
A NATURAL HISTORY OF CATS

Below us at the end of the valley—
 the zoo's great lions outstare their flies,
 sicken themselves with the stink of themselves,
 make themselves perfect images of the criminal-killers
 children know them to be.

What are they remembering? How did they get here?

The manner of the movement of these lions
 round the planet is a commercial secret,
 though they have dreamt themselves into our sleep,
 into our tawny souls, our childhood beds,
 until we're all part-lion, part-prey, pulsing with fear.
 They move without sound through us, it is their habit.

I hear their hoarse, dust-filled sounds drift up the valley,
 excellent in every nuance: their forgery is perfect.

My cat, counterfeit lion, shakes its spine at
 a bird bigger than itself in our back yard.
 They watch each other unhappily.

In a doorway my cat considers every option,
 each one as true as a temple;

the paling fence outside is a line to be followed like a signature;
 the sky is unattainable and inescapable;
 my cat waits as if all this will pass and it does, every day it does.

Lion jaws yawn out bubbles of Africa late in the unending afternoon.
 Gawking families are distant fly-buzzed flickers in their half-minds,
 meaty, soft as cubs.

What are they protecting? What thoughts,
 what blood, what locked drawer, what knowledge?

The tiger in the Darjeeling zoo is monstrous,
 and in its eye a monstrous mountain capped in ice.
 The tiger knows and flings up its head with knowing.
 Its jaw snaps down. It is doing tiger for the tourists.

Nothing more is needed now but the sleep of the cat, its slow bomb of
 time.

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