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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.