Animal Acts
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“I am not a cat lady,” my mother declares, a bag of Whiskas under her arm and a Maine coon at her feet. She marches through the laundry room to answer the lament of a portly calico who is kept locked in the pantry. “No, you stay out here, Don Diego,” she cautions the Maine coon. “Mrs. Gummidge has yet to reconcile herself to other cats. Thus she remains in self-imposed exile here in the pantry.” My mother manages to slip into Gummidge’s chamber without Don Diego. “Well, Gummidge. You didn’t finish your white albacore. Why didn’t Gummidge finish her white albacore, pray tell?” She directs the question to the calico, while referring to her in the third person—the way, in Batman, that Alfred speaks to Bruce Wayne. Master Wayne wishes not to entertain any guests this evening? “Gummidge desires that I take this tiresome tuna away and present her, in its stead, with some fresh Whiskas—or perhaps some Science Diet? Yes, Gummidge needs a new snackie.” She moves from butler talk to baby talk. “Gummidge finished with dat tunie. She done.”

My mother emerges from pantry, the china plate of abandoned albacore in one hand, the now slightly lighter package of Whiskas in the other. She is wearing a calf-length pink cotton skirt and a discarded t-shirt of my brother’s that bears, down the front, the word “paranoia” six times. Her hair hangs
down to the middle of her back. Though it is gradually becoming more and more white, for years it was a deep copper, with just two silver streaks that framed her face. The streaks had been a lineament of her icon in my childhood; several of my classmates had believed her to be a witch, citing the strange strands of silver, symbols of age that stood in contrast to her still-youthful face. My mother has some wrinkles now, but her lips remain overly full, defiantly young. Only months ago, a Walmart one-hour photo clerk mistook her for my wife. She is an age chameleon.

“Sit down, Carol,” she says to my aunt, the sister of my father, who waits for her in the kitchen. “I’m just going to run upstairs and quickly change.”

“Take your time,” Carol calls. My mother is usually an obsessive hostess, assaulting guests with hot chocolate and pillows, items of sustenance and comfort. But Carol comes over almost every day now. She is slender, with recently bleached blond hair and red lipstick. She had once embarked on a Broadway career, but aborted it, opting to marry and raise a family. Still, she is revered by community theatregoers throughout the greater Kalamazoo area. Her husband, Jerry, recently had an affair with an amateur country-western singer named Debbie. He is now divorcing Carol. She has taken to self-medication, frequently preparing cocktails of vodka and various anti-anxiety pills.

My mother returns in a purple skirt with intricate black designs, a luminous gold short-sleeved shirt, and alligator boots. “Want to visit Gummidge?” she asks.

“Oh, not right now, Kit,” Carol replies. “In a bit, though. I’ll see plenty of her.” Carol has agreed to help my mother take Mrs. Gummidge to the vet’s this afternoon.

“She’s awfully forlorn, you know.”

A one-time filmmaker, poet, mixed-media artist, and high school English teacher, my mother has not created work since our house burned down in 1986, destroying her reels, assemblages, and manuscripts. Since that time, she has, however, devoted herself to the twenty-four-hour-a-day interactive performance/installation of caring for, integrating herself into, taking over and dramatizing the lives of cats. While critics, historians, neighbors, and the mailman all classify this piece as quintessential Theatre of the Cat Lady, my mother often entitles it I Am Not a Cat Lady. This could be understood as a surrealist strategy, akin to that which Magritte employed in his painting of a pipe, accompanied by a caption that reads, “This Is Not a Pipe.” Or perhaps I am Not a Cat Lady is in line with the philosophe-religious texts of Simone Weil, who asserted that contradiction is the test of reality. My mother, the cat lady who is not, wishes to keep her relationship to the cats unexplained,
to create a void, a momentary evacuation of meaning where something unpredictable might happen. A vacancy might be created and God might show up to fill it. Who knows?

Similarly, my mother summons the void in her baby talk to cats. A militant grammarian, she is prone to suddenly deny her understanding of subject/object and past/present, affect a speech impediment, and recite Elmer
Fuddian incantations. I remember once doing my middle school algebra assignment at the kitchen table, in the company of my mother and our cat Cubby, a former stray with one ear who bore a remarkable resemblance to a baby bear cub and who had taught himself to sit up and beg and wave for treats, play fetch, and a variety of other circus bear tricks. As Cubby blankly watched my pencil in the erratic movement of equation solving, my mother announced, in baby talk, “Cubs don’t do ‘rithmatic! No. Him don’t do no ’rithmatic.” She pushed her lips out in a half pout, half kiss, tensing her mouth. She spoke in spite of the tension. “Himm dona doo ‘riffmatick,” she repeated insistently. She chanted the phrase over and over, distorting the words more and more each time, pursing her lips more intensely; she spoke as if she simultaneously wanted to be Cubby, make out with him, and eat him. Just gobble him up. She would have cuddled with him if she could have been sure she wouldn’t have let herself go in a moment of Lenny-like over-exuberance. Instead, she cuddled, morbidly, with language itself. As Warhol dissolved the aura of celebrity through his serial representation of famous faces, as the Marquis de Sade used his characters’ repetition of criminal and perverse acts to purge those acts of their meaning, so my mother, through repetition, flushed all the logic out of the fact that a cat can’t do math.

“Don Diego is named after Zorro’s alter ego, a dandyish fellow that nobody ever suspects of being Zorro,” my mother begins to explain to Carol, apropos of nothing in particular. “Why, no one would imagine, while watching our Don Diego in the pantry, daintily nibbling on his Fancy Feast, that when he ventures into the yard, he becomes a virile and mysterious hero. Mrs. Gummidge is named after the widow in David Copperfield. Our Gummidge also weeps, perpetually, in her own plaintive mew.”

The Dr. Moreau of interior decorating, my mother sits among strange mixtures of animal prints, in her dark laboratory of excess. Zebra print pillows populate the sofa, a deep orange leopard rug spreads across the living room floor, and peacock feathers peak out from the ceramic Chinese umbrella holder. The alligator boots my mother has put on her feet are the variable in today’s experiment in hybridity. She strokes Cleopatra, the chubby Siamese who sits next to her, on one of the five luxurious cat beds that have been set up for Cleopatra in the living room.

My mother continues to psychoanalyze the cats before Carol, who nods quietly and smiles her actress’s smile, the corners of her mouth rising up, only to turn slightly downward at the last moment, like a firework, streaking up to the sky, and failing to explode.

Carol is afflicted with Sjogren’s syndrome, a rare condition that makes one unable to produce tears. When she cries, she must squeeze drops of
saline solution into her eyes. In life and on the stage, Carol is an actress incapable of summoning tears. She often arrives on the porch, Visine in hand, coming to present my mother with a new plot to sabotage Jerry—or win him back. “Kit, I’ve got it. We can plant a camera in his apartment, and catch him. In the act . . . Or maybe I should just write him a long letter, tell him that I love him. What do you think?”

Carol brings plans to my mother like densely tangled knots. My mother carefully unties each one. While my mother frequently talks Carol out of her outrageous plans, she sometimes trumps Carol with cabals of her own. Several weeks ago, enacting a plan of my mother’s, the two broke into Jerry’s office in the middle of the night to steal financial documents.

On Carol’s more manic days, she greets my mother on a sustained pitch, at the top of her rich mezzo-soprano voice, and the two women exchange operatic dialogue for a few moments, before Carol inevitably goes careening into an aria about the tawdriness of Jerry’s mistress. “That Debbie is a sluuuuuuut!” she shrieks.

Carol talks about the divorce obsessively. She refers, in a histrionic southern accent, to the upcoming hearing as mah trah-uhl. “Aw, Kit, you gotta come tuh mah trah-uhl and testifah! You can say, ‘Mistuh Jerry and Miss Debbie? Wha yee-uhs, ah saw them two—togethah!’”

Today, though, Carol is subdued—not despondent and not at peace, just still. Well acquainted with the pantheon of pussies that people my mother’s mythologies, Carol does not mind listening to the stream of anecdotes.

“I don’t know what to do with Gummidge,” my mother sighs, rising from the sofa. She walks to the antique cabinet across the room. It is an heirloom, one of few that survived, having been in storage at the time of the fire. “She’s sick. Moaning all the time. I think we’re making the right decision, taking her out to the vet’s,” she says.

“Yes,” affirms Carol. My mother draws a silver Jacobsen’s Department Store box from the cabinet. She sits back down and opens it. It is filled with photographs of cats. My mother is not a linear person, and the images are not organized chronologically.

My mother shows Carol pictures of Little Fox, the cat to whom she used to sing her original lullaby, “Cuddle Cats,” in retaliation to my father’s saying he abhorred the word “cuddle.”

_We’re just a couple of cuddle cats, cuddling all day long_  
_We’re just a couple of cuddle cats, that’s why I’m singing this song_  
_Cuddling, cuddling, cuddling all day long_
My mother shuffles past a black-and-white photograph of a cat that catches Carol’s eye. “Which one is that?” Carol asks.

“Hmm?” my mother hums.

“The gray one,” Carol says. The cat appears to be gray, but as the picture was taken in black and white, the cat could have been, in real life, orange, deep cream, or pale brown.

“I don’t want to talk about that one,” my mother says, abandoning her gentle, nostalgic tone.

“Why not? What’s his name?” asks Carol. My mother speaks a Z-word name that Carol forgets immediately. Then she pauses, and inhales slowly through her nose.

“My second husband was a painter and a drunk. His temper was un governable. He used to come home and throw his paints against the wall. One night he came home and threw that cat against the wall.”

“He killed it,” Carol gasps. My mother silently returns Carol’s gaze.

“There have been three people I haven’t been able to save. That cat was one of them. The first two were my best friends. David Grant. We were best friends in high school. Then we both went to the University of Michigan. He was an art major. He had an original Andy Warhol print in his apartment. And Patricia Alexander. We sang ‘The House of the Rising Sun’ together for the high school talent show. She went to school out of state. Each of them got married shortly after college. And I lost them.”

“To marriage?” asks Carol.

“David was gay, but he was in denial. He left his wife and moved out to San Francisco. But he couldn’t deal with his sexuality. He jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. And Patricia. One night her husband found her. Hanged in the shower. A suicide, but I’ve never believed it. She wasn’t the type. For years, I’ve had dreams about her being trapped under the stairs, trying to escape, and me not being able to save her. Sometimes in the dreams I am inside her body, trapped inside her body, and trapped under the stairs, trying to make noise, trying to call out, and not being able to…” she pauses.

“I think Patricia was murdered by her husband.

“I’m the one who lost myself to marriage. But I saved myself. I fell in love with Laurence way too young. At eighteen. But he was handsome and very well read. He started beating me as soon as we married, especially in the abdomen. It’s a miracle Evan wasn’t miscarried. Laurence broke my hands and my nose. He beat me until I was unrecognizable. One time Laurence made
me a sandwich. I thought how uncharacteristic. Braunschweiger. He had hidden an enormous amount of LSD inside. For hours I saw only red and green. I stepped into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and saw a reptile staring back. One morning I packed up some things, whisked up Evan, and got out. I became unrecognizable on my terms. I changed my name from Elizabeth Hartsorn to Clare de Lanvallei, the name of an English ancestor of mine who was among the signers of the Magna Carta. Then after the second husband I finally married Rick. Then I had Joseph, fourteen years after having Evan. When I married Rick I just threw all my old names together. My legal name is Clare Christina Elizabeth Christine Hartsorn de Lanvallei McKay.” My mother chuckles at her many names.

Carol feels the urge to cry, and begins to root, nervously, through her purse full of medications. She pulls out her Visine drops and drowns her eyes in saline.

“The hour approaches, Carol,” my mother says.

“Let’s do it,” Carol says, dabbing at her Visine tears with a tissue. Carol waits on the porch, as my mother has instructed. She smokes an extra-long Marlboro Light as my mother singlehandedly wrestles Gummidge into a cat carrier at the back of the house, and loads her into the silver station wagon. My mother pulls up the car.

When my father, a lanky man with a few wisps of black hair remaining on his mostly bare head, arrives home, no one else is there. He is coming from the grocery store that he manages. He places a carton of milk, a package of sliced turkey breast, and a bag of apples into the refrigerator and exhaustedly sits down at the kitchen table, a sea of the last two weeks’ newspapers. He begins idly reading one of them through his square framed glasses. He remains there for thirty minutes before my mother and Carol come bursting through the door, cat carrier in hand.

“Roxy has an announcement to make!” my mother shouts.

“Who’s Roxy?” my father asks.

“Roxy is a cat,” she informs him.

“You got another cat?” he asks, his expression moving from puzzled to perturbed.

“Yes,” my mother says, proudly.

“Jesus,” he says.

“Would you like to meet her?” she asks.

“S’pose so,” he answers. My mother opens the wire door and a calico scampers out. “That’s Mrs. Gummidge!” my father exclaims.

“It was determined today, at the veterinarian’s, that the-cat-known-as-Mrs. Gummidge was not eight years of age, as previously imagined, but is,
in fact, a sprightly one-year-old. It was also determined, at the veterinarian’s, that the-cat-known-as-Mrs. Gummidge had a nasty sliver lodged in her side, causing her to cry and act generally like a curmudgeon. As this cat’s age has been clarified, and her troubles assuaged, she wishes to put forth a new image, and asks, now, to be known only as Roxy!"

“Roxy is moving out of her cell and into my house!” Carol announces. She had once toyed with the idea of adopting Mrs. Gummidge, figuring that two sad women might make one another happy. The way two rawngs make a rah-at. Now that Roxy has appeared, she seems to have revised her logic: a happy cat might cheer her up. She places Roxy in the passenger seat of her car and lights a cigarette. The two drive, coolly, away.

At 9:30 p.m., my father retreats to bed, as he always does. Soon thereafter, Cleopatra rises languorously from a living room nest, and saunters up to join my father in the king-sized bed. As always, my mother remains in the kitchen, indefinitely, reading mystery novels and sipping flavored decaf, well into the deep sleep of Cleopatra and my father.

My mother sets her book aside and creeps out to revel in the new space of the pantry: the erstwhile home of a cat who suddenly switched lives and names. New discoveries have thrown the cat’s former persona into a liminal zone between past reality and fiction. Who lived here? my mother asks herself. Who was this . . . “Mrs. Gummidge”?

Mrs. Gummidge was a being with several names and a being with no name. She was a Z-word that was hard to remember, with a face rendered gray by a limited and artful memory. My mother swoops up the bag of Whiskas, nearly empty now at the end of the day. She shakes it like a gigantic maraca, humming a syncopated version of “Cuddle Cats.” Drawn by the sound of food—or perhaps by the Latin rhythm—Don Diego appears at her feet. My mother does not finish the song but pours all the rhythm, the remaining morsels of Whiskas, into a Blue Willow bowl.

My mother turns, and begins to walk to bed. Mounting the stairs, she pauses, thinking that she hears the distant cry of a love-hungry feline. She continues on her way. The stairs are loud and creaky, and she barely hears the subtle noise of her own soul, trapped and shifting beneath them.