Indentations and Other Stories

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Some said I was a witch. I let them believe as they wished. To tease them, I knelt at the picture window each weekday at 3:08 p.m. when the schoolchildren came, flailing my arms and chomping my teeth, gnashing wild and artistic with none of them realizing that I was really flashing a grin. They saw me: a hideous, interesting mouth surrounded by a wreath of streaked, brittle hair pulled back from the face with a blue rubber band and a few bobby pins, rubbing my head against the wool curtains so that my hair loosened and stood on end snakelike and mysterious. Often, a girl's face was jammed flat and distorted against the glass opposite me by her schoolmates. She was all nostril and eyebrow and lip, squirming and squeezing red against my window, only three centimeters away, begging for entry. Her schoolmates beat on the glass and hooted at me—this woman they admired because she drilled holes and laid hexes and dissected lunch boxes with her eyes.

I say she's a witch, they said.
Can she talk? they wondered.
Is she sick? they screamed.

Then the mothers and fathers dragged them off and I closed the curtains and guffawed at their youth.

Inside the curtains, I was not a witch, but a walking climacteric. Climacteric was a much better term for my condition than menopause. Menopause was for the masses, interruptive and universal; climacteric was much more like a true climax: four, quick, permanent thuds to my body, squeezing it into something more boxlike. I could say, "I am my climacteric," but I couldn't say "I am my menopause"—it sounded ridiculous. I walked, breathed, reeked climacteric; I wallowed in climacteria; I thought climacteranically.

Years ago, as soon as I had accustomed myself to having gobs of ova rolling down my thighs each month, finally convinced my body was only replenishing itself ritualistically instead of falling away in meaty clumps, I was informed: You're just going through menopause. The doctor told me I would perspire less and nap more often. He told me my periods would no longer matter. He did not tell me I would miss them.

So I developed my own system. Every forty days, I starved myself for seventy-two hours, drinking only fatty milk, until all I could think about was that thin line of hunger coiling sideways through my head and esophagus, and I smelled myself claylike and metallic and thick: the smells of my menstruation. If I starved myself again before forty days passed, I collapsed, so my limited tolerance and some controlled experimentation created a natural forty-day cycle between each of my three-day menstrual periods. This system put me well ahead of the planets, making all my months exactly forty-three days long and my years five-hundred-sixteen days long (43 x 12 = 516). In
theory, I found this system much more satisfactory than the old one. I calculated one of the advantages on a chart.

CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MY CYCLE</th>
<th>LUNAR CYCLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>516</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x 4</td>
<td>x 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=2064 days</td>
<td>=1460 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 0 Leap Days</td>
<td>+ 1 Leap Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=2064 days</td>
<td>=1461 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2064
- 1461

=603 days

This put me six-hundred-three days ahead of everyone else every four years. My plan was to get so far ahead of everyone else that I would become younger rather than older. The schoolchildren knew nothing of this, but I foolishly told Max.

Max was a man. Like all men, he displayed his true weakness only at the urinal in the public restroom where he cried and picked his nose when no one was watching. My job was to bang on the door and tell Max to hurry up and take a piss. He was my little lizard, waiting for me to pat his scaly head and tell him he'd been a good pet. He was a burglar, breaking the padlock on my cellar doors each night and strolling into my living room, posing as a welcome guest. He was as bubbly and boring as a cup of Alka-Seltzer.
According to Max, he was none of these things, but simply an expert on the ways of cats. To illustrate, he lay on his back in the middle of my living room, paddling all four limbs in the air and shimmying his spine, explaining that this was the cat's most secure fighting position. He noted that Figure 1, "The Skeleton of the Cat," was mislabeled: number 30, the so-called medial malleolus, was actually the metacarpus. A common pedestrian error, he told me. He explained how practical a cat's shoulderblades were, and practiced his Panther-step, arching his belly as he crawled down the basement steps. He spent his days wandering the streets looking for stray cats to add to his collection in my basement, or studying catbooks and encyclopedias in the library, or switching the feminine hygiene and fruit juices and toothpaste signs in the aisles of supermarkets. Max was an idiot.

Max had one mission: to lure me into the sack with his intellect. To that end, he deposited 3" x 5" index cards around my house in assorted locations, occasionally shoving them rudely into my hands and interrupting me while I was

**GET READY FOR THE MAX-CAT DICTIONARY® (FIRST EDITION)**

**FOR YOU** (partial)

This note from Max introduced a flurry of index cards which, supposedly, were part of a special dictionary of catwords he was compiling for publication. Really, they were the slices he scratched into my back, interrupting the harmony of what used to be a perfectly vibrant torso.

**catacombs** (kət′uh-kōmz′) **pl.n.** A structure of hexagonal, thin-walled, private cells formulated from loose cat hair by Max in the basement.

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This index card was stuck to the top of an empty honeyjar in my kitchen. I scoffed secretly, but told Max that it was quite tasty. I humored him regularly, pretending to listen to his jabbering about the "surreal" as he squatted in the basement doorway and observed the cats while they mated. Max was generally so fascinated by their mating that he felt compelled to put his hand over my left breast. As usual, I looked at him rigidly and he called me a witch.

If I was a witch, as Max insisted, then the cats he stored in my basement were the Devil's emissaries, and they came to me at night to scratch the blood which bound me to Satan, sucking from my extra teats for comfort, as Max would never be allowed to do. At midnight I held mysterious conclaves and danced wildly with cats tied to my petticoats by their tails. I was Mother Tabbyskins, teaching my kittens how to spit and scold and gobbling up the doctor because I was violently ill and hungry. Of course, I told Max none of this. I told him to get his damn paw off my tit.

To distract myself from Max's insistent hands, I concentrated on the little blue oval I imagined on my breastplate, four fingers down from my larynx, where my cleavage used to begin. This was the center of my universe. From my oval, thin antennae crept out over my ribs, and no one could see them but me. My oval was an exotic brooch with wavy feelers which sprang up out of the earth and through my chest, protecting me from the hands of men, or a spider with tentacles which fondled me affectionately and slurped my juices through my skin.

Most women enjoy being touched by men there, Max complained as I removed his hand.

Within my oval was a small circle of soft teeth, suctioning my finger gently down into my trachea and through a funnel
and into the left ventricle of my heart, where I touched a tiny, pulsing doorknob which no one else knew about—a fibrous button smeared with a film of fluid, pouring elixir-like through the soft copper tubing of my arteries and returning back to my finger to spawn. Deep inside my oval I became egglike and reeked of cytoplasm. I was fertile again.

Of course, Max understood none of this. I explained carefully to him that we could not get into the sack together because my blue oval and climacteric chart together made me unpredictably and extraordinarily fruitful most of the month, and I did not wish to have his ugly children. The true reason was because all people were made up of colors. After my climacteric, once I took over the responsibility for my menstrual cycle, I became almost entirely blue. I watched Max carefully for a year and realized that he was decidedly red. He often masqueraded as green, eating leafy vegetables or stuffing his pockets with foliage, but I detected his redness despite his efforts. He coated his cheeks with blue powder to hide their ruddiness, pretended to sulk rather than grow angry, and talked about the veins of the body rather than the blood. But I knew he was red, and there was no room for his redness in my body.

In typical Max-fashion, he left his response to my refusal to get into the sack with him under the upside down rinsing cup on my bathroom sink. There I found a little bottle of estrogen pills with the label: “Take three as directed by Max.” Because Max believed that testosterone made up the earth’s axis, he decided that estrogen made up the crust, and believed that excessive doses of it would make me desire to enfold him. He cut silhouettes of our bodies out of black construction paper to prove we had once been separated by plate tectonics.

So we argued:

The dowager’s hump on the back of your neck, he insisted,
is the perfect size for my teeth, which will act to restrain rather to bite as I mount you suddenly from behind.

To retaliate, I showed him a picture of Arthur, the British television cat whose teeth were extracted to force him to eat cat food by dipping his paws in the can. Arthur, unlike Max, unwittingly ran a very successful campaign.

As a cat, Max persisted, I am designed to copulate up to eight times in twenty minutes, and you are denying me my sense of cat-self by refusing me your favors.

The female cat, I read from a book, viciously tears away from her mate as soon as he ejaculates.

Because, Max quoted, his seed is so fiery hot, that it almost burneth the female’s place of conception.

Talk such as this always got Max excited, so I reminded him that the penis of the male cat was covered with reverse angled horny spines, and I did not, thank you, care to be ripped apart inside by his red presence.

Rejected, Max sulked for two weeks and left an index card in my panty drawer.

catamenia (kat uh-me ne-uh) n. Your Personality. The quality of being as nasty and changeable as a cat for no particular reason with monthly regularity.

I soothed Max by assuring him that he was not as ugly as I once thought. He basked in the compliment. The next morning I found another index card taped to the headboard of my bed.

catechist (kä’t uh-kist) n. The condition of having been kissed on the breast secretly by a cat (Max) while you slept unknowingly.
I stomped up the stairs and fidgeted out a clay replica of Max's body at my workbench, leaving off the head, hands, and feet. I dragged the severed cat paw he had given me down the back of his body, leaving deep gouges in the clay. Stabbing his groin with knitting needles, I chanted the spell I had prepared:

I poke thee,
I poke thee,
I toke the quell that’s under the 'ee
Oh qualyway, oh qualyway,
Dash out the brains of Max I say.

Then I sewed his body into a sack with a replica of a live cat, as they used to do with adultresses, and threw it into a sink full of salty water.

I hated Max. I hated him because I relied on him. I never had to leave my house, because he brought me groceries and medicine and painted all my windows shut for me, calling me his Miss Havisham and Miss Emily Rosey and Mrs. Bates all rolled into one big lump. He encouraged me to become an entirely fictive character by bringing me old wedding cakes and dented pillows and taxidermy needles. He wrote novels starring me but never let me read them.

HERE IS A PLOT SUMMARY OF MY LATEST NOVEL © STARRING YOU

The Cat Queen

Freyja (you), the Cat Queen, is holding her annual twelve-day slaughter of all flightless birds and large rodents. As is the custom, anyone in heat (you) can appear before the Cat Court and ask for a champion (Max). The fair cat Luna (you) rides into the court on a white ass, shrieking that her parents have been imprisoned in a pet taxi by a
local veterinarian. The sturdy and athletic knight Ra (Max) gallantly offers to assist Luna (you). Despite the efforts of Duellona and Orptah (them), Ra and Luna (we) are betrothed and the veterinarian put to sleep. To everyone’s surprise, Jesus (Max) appears suddenly and gives a cat to the widow Lorenza (you), which she uses to charm the Blatant Man, deformer of feline character and the last enemy of the Cat Court, and everyone returns to Freya’s court (your bedroom) and frolics.

The basic plotline, he said, is, of course, plagiarized, but the story remains an allegory. As a joke, I offered Max a picture of a hairless cat which he could use as a self-portrait for the jacket flap of his novel. Predictably, Max did not get the joke, but was aroused by the attention I gave him.

Among the important and easily missed symbols in the novel, he said excitedly, is the Sistrum. The Sistrum is the ancient rattle which Ra carries into battle in his right paw.

Who cares? I said.

The blue oval at the top of the Sistrum, he said with a sneer, is the self-contained womb of your imagination, while the erect pillar of the handle stands for the corresponding male organ of Max, which enters the blue oval whenever it wishes.

Never, I insisted. No one enters my oval but me.

Then Max contorted his face and hissed wildly at me, slapping my face and throwing me onto the bed. He covered my knees with his and squeezed my wrists between his claws. His fingertips probed my lungs and strangled my circulation, cutting my oxygen into tiny gasps. He mashed his forehead into my chest and his drunken eyes seared their way down into my oval. Somehow, he covered it with a plunger and thrust the stick handle through the mouth, swindling out my deepest secrets without depositing anything intimate of his own. Somehow, I allowed him to walk his stained lips over my
breasts, chewing his way through the very skin which preserved me.

Don't worry, he said, sucking away at me, all cats close their eyes while drinking milk.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to concentrate on my oval. This time, no soft teeth greeted my finger, but a pool of viscous lubricant bubbled with hate at my intrusion. I frantically searched deep into the grease and tried to find something with substance, but the only thing left was a fistful of raw wool.

Meanwhile, Max rubbed his toadstool penis over my opening, promising that he was no longer a cat, but a folklore, a literature, an occupation, a jukebox, a manufacturer, a rite-of-passage, a safe-deposit box, a savior, a religion, a chronicle of human manhood who would fill me with his bloodshot.

He forced his way into me, squeezing away whatever porosity was left in my bones. The schoolchildren flooded my yard in the moonlight, tapping a blue balloon into the air with their soft hands while I watched helplessly from behind the window. My climacteric chart tore itself into little bits, fluttering down the basement steps in an effort to seek the earth. The clay on my workbench rolled itself into a cavernous mouth, laughing and threatening to swallow me whole if I unclenched myself. And Max inflated and buried his hips into me again and again, as I pounded on his ribs with my fists, my throat retching with the taste of his redness.