyes and takes my sight away

in the blindness a cold wind cuts into the skin below my fur

when my sight comes back I go close to the black box again and I see my nose and mouth in the little glass circle and I think of the people holding up their phones and pressing and pressing

I step back and wait for the next flash but there's no next flash

my claws come out and I knock the little black sticks and the black box tilts and falls and it pops open like a trap

what did it capture

the smell of easy prey wakes me

what I see when I open my eyes isn't something to eat

it's two slow people withered and wrapped in layers of clothing

one is hunched over and the other staggers and helps him up the trail

it's sweet but unappetizing

I can smell their death coming at me through the woods

is this what the coyotes smell when they circle

what my father smelled on me

what made him want to snap my neck in his jaws or beat my head on the ground

was I a threat

or just on my way out

my skin is starting to get loose and some of my fur drags and tugs on things it didn't drag or tug on before

it's okay

old is fine

I'm old because I'm not dead

something explodes above me

the sun's already set but this brings the day back white and blinding in the black sky like a swarm of fucking helicopters

there are cheers rising from down below like all of hell is making this happen like the people forgot how dry my life is

and they do it again and again

more explosions and cheers and less night

I look down to stop my eyes from hurting but the light doesn't go anywhere and now the bursts are in my ears too

I hear the sky crackle and fall down around me

all I feel is fire danger

this is too much

the shudder inside becomes unbearable

I can't eat everything I'm afraid of

the horror of the sky fire stays in my head for days

I sit secluded on my cliff where no one comes until sundown

two men approach the cave below and I watch

they walk a few feet apart and stare at their phones

and don't talk

the only sound they make is footsteps on gravel

at the mouth of the cave one stops and looks at the sign and one doesn't and keeps walking in

the space between them grows larger

when they're out of sight I climb down the cliff

and creep to the cave mouth where I can watch the men and not be seen

their phones are gone now and one stands close behind the other and leans in to the other's neck to bite

the best deer I ever ate was one I didn't kill

when I made it far enough away that my father stopped hunting

he left me to the long death with its roar that got louder with every step I took

I first saw the deer bolting through the woods and it stopped in front of me

stopped long enough for another big cat to catch it

I watched and did nothing as the other big cat ended the deer's life and
made it meat

with blood on his mouth and nose and whiskers the other big cat looked at
me

a challenge to approach

or an invitation

I waited until he'd eaten a bite of intestine and then joined

my face buried in the deer and my eyes on him

when you meet a big cat who will share a kill you can't let go of him easily

I bend low and enter the mouth of the cave and hide in the shadows

the men are on the ground now

on their knees and the one in front has his hands planted flat like my paws
against the dirt

there's a hot scent where they're connecting

my eyes are full

the motion they make reminds me of the shudder but in a way that makes it
okay

they move like the whole cave wants them to move like a natural part of
this world

the man behind collapses forward and his front joins with the other man's
back and their arms wrap together

the shape they form is like my shape

their breathing is hard but their bodies are motionless and they go silent and
my purr echoes

I'm loud

they're going to see me

I remember how every day the kill sharer and I would meet by his deer and
bloody our faces together

and each bite that made the carcass smaller made the roar of the long death
smaller too

I would stay close and he would go off somewhere and return matted and
hungry his teeth bared as if he had stories he wanted to tell me but couldn't
and his chewing was enough and I treasured the way he blew air out of his
nostrils

no deer lasts as long as you want it to

I saved him the final bite and I waited and waited but he didn't return and
then I knew it was time I crossed the long death

the long death up close and in focus was even harder to take with its lights
and speeding murderous cars never stopping on their hell ride to the right
and to the left

I spent all night terrified and slinking along the side daring myself to cross
and when the light broke over the hill I saw the body of the kill sharer

his fur coated in a mix of dried deer blood and wet cat blood his own blood

I ran straight across the long death my feet determined and pounding
because I wanted to die

I'm not that lucky

the men in the cave pull their pants up and get back on their phones

the one behind leaves first and the other one waits a moment and follows

they're so into their screens that neither of them sees me

I go over to the spot on the ground where the men were connecting and lie down in the disturbed dirt

my body twists into the same position the kill sharer had in death

I wonder if I'd been brave enough and tried to cross first

would he have found my body

or if we'd crossed together would we both have made it

I imagine the kill sharer appearing now at the mouth of the cave

circling like I'm his prey and pouncing and connecting with me and the warmth we would make together with our eight paws and two dangling parts and four rows of teeth

I get up and crouch and shit and bury what came out of me

two more men approach and these two brought their voices and their voices say *man I don't want you to miss your chance* and say *yeah god she's so cute*

they pass the mouth of the cave and they don't come in and the cave is fully dark now and I feel hidden and I watch

they kick rocks and pace and push small sticks in their mouths and the sticks make a glow and the men blow out smoke and the glowing sticks shrink

I know these men

the man with the whip and his skinny friend

the man with the whip is not holding a whip and he's not wearing a hat or jacket but I know his thickness and I know that neck vein I've been seeing in my head since he first leaned it within reach of my teeth

this is your chance to have pancakes with allison says the skinny friend to the man with the whip

she wants pancakes what can I say says the man with the whip

they are not going to connect

I follow them down the trail and they reach the trees near town

just ask her when we get back says the skinny friend *hold on I have to take a piss*

the skinny friend ducks into the woods and leaves the man with the whip alone

I go closer and the man with the whip stretches his arms above his head and spits on the ground and the extended length of him looks vulnerable

but the skinny friend runs back out and says *shit never mind* and the man with the whip says *what* and the skinny friend says *there's a whole y'know camp in there* and he points through the trees to where the tents of town are

fuck says the man with the whip *these fuckin' tents are everywhere now man I mean my street's not safe* and the skinny friend says *yeah julia doesn't wanna walk over anymore they take up the whole sidewalk* and the man with the whip says *fuckin' disgusting with what we pay in rent*

they go quiet and the man with the whip pulls a small metal box out of his pocket and holds it up

alright fuck 'em he says *seriously watch this*

he flicks the metal box open and it makes fire

another weapon

he walks with the weapon into town

I crouch behind a tree and the skinny friend stands back near me and says *what*

the man with the whip turns and says *shh* and he goes to the pile of trash near the tents and he makes the fire and holds it against the trash and the trash becomes little bits of fire too

he squats and steps over to the cardboard outside the young man's tent and makes the fire again from his little metal box and the cardboard turns bright

the man with the whip closes the metal box and sprints to the skinny friend

smoke 'em out says the man with the whip and pats the skinny friend on the back and they walk away quick making nervous laughing sounds

ha ha ha ha

I watch the fire lick the tents and I hear my people wake up

the couple in the middle make muffled noises

a spark jumps to the brush at the bottom of a tree and the flames rise and light everything

this is a big deal

the woman of the couple tears out of their tent with her dog and the man follows and tosses her a backpack and she turns and looks at the flames and the man goes and pulls the old man in the left tent out and the old man staggers backward and leans on a tree right next to me coughing

the woman shouts *santo* and she picks up a bucket and throws the bucket at him and he catches it and runs up the hill toward the water pump

the dog goes barking past me out of sight and they don't try to chase him

the woman waves a hand from her head to her heart and from shoulder to shoulder

the cardboard by the right tent burns fast and the fire consumes the young man's tent and when he steps out his legs and arm are on fire

the old man and the woman don't move so I move

I go past them and toward the right tent and I leap on the young man and knock him to the ground on his back and I pound the fabric of his jacket where the fire is and knock it out and I grab his collar with my teeth and pull him away from the cardboard and the cardboard is almost gone and the tent is all flames and I pound with my paws again on his legs this time and one fire goes out and the other doesn't and his mouth is open he is probably screaming but I only hear the crackle of burning trees and it is hotter than I can take

I don't want my story to end here

I roll the young man on his face and then back onto his back trying to cover his fire leg in dirt

something hits me

the old man throws another rock and this one hits the young man but I see he's aiming for my face

the woman screams *aguas* and she grabs a large branch from the ground and steps forward and jabs at me and another rock from the old man clips my ear

the man returns clutching his bucket and when he sees me he drops it and water sloshes out and tears fill his eyes the bucket is so small and the flames are almost done destroying our town

the stick and more rocks come at me through the smoke and I feel one
bounce hard off my spine

the young man's fire is out now but he's crying in pain

I step off him and turn and run away from my people

away from their doom and toward the lights of a larger one

the flames rise to the tops of the trees behind me and the hills in front of me
reflect the glow and they might as well be burning too

fire is the only future

the burn is behind me but the smoke is everywhere

without the sun or moon I don't know when day stops or night starts

I can't tell how long I've been walking away

walking not running because I can't see what's right in front of me anymore
and can't see myself

I could be something else I could be a deer or even a person

but not a bird a bird could rise above the smoke

I can't sing

my lungs are full of ugly

I look down and there are no paws

any sec I could step off a cliff

I think I've always felt this way

the smoke makes it clear

today tomorrow or yesterday

I'm fully empty

my hunger joins up with my cough and I go from walking to crawling

voices come at me through the smoke

oh he's gotten much worse says a voice since the election he's in front of the teevee twenty four seven and it's just see en en from morning till night and you know he pretends it upsets him but I think he loves it loves all the jokes and the hate and the chaos I mean I think he secretly or you know repressedly loves the guy you know and loves all the nonstop media coverage

yeah says another voice he wants to fuck the president

I know these voices are a memory and not a now

moving doesn't seem worth it and I stop and lie down with my not body and wait for something anything to shift

the memory voices leave me and the smoke stays and I close my eyes

I picture the men in the cave but they're on fire and I'm running from them

today tomorrow or yesterday

the wind changes direction and I get my body back

I put one paw in front of the other

in the burnt but open air I'm the only creature still living

I reach a clearing and there's a checkered blanket laid out and an overturned basket

things left by fleeing people

the basket is empty

I dig in a knocked over can nearby but there's only plastic and more plastic

it's on the ground too

I'm not sure how to have a body again after losing it and my desire goes in all directions

slow and starved and wanting to connect

fuck

down the hill from the clearing is a street and near the street is a giant round tent with no sides

underneath I see animals

I get closer and the animals are frozen

not from fear

of me

but because they're fake

they're painted and hard and arranged in a circle

a deer and a white horse with a horn and a big cat with a fiery swirl of hair
around its yawning mouth

they're all impaled and I go and stand with them and expect my own
impalement

the rod dropping from above and stabbing through me and holding me in
place

giving me purpose

it's the middle of the day and I'm in the middle of a field and I don't feel
exposed

what person would walk into a scorched world

I follow the street and enjoy the dead silence of a park abandoned by
everything that flies and shouts

until a sound stops me

faint but frightening

an unending roar I could never forget

another long death

I crouch by a tree and wait for the sun to set at my back to make sure I'm
facing the right way and yes I'm facing the right way and that means the
park has an end and there's no more escape

I can't do another crossing

I'm not about to die on an empty stomach

what good would that do

tonight I can smell so many animals it makes me angry

all it took was a short walk downhill to catch their scent

I'm never going toward the sunrise again

or the sunset

and the mountains are uphill so my nose takes me in the only remaining direction

and it leads me to the stench and a wall of metal poles reaching higher up than my head can look

I expect the animals I smell to be impaled here too

alive this time not fake alive and dripping blood that I can lick and lick from the metal

instead the poles are clean and I can't fit between them

I go to the top of a ridge where the poles stop and leap down onto a hard path between strange trees a kind of tree that doesn't grow on the other side of the wall

the howling starts

now these animals can smell me back

I see a deep pool of blue water and run toward it and let my tongue out to lap

but my tongue and face stop short at a hard wall

a wall I can see through but can't move through
all I taste is the smeared fingerprints of people
there are writhing hairy animals swimming in the water on the other side
anxious bodies that don't know I can't reach them
I turn and follow the path and hit another clear wall
behind this one is a god shadow perched on a cracked limb
its wings spread bigger than three vultures combined
the god shadow flaps and I pray for it to fly and find a dead thing and circle
and show me where it's rotting I'm so starved I'd eat the most rotting thing
the most dead thing
the bird looks up and in its eyes I see netting stretched tight across the night
sky
it's going nowhere
what is this place
every ten steps I take I'm at a new net or a new clear wall and there's a new
animal somewhere behind it and some shriek or some rustle erupts as I pass
my senses can't keep up
I leap up onto a low stone wall and smell something like me but unlike me
I look down into this new area and it doesn't have a net or clear wall it just
goes deep
there are cat eyes by a small stream below and the eyes meet my eyes and
judge my power

this big cat has stripes running up and down its body like claw marks like
it's been shredded

there's water dripping from its mouth and it dares me to jump down and
drink

I know this look it's the look a coyote gives me when it knows there are
other coyotes hiding in the brush or circling behind me

I leave the big cat's evil sight

have fun in your trap

I'll show you a predator

beyond a murky green pond that even I won't drink from my nostrils catch
an irresistible scent

small and sick and afraid

three of my favorite flavors

I leap another wall and this area isn't so deep so I fall toward the smell

a fat furry gray thing clutches a tree and extends its weird little tongue and
before its squeal hits my ears my teeth hit its neck and I pull it to the ground
and end its life and my starvation

every bite tastes bad

the body slowly becomes bones and now I'm alone

a spotlight hits the ground next to me and the blood on my paws shines and
I gag

there are people on the way

they won't understand

people don't have to kill things like I have to kill things

I jump as high as my stuffed body will allow and I scramble to the top of the wall

a voice shouts *oh jesus kiki*

a woman in a hat enters a gate below and waves a man over

they stand over the bones I left and the woman says to the bones *poor kiki*

I'm sorry kiki

they shouldn't have named you

the man points at me and I remember I'm visible

running makes my head hurt but I run

there are people shouts on all sides of me

more names

I run for the lights of ellay

even when I leave the park the park comes with me

the burn smell stays on my fur and in my nose and the trees continue and get split by the curving street and stand tall on either side and I choose the side with the most green and hug the hedges and try to go fast

there are buildings here much bigger and stronger than the tents in town and their doors are hard not soft

they go up and up almost as tall as the trees

I hear a car approaching and I disappear into a thick hedge

two men step out of the car and they make noise with long sticks that end in spinning blades like tiny fucking helicopters and they stand across the street and drag the blades across the hedges sending pieces of green flying up in the air

it's so green here

how

I bury myself deeper in case the men get tired of their hedge and attack mine

but they don't

when the spinning goes away I look out and see two small hikers

a man and a woman I know from the park

they step over the huge roots that pop out of the ground on their way up the hill

don't they get that the park isn't safe now

they stop in front of me like they heard my thoughts like they heard my warning

you know who lives there says the woman and she points across the street to the building beyond the trimmed hedge *that's slaughter's house*

the man takes a big swig from his water bottle and says *oh fuck really I love slaughter or y'know I loved him he's like a legend*

yeah says the woman *but his wife is younger than you*

gross says the man

gross yeah says the woman *but fully typical*

they continue to walk uphill toward danger and there's nothing I can do to stop them

I look at the house where they pointed

the name slaughter sounds good to me

like something I could do

like somewhere I belong

I nap until night and wake to a car coming to life and pulling out from in front of the slaughter house

the car lights blind me for a sec and when I can see again I cross the street and crawl through the trimmed hedge and into the thick green grass

water sprays up out of small holes in the ground and I drink until I hear another car

I run around the side of the house into an even larger grassy area in the back

when I get there I see a girl in a cloak on her knees lit by a blue lantern in a circle of sparkling stones and she holds a bowl and the bowl pushes smoke into the air

she lays the bowl on the ground in front of her and puts her head down so the cloak covers everything except her long hair and her long hair spills and licks the grass like a flame

it's a color I didn't think I could see until now

she keeps her head down and I sneak by and hug the edge of the house

I can hear her whispering

around another corner I find a hole in the hard gray stone where there's one chunk missing and it's just big enough for my body so I squeeze my body inside

I have to keep my head low but I smell mice and I crawl in the dirt toward their scent and the sound of scuttles

a mouse and a bunch of baby mice run toward my mouth and my mouth eats them

with my stomach full I keep moving and the farther under the slaughter house I go the lower the dirt sinks and the larger the space above me becomes

there's another me sized hole in another layer of gray stone and on the other side of this hole I can stand up all the way

the ground slants down into a ditch and at the edge of the ditch is a wall and at the top of the wall is a wooden platform with a wooden railing and a door and beyond the door is light

I take it all in

this is my first room

there's a dripping pipe on one side of the ditch and it gives me all the water
I could want

I sleep for what feels like days here in this dark safe spot where the sun
doesn't rise or set

confused mice come back from the outside world and run through the low
space and down into my ditch and before they even see me I trap them in
my jaws

nothing's ever been so easy

I forget the scent of the burning forest

my fur smells like earth again

my ears hear the dripping and the clicking of bugs and then they hear shouts

a man's deep voice coming from somewhere above

this must be slaughter

I go back through the hole into the low space where my head touches the
surface above me and my ears are close to the inside of the house and the
voice becomes clear

muffled by a floor is the right volume for people

*everything went fine says slaughter they're just gonna keep her there for a
few days until they know everything's still working okay with her body*

for a moment I listen to slaughter listen

yeah I mean sure he's fine he's alive he's a baby

I follow slaughter's footsteps to the edge of the low space

slaughter pounds on a wall and says a short name

I hear another voice and something in this other voice sounds kind of like
slaughter but higher and younger

like a little slaughter

the voice says *dad* and the way it says dad is the way most people say no

I curl up and let the bouncing shouts become my lullaby

these are my new people

they don't know it

there's sunlight coming from the hole in the bottom of the house

so I can tell it's day

slaughter continues his shouting

people are loud during the day and quiet at night

I roll on my back and listen to slaughter as he steps in a circle on the floor above me and I know without seeing that he's on a phone because he sounds like everyone in the park when they hold their phones to their heads or speak into their wires

no we're fine now the house is out of the danger area and anyway it's all out says slaughter but did you see they figured out the whole fire started in a homeless camp

slaughter goes quiet and I hear the sound of a bottle hitting metal and then he says *this is what happens when we let them just live up there and no one does anything about it*

his voice keeps me awake

but slaughter is a comfort

if the mice run out I can always eat him

the light leaves the hole and a possum appears and does what possums do

I grab it and make it mine and drag it back to my ditch and dig my teeth into its middle

it tastes okay but I'm distracted from my meal by the hard footsteps and slamming above and I go back into the low space

slaughter says *alright I'm leaving for the hospital last chance* and then he asks *you're not coming*

slaughter says *fine you're not coming*

slaughter says *don't come*

a door slams and then another door slams

a woman's voice pours through the floor

not a real woman no a woman in a recording singing beside music and thumps

she sings *living alone is all I've ever done well*

I go back to my possum but before I can bite a bigger thing happens

the door above me opens

a square of light hits my ditch

a person steps onto the wooden platform with a small stick held to her mouth

little slaughter blows smoke and the smoke fills the air above me and blocks her face

all I see is the flame hair from the backyard

she's not wearing a cloak anymore just a big shirt

when the cloud clears she's looking right at me

in my whole life I've been seen by only a few people and each time was a failing of my stealth and my mother's lessons

but this moment is not like those moments

my gaze meets hers and I don't feel guilty for being seen

there's not even a whiff of fear

I summoned you says little slaughter

and in our eyes it feels right

stay says little slaughter and I do

she goes back out the door and a moment later the music stops and I realize I'm waiting for her to return

she returns and she has a handful of shredded goo and she tosses the goo down to me

I leave my possum and go to the goo and sniff it and it's meat and I lick it and it's tasty

there you go heckit says little slaughter and then she says *eww*

she wipes her hand on her shirt

I'm vegan says little slaughter *or I'm trying to be*

as I eat I keep my eyes on her

I want her to know I'm grateful

good girl heckit says little slaughter *I'm so glad you're here*

she kneels and watches me chew and this unhunted food is too easy

I love it

time goes by and I hear slaughter come in and shout and then go out again

and when he goes out again little slaughter comes to visit me

good morning heckit she says and she throws me meat

her daily offering

she holds out a large water bottle and pours and I go to the trickle and catch the liquid in my mouth and little slaughter smiles and doesn't stop pouring until the bottle is empty and as the container quenches my thirst I get why the hikers carry them

I try to make sense of the word she keeps saying *heckit* and after a few days of feedings I realize she's giving me a name

heckit

I'll take it

I can't tell her my real one

my mother gave it to me when she first saw me lick blood off my lips

it's not made of noises a person can make

now that my water supply is endless the sky decides to rain

I watch it pour down through the crack in the low space and the dirt beneath me becomes mud and little creeks form

my lack of thirst makes me hate the water and I leave the low space and when I get to my ditch I watch the creeks wash down into it

my paws get wet and then the legs above the paws get wet and then my dangling part and the underside of my belly get wet

each time I shake myself dry more water rushes in

I claw the edges of the ditch but I can barely get a grip and each new motion feels useless

where was this water when we needed it

when it could have helped

my paws catch a dry spot and I lift myself out of the ditch

the weight of the water on my fur wears me out and I find the driest corner and curl up and let the rhythm of drops put me to sleep

I wake up because I'm drowning

the water's above my head and there are no dry spots left on the ground

I kick against the wall and roll onto my back and float and push water out of my nose and grab a hard breath but I'm too soaked to stay on the surface and my soak pulls me down to the bottom of the room

in the dark water I see the hole to the low space and it's also underwater

there's no way outside

I think of the creatures I saw swimming and try to make their movements with my front legs

the water splashes but I don't rise

with every flail I think of every bad move I've made to get to this moment

I see my mother lying still beneath my father and I see the kill sharer lying still beside the long death and I see my own body lying still in the flood

with my last breath I think the word please

let me start over

a hard object hits my back and I claw my way onto it

a wood plank rising up like a ramp to the platform and the railing above

I walk three steps and leap to the platform and knock little slaughter backward and she lets go of the plank

I crouch and cough out water and little slaughter says *shh* and she grips my wet fur *shh it's okay heckit I'm here*

she takes me down a long thin space and into a bright room and she lays a soft cloth on the ground and wraps me up in it and rolls me onto my back and everything is a blur like my head's still underwater

all I can see is little slaughter's big shirt

on the shirt is a yellow animal with a long neck and I reach out and touch the animal

little slaughter says *oh this is dumb a friend gave it to me for my birthday*

she holds my paw and moves it slowly across the writing below the long necked animal and she says *it says* and then she speaks to me slow in the voice people use when they're reading out loud

not all giraffes are real

the rain is stopping says little slaughter

I'm very dry now and I try to stand and I succeed

little slaughter says *sorry you had to be down in the cellar I don't even know what it is it's just cuz the house is built into the hill but you're here now this*

is our space

my eyes are back to normal and I look around the room at the soft ground and the splashes of color on the walls and the green outside the big slabs of glass

little slaughter says *dad never comes in here*

there's another big cat across the room

oh says little slaughter and she walks over to the cat and I follow her and the cat gets closer

we reach a hard wall and I see there are two of her and I push my face against the hard flat cat

it's just your reflection says little slaughter

there is so much more of me here than the nose and mouth I see in the black screens of dropped phones

I can't touch myself

little slaughter brings in a box of weird sand and puts it in the corner and says *you can go to the bathroom here*

I don't know what she means but I take a chance and piss and shit in the sand and bury it and that's what she wants and she takes the box out of the room and brings it back fresh

this used to be for my cat says little slaughter *but he died two years ago and dad won't let me get another because beth is allergic to like every animal*

little slaughter shows me her sofa and tells me it's my sofa now and I hop onto it and it's exactly my size

she talks and I listen

I learn about longing

I get most of my new words from her

she makes a circle of sparkling stones around my sofa and kneels and feeds
me from her outstretched palm and calls me her goddess

if you feel alone in the world

find someone to worship you

little slaughter sleeps at night and I sleep in the day so we watch over each other

she spends most of her awake time on her phone

laughing to herself and pushing the surface with her fingers

she holds the screen to my face and says *look heckit I found a picture of you you're famous*

I look and it's just a bright blur

the phone shudders in her hand

ugh says little slaughter this guy keeps texting me he thinks just cuz we've run into each other three times since graduation we're meant to be or whatever but I don't believe in coincidences he can bite my ass

she throws the phone and I go to get it for her and she laughs and says *leave it*

I look again at the picture

that can't be me it doesn't have a smell

I don't trust screens to tell me who I am

I'm sorry heckit says little slaughter as she feeds me an apple because I've eaten enough apples

dad hasn't gone shopping cuz he's always at the hospital I'm running out of meat for you

even here we're in scare city

they're bringing the baby home tomorrow says little slaughter and the way she says baby makes me wonder if she wants to offer the baby to me for my next meal

she says whatever I'll be gone soon and dad'll be happy and beth will be thrilled they can just be happy here with their baby

I roll sideways on the sofa and she sits with me and rubs my head like park people rub the heads of their dogs

am I a pet

she says next month I'm going to santa fey to do my photography there are a lot of witches in the desert and I can't wait to get as far away as possible and then I'm gonna go work at the border and take pictures of what's really happening but I need to get better with my spanish

she tells me words in spanish

denada

gato

agua

in my head it's all people language

little slaughter says *you can come with me you can eat ice*

when she's asleep I see a small set of eyes in the darkness outside

a cat

I can't smell it but I can see blood on its little mouth from a fresh kill

the cat looks through the glass and it looks through me

like why aren't I out hunting why am I inside

why isn't this person my prey

my mouth falls open and I can hear the blood inside little slaughter

she wakes up and stands up and the cat eyes disappear

she asks if I'm comfy

that small word

yes

and no

I lick my paws and little slaughter reads to me off her phone

facts about big cats

she says *because of people you're becoming more and more isolated from one another*

she says *sorry*

she reads *chronic stress can result in low reproductive rates when in captivity*

she strokes my back and tells me about my characteristic neck bite

I feel more like a person than ever because I'm starting to hate myself

I look around at all the space I have and I think of all the other space in this house and in every house on this street and in all of ellay and I think how the people of my town could be here too

instead of burning in the woods

this is my second room

it's so much nicer than my first

I don't belong here either

the baby comes home and cries most of the day and night through
our wall

the shouts of slaughter come home too and also the small voice of a woman
and when the woman's small voice happens the shouts of slaughter get
softer but only for a short time

we treasure the pauses

in a long pause little slaughter sneaks chicken in to me and I gnaw on a leg
and she spends the night telling me about a place called diznee

she tells me she wants to take me

*you'd love diznee says little slaughter there're animals everywhere and all
we have to do is jump in a car and get on the freeway and gun it to seventy
and we're there*

I close my eyes and pictures appear

*I used to want to work at diznee says little slaughter if I worked there I'd be
the evil queen but when she's an old witch and I'd go around and scare kids
and shit*

I fall asleep and have my first dream since before the fire

when I wake up my body is moving faster than it's ever moved

gunning it to seventy

my eyes open and the blurry distance stands still but the world right outside
the car shoots by at unbelievable speed

my paws are up on the dashboard and I'm sitting in the passenger seat

I turn my head and little slaughter smiles and rubs my back as she drives

I'm so much bigger than her and my body takes up the whole right front of
the car

get excited heckit she says we're on our way to diznee

she lets go of me and grips the wheel

this is the long death from the inside

I look out and think I see the body of the kill sharer but no it's a bag

other cars pass and people turn their heads and smile and children press
their little hands and faces to the glass and scream silently

*it's your birthday little slaughter says you're turning five and that's like
thirty five in cat years*

this is your prime

it's weirdly quiet in the car like we're in a bubble protected from the
speeding world outside

the world outside slows down and our car goes up in the air and leaves the long death below

here we are says little slaughter

we stop next to a bunch of other cars and she jumps out and runs around and pops open my door and my big body falls out and I'm on all four feet again watching kids and adults and more people than I've ever seen swarm out of their cars and make a river of feet moving toward the sunlight

little slaughter claps and I look up and she's wearing a sparkling blue jumpsuit and ears like a mouse

did she change or

we join the river of feet and we go down moving stairs and a polished sidewalk me running beside her

I smell something so different that it's hard to describe and as we come to a stop and as the river of people forms a long slow moving line I realize it's not what I smell it's what I don't smell

no one is afraid

we reach a turnstile and I start to walk under it but a woman says *wait*

little slaughter smiles at the woman and the woman smiles back

is this a service animal asks the woman

yes she's my emotional support cat says little slaughter *and I have her papers right here*

she reaches in the pocket of her jumpsuit but the woman says *no you're fine*

the woman lifts my paw and presses a small wooden object gently against it

this is your hand stamp for reentry in case you leave the park says the woman

oh we won't says little slaughter *but thanks* and she moves my paw and gets her own hand stamped

now a quick picture says the woman and little slaughter turns her face and I hear an electric click from the device

now her turn says the woman and little slaughter grasps my neck and tilts my face up and says *smile for the picture heckit* and I do I smile

the only time a cat has done that

music and voices are everywhere inside the gates

there are other animals big animals with soft fur and faces and they stand upright and hug and blend in with the people all the people the people with their own ears and hats and bright objects and no one thinks I'm strange at all

and some of the kids come over and pet me and little slaughter lets them and they say *she's beautiful* and little slaughter says *it's her birthday* and the kids tie a birthday ribbon around my neck and we walk down the wide main street together

there's a bench beneath a castle and little slaughter sits me down there and says *stay*

I stay and enjoy my stillness within all the motion around me

as soon as I get hungry food appears

a huge bird leg that little slaughter holds out to me and she has her own and she sits down on the bench and she tears into the fat flesh

I look around and others are eating these big ugly meats too so I slobber and chew and join in

gory gory feasting

so far from scare city

you must be this tall to ride says little slaughter in the reading voice

she stands by a sideways stick in the air and holds her hand out to measure its height

stand up heckit she says and I stand up like the other big animals in diznee and now my neck is above the sideways stick

I'm a good emotional support cat and I'll be tall for her

perfect says little slaughter and we run to the front of the line and they strap us into a log and water sloshes over the sides and she clutches my back and the ride begins

there's darkness and color and animals singing and animals being tortured and each time we go over a cliff my stomach slams up into my throat and I feel amazing

when we get off the ride we're soaked so I shake myself dry and everyone around us screams and enjoys the water raining off me

look heckit there we are says little slaughter and she points to a screen and I see the screen clearly and on it we're going down the big cliff and little slaughter has her hands up and her hands block the faces of the people in the ride behind us and I look so scared of my own happiness

I love the photos says little slaughter *now even if we leave we'll still be here*

we wait in a line surrounded by glowing wooden statues

it reminds me of the forest when I was a kitten when I loved the sunlight and there was more green than there ever would be again

this is worth it says little slaughter *it's my favorite thing in the world*

the glowing wooden statues shake and make noise

that one's the goddess of fire says little slaughter as we step forward

and this one causes earthquakes

she touches a branch and it sings

these trees are alive and fake

the line moves again and little slaughter gets her favorite thing in the world

it's yellow and cold and she holds one for both of us and licks hers and says *mmmm* and holds mine out for me but she holds it up high and says *okay heckit if you want this you have to stand up again and stay standing* and I do what she says again and like magic I'm fully upright licking too

I'm taller than little slaughter now

we walk through more forests fake and real and out into a fantasy

and the day fades to night and the lights come on at the castle and more transformation happens

I look at her and she looks at me and she's no longer in a jumpsuit and mouse ears no she's changed again when I wasn't looking and she's wearing a dark dress and a jeweled crown

I'm on two legs and it feels permanent

a person in a cat suit

my paws drop to my sides and they're ready to grasp

little slaughter says *I'm the queen now the evil queen and you're my emotional support goddess*

we pass a line of people shuffling like there's something great at the end
and as we get to the end I see a throne and a sofa at the top of some stairs
and I know the throne is for little slaughter and the sofa is for me

up there is where we belong

at the top of the stairs we take our places

little slaughter seated and clutching the arms of the throne like she was born
there and me sprawled out the whole length of the sofa scratching its fabric
and licking my paws to a regal polish

the people at the front of the line come to us and pose

a photographer flashes picture after picture and everyone who comes up and
stands with us smiles because they know that the photos mean even after
they leave they'll still be here

the line moves but stays just as large and it stretches into the distance and
for once I can see the distance instead of the usual blur and I can see all the
way over the disney buildings and across the faraway lights of elly and I
can see the dark mountains below the hollywood sign where I think I must
be must be asleep and dreaming this

because how

more flashes come from the camera and more smiles come from the people
assembled around us

the birthday ribbon around my neck swells and I want to speak

so I do

at the sound of my voice the stairs shift and start to move forward

the throne and sofa are now the top of a parade float

costumed animals appear and begin the parade and our float follows

our people below part to both sides of the wide street and they cheer and take their own pictures and wave their huge bird legs and twirl their shining sticks

pinks and reds like sparks of blood and thought

our people shower us with cheers as we reach the end of the main street and I see the exit and think no no don't let it be over

the float slowly turns around so we can face back the way we came

look up says little slaughter look all the way up

I tilt my spinning head back

fireworks

the fireworks explode in the shape of little slaughter's face and explode in the shape of my face and in the night sky we're smiling exactly like we smiled in the photos they took at the turnstiles

I look at little slaughter's real face lit up by her firework face and she rubs my head

a storm of eyes is on us from our people below

I lift my goddess paw and wave at them and they all wave back

we're here heckit we made it says little slaughter we're in the happiest place on earth

our sky faces fall apart and rain down and leave smoke

the scream that fills my ears lets me know that I'm waking up for real

diznee is gone and I'm back in little slaughter's room

a woman stands in the doorway and she's making the scream

she gasps and then she is quieter than I thought a person could be

she holds a big sucking machine on the floor and it makes a big sucking sound

until she slides it at me fast and hard and it knocks the table next to my sofa and stops making a sucking sound and the lamp falls off onto the carpet and breaks into pieces

I look at the woman and she is frozen like she's expecting me to move first to indulge her I lick a paw

clean and peaceful

she runs away and I hear more of her screams and I feel powerful and also guilty as fuck

I look at the lamp in pieces on the floor

I can't fix this

I have no idea what it's like to be a person and to be confronted with a me

the carpet is ruined already by the shards of lamp so I get down off my sofa and scratch and scratch at it and try to claw words into the floor to explain

myself

but when I climb back onto the sofa and look down at my work it's jagged
strips with no order or meaning

someday I'll be able to write what you're reading

maybe in santa fey with little slaughter

telling every word to her

or on the other side of the world from the burning hills

in new york with a therapist

maybe I'll write it from an okay future a future where I'm safe

or maybe it won't ever get written

only growled

little slaughter enters the room and the room feels right again with her in it

but she is acting wrong

*shit shit she says I'm so sorry heckit I forgot that marie comes mondays
fuck*

she sits on the sofa and I jump up and lay out and put my head in her lap
and she pets me for a sec before standing and leaving me for her drawers

okay okay we're just gonna have to go to santa fey early she says

I can see the decision in her eyes and in the way she grabs a bag and unzips
it and tears open every drawer and stuffs clothes and shoes into the bag

*what do you need heckit you need food lots of food okay okay little
slaughter says and each word gets faster as it comes out*

she comes back over to me and puts her forehead to my forehead

you didn't do anything bad she says you're perfect I just fucked up

there's the sound of a car outside and little slaughter freezes like marie froze when she saw me

her tiny fear voice says *dad's home*

this is slaughter the man not just slaughter the voice

but his voice came in with him and it fills the room

jane get back he says to little slaughter and grabs her and pulls her toward the door and she throws him off and comes back to me and he yells *goddammit do what I say*

slaughter is smaller than I expected and he has only a little bit of hair on his head and the little bit of hair he has is white

he's holding a long smooth stick in one fist and he points it at me

get away from it he yells *jane come over here*

little slaughter puts her hands on her hips and doesn't move

he slams the door and locks it behind him and says *beth is calling the cops jane this is serious you need to come over here with me*

the air in the room is hot with slaughter here

it's a cougar jane he says *it's a goddamn cougar*

is that what I am

the door jiggles and bangs

slaughter flattens his body against it and he checks that it's locked

a woman's voice comes from behind the door shouting *what's going on jack*
I just saw marie take off

did you call the cops slaughter yells at the door and the door yells *call them*
and tell them what

just go be with the baby yells slaughter and then he turns to little slaughter
and says *jesus jane the baby the baby's here*

little slaughter stays still and I stay still with her and we could be a picture
we're so not moving

slaughter looks around the room and sees the broken lamp and the mess of
drawers and he says the first quiet thing I've heard him say he says *why is*
your suitcase out

you wanna have a baby dad fine yells little slaughter *you wanna date a*
baby fine but I get a fucking baby too

I'm not the problem now yells slaughter *you are the problem now this is the*
problem

he points the stick at me and I notice his throat

look shouts little slaughter *she's mine she's okay*

slaughter holds the stick with both hands and steps forward

little slaughter holds her hands out flat in front of her like it will add to her
power

she's not gonna bite me says little slaughter

she puts her head by my mouth and I don't bite her

she's not gonna claw me

she lifts my paw up to her side and I don't claw her and she lets go and I drop my paw and dangle it off the sofa in the least scary way I can

she won't even move

I don't even move

slaughter's hands turn purple he's gripping the stick hard

I try to purr and it comes out wrong

I'm so good but things don't get better

how long have you had this in the house jane

forever dad for fucking ever

jane get over here

what

jane this isn't okay

dad put the bat away you don't need it she's good

you keep saying she she what the hell jane

yeah dad this is heckit she's mine and I'm hers

I can see its goddamn dick

fuck you

jane

fuck that and fuck you dad

little slaughter rushes forward and unlocks the door and slaughter runs to stop her and lets the stick fall to his side and little slaughter is gone and

another person replaces her in the doorway and says *jack what the fuck is going on with your daughter*

beth wait says slaughter

the new woman sees me and of course the new woman freezes everyone freezes or runs those are the two things everyone does except for little slaughter and I want her in here but she's not here where did she go

jack it's the mountain lion says the new woman *what* says slaughter *it's thee mountain lion you haven't read about it it lives in the park*

is this fame

well now it's fucking here says slaughter and the woman says *jack we have a baby* and then the woman does the other thing that everyone does she runs

slaughter raises the stick again but he steps backward instead of forward and reaches out a hand to grip the doorknob and starts to slowly close the door

a scream happens

jack shouts the woman from down the hall *jack where's the baby the baby's gone*

slaughter runs after her down the hall and takes his shouting with him

I have a moment to think

after searching my head I don't have any thoughts and I use my eyes and I look over at the reflection on the closet doors

in the room inside the glass I see an unplugged sucking machine on its side

I see a shattered lamp on the floor

I see rips in the carpet from claws

I see an open suitcase and drawers pulled out

I see the green blur of trees behind the sofa

I see a circle of stones and cards and candles

I see myself

I see myself

it's time to leave

little slaughter runs back in with a full backpack and slams the door and locks it

she runs to me and holds me tight

don't worry heckit she says the baby's fine I just moved his little bed thing into the laundry room so we've got like fifteen minutes till they find him but he's good he's got his little binky and everything

I don't worry about the baby

little slaughter stuffs one more pile of clothes into her suitcase and throws the backpack over her shoulder

she jingles keys at me like it's a game

it's not a game

here we go she says and she runs to the glass wall behind the sofa and pushes it to the side and pats her leg and I go over to her

she gestures for me to move forward and I do

there's nothing between me and the outside

I'm stretched across the back seat and little slaughter is driving

I have some room back here

stay down says little slaughter *stay down for now okay*

I feel the car speeding and turning and turning

then we stop and I almost roll off the seat and I claw my way back up to sitting

shit says little slaughter and the car moves very slowly stopping and starting and it's not at all like the speed of my diznee dream

the car is a quiet bubble though and I enjoy the quiet after the screaming and running and breaking in the slaughter house

traffic it's traffic heckit she says *it's going to take us a while to get out of this and hit the freeway*

little slaughter drums her fingers on the steering wheel and the car edges forward

I can see her reflection and her eyes are angry and afraid but smiling at me

she says *now we're stuck here getting cancer like everybody else*

when we come to a full stop again little slaughter takes her hands off the wheel and grabs a bag and rips it open and turns around in her seat and pours chunks of dried meat out in front of me

I eat them

good girl says little slaughter

it's nice to be fed and praised at the same time

I wish you could talk back to me says little slaughter and she faces forward and the car moves again and she keeps talking

fucking rush owver of course clear keep it says on the street clear and then keep in that order when you're going slow that's how I always read it

I nod but I don't know what she's talking about and she meets my eyes again in the reflection and she watches me swallow and reaches back and touches my leg

say something she says please heckit I'm not talking to myself for this entire drive so just say something

I want to

I open my mouth

okay fuck this says little slaughter *we're going through the neighborhood*

she turns the wheel and we speed right and for a moment we're going faster but then we stop again and little slaughter bangs a hand on the steering wheel and sinks her head against it

she turns and caresses my back and I can feel her frustration in every pet

really stay down now heckit there's people everywhere here I'm sorry but you have to stay down and don't look out

I love her and I'm thankful for the time we've spent together

whether she summoned me or I found her

I'm excited for her image of our future

a life far away

I let her pet me harder than I want to be petted

and I listen close when she says *stay down stay down*

but when she lets go and looks away I do the opposite

from inside the car I see all the people

some walk and some sit and they all hold phones and tap on them

and at the tables that take up most of the sidewalk across the street the people drink and eat and talk and don't talk

there is a lot going on but all I see is one person alone at a table in the middle of all the tables and it's a person I know

it's a neck I know

the man with the whip

I watch his neck that familiar neck but I also watch his hands they move up and down as he eats and I think of how easily those hands can make fire and how easily that fire can destroy tents and a town and burn a forest

every person sitting and walking has hands too and I see all their hands and I know what their hands can do and what their hands would do and the violence waiting behind every motion

I learn something new

I learn I can open a car door

on quiet midnights back in the caves I could almost imagine that all
the people were gone

canyons cleared of their footsteps and voices and cars

the long deaths standing still

trees expanding and their green swallowing the buildings and returning the
original smells

returning what's needed

I could see myself leaving the park and walking through an empty ellay

slow and safe with all the other animals

back to the deep forest and the forever water and the sun setting

people can't see it but I can

their end makes everything okay

scare city isn't scare city with no one around to say its name

I open the car door and jump out onto the street and it's only a
street only a short death and I cross it quickly with the cars all
stopped

when I reach the man with the whip there are fewer people because they've
dropped their bags and kicked their chairs and run away

but the man with the whip doesn't see me until I'm in leaping distance

and so I leap and my claws connect with his chest and I knock him back
and he falls out of his chair and his face hits the sidewalk and his nose
sprays blood

he rolls over and looks up and I'm pinning him down

where's your whip now I think where's your fire

his neck vein bulges like a wish come true

I can smell his blood on the pavement and I'm not at all hungry

this is not about need

no this is want

it's a terrible choice but I'm making it

just like a person

my teeth tear into his neck tear right through the vein and my jaws clamp
and twist and do what they're meant to do and his body cracks under my
weight and he stops moving

his blood fills my stomach

warm rain

I look up and my head clears and I remember little slaughter

she's the only person outside and she's standing in the middle of the street
by her open car doors

her eyes are on my eyes and

my eyes shoot fireworks

she sees the dead man and she sees that I made him that way and her fists
clench and she shudders like an earthquake

we meet for the first time

hello little slaughter

this is what a goddess looks like

she steps back and slams the door that I opened and she gives me one last
glance

I would only slow you down little slaughter

you've got so many miles to go

she gets in the front seat and shuts the door

good girl

I look down at the man with the whip who is now the man with no whip and
no life

I look down at his open throat

his hands aren't hands anymore they're just useless hunks of white
little slaughter starts the car
I'm letting her go
there's blood all over my body
my mother would be so proud
little slaughter's car finds an opening and she speeds away
a big car sound replaces her little car sound in the air
many cars and their mechanical howls coming closer and
then I hear the sky sound I remember from the mountain a fucking
helicopter
not a rescue chopper to carry me somewhere safe
but the kind that circles close and blinds with its light
I hear the whirring and it gets louder than the cars and I know the sound is
coming for me and the people inside the sound are coming for me
there's nowhere to go
I'm done with thickets and caves and rooms and I'm sick of being outside
I step away from my prey
his thick empty body is too heavy to hide
I'm only sorry I didn't get to eat all of you
the howling cars form a mess in the street
lights swirl everywhere

padded people leave the cars and surround me and point long objects

these aren't sticks

they shout so loud at one another that I can't tell what they're saying

I can't listen anymore

the fucking helicopter's whirring is right above us and the padded people look up and then look back at me and what I see in their eyes is what they see in mine

a threat

I retract my claws and try to become the kitten at the center of my self

maybe the padded people know why I did what I did

maybe they understand

I say something

it sounds like words

it's not what they want to hear

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A Note About the Author



[Henry Hoke](#) is an editor at *The Offing* and a writer whose work has appeared in *No Tokens*, *Triangle House Review*, *Electric Literature*, and the flash noir anthology *Tiny Crimes*. He co-created the performance series *Enter>text* in Los Angeles and has taught at CalArts and the UVA Young Writers Workshop. He lives in New York City. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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