The Boy Who Drew Cats

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The Boy Who Drew Cats

after the Japanese fairy tale

I.

Siamese, snowshoe, minskin, cats
with tails that flicker along the walls
of the temple like cove lights, champagne
or the color of sweet cream,
cats with stripes that never touch.
Odd-eyed, mitten-toed, corn-husk
cats locked back on their haunches,
waiting for the slice of shadow
that announces a dormouse
as he darts from post to lintel.
Whistle cats out of charcoal,
ruby cats with eyes like the flesh
of an opened pineapple, cats asleep
in ouroboros, time a mangled ball
between their paws, only a tooth
away from unraveling. Here, a cat
whose watercolor body sank
with gravity and now—like a ghost
or a pool of clover honey—only vaguely
remembers its shape.

II.

Now the boy
in cat costume, every claw copied
like the spangled turns of calligraphy.
This is what books say about
heroes: that there are countless
intermediate worlds between mind
and heart. That there is no sword so straight and sharp as a goat-hair brush wetted with spit. He’s giving this cat of jasmine petals three legs long enough to leap Mount Iwaki. More cats that only make the sounds of feathers, cats capable of witness and seduction. Cats who wander out from simple machines—pulleys and planes, cats with wheels or levers, radio signals sketched as if whiskers from their ears.

III.

But keep the quiet close as bone—before each midnight, the rat-goblin trespasses the karamon, pickled breath wandering around his face like a minion. Three separate times the attending monks have been discovered with their spines clipped from their backs. All the bell-windows crashed apart from being shouted through.

Tonight, the cats address their bladed shoulders with their tongues, and the boy-hero climbs into the cabinet of candles. Danger fluting in the miniature rock garden, urging its ice spikes to climb up to the eaves. To sleep through the sounds, the boy must endure a dream
of tangles. He is tangled. At the center of a piece of string so kinked and snarled and smelling of burnt glass, he must find the two frayed ends and guide them free. What appears to be hours of this—burn and hook, prediction, snaking. Until finally the sun’s pink applause cracks through the cabinet door, waking him.

The cat with visible veins smiles from its panel. Out on the scarlet carpet now, splintered and carved apart: the rat goblin, his motley green cloak quiet as a kale leaf across his chest. Listen—a sound of licking swells from the walls. Everywhere cats breathing storm clouds, dirty but bastioned, cats with bodies like arrows. No, translucent and blooming as tea. The boy is a little war god in his yawning. He claims the monster with his heel, cats around him a legion of dusk-throated hunters. Their mouths tonight anointed with his bloody paint.