

## Dies Natalis

When I was cat, my mistress tossed me sweetmeats  
from her couch. Even the soldiers were deferential –  
she thought me sacred – I saw my sleek ghost  
arch in their breastplates and I purred

my one eternal note beneath the shadow of pyramids.  
The world then was measured by fine wires  
which had their roots in my cat brain, trembled  
for knowledge. She stroked my black pelt, singing

her different, frantic notes into my ear.

These were meanings I could not decipher. Later,  
my vain, furred tongue erased a bowl of milk,  
then I slept and fed on river rats . . .

She would throw pebbles at the soil, searching  
with long, gold nails for logic in chaos;  
or bathe at night in the moon's pool,  
dissolving its light into wobbling pearls.

I was there, my collar of jewels and eyes shining,  
my small heart impartial. Even now, at my spine's base,  
the memory of a tail stirs idly, defining that night.  
Cool breeze. Eucalyptus. Map of stars above

which told us nothing, randomly scattered like pebbles.  
The man who feared me came at dawn, fought her  
until she moaned into stillness, her ringed hand  
with its pattern of death, palm up near my face.

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Then a breath of sea air after blank decades,  
my wings applauding this new shape. Far below,  
the waves envied the sky, straining for blueness,  
muttering in syllables of fish. I trod air, laughing,

what space was salt was safe. A speck became a ship,  
filling its white sails like gulping lungs. Food swam.  
I swooped, pincered the world in my beak, then soared  
across the sun. The great whales lamented the past,

wet years away, sending their bleak songs back  
and forth between themselves. I hovered, listening,  
as water slowly quenched fire. My cross on the surface  
followed, marking where I was in the middle of nowhere . . .

Six days later found me circling the ship. Men's voices  
came over the side in scraps. I warned patiently  
in my private language, weighed down with loneliness.  
Even the wind had dropped. The sea stood still,

flicked out its sharks, and the timber wheezed.

I could only be bird, as the wheel of the day turned slowly  
between sun and moon. When night fell, it was stale,  
unbearably quiet, holding the breath of the dead.

The egg was in my gut, nursing its own deaths  
in a delicate shell. I remember its round weight  
persistently pressing; opening my bowel onto the deck  
near a young sailor, the harsh sound my cry made then.

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But when I loved, I thought that was all I had done.  
It was very ordinary, an ordinary place, the river  
filthy, and with no sunset to speak of. She spoke  
in a local accent, laughing at mine, kissed

with her tongue. This changed me. Christ, sweetheart,  
marry me, I'll go mad. A dog barked. She ran off,  
teasing, and back down the path came Happen you will . . .  
Afterwards, because she asked, I told her my prospects,

branded her white neck. She promised herself  
in exchange for a diamond ring. The sluggish water  
shrugged past as we did it again. We whispered  
false vows which would ruin our lives . . .

I cannot recall more pain. There were things one could buy  
to please her, but she kept herself apart, spitefully  
guarding the password. My body repelled her. Sweat.  
Sinew. All that had to be hunched away in nylon sheets.

We loathed in the same dull air till silver presents came,  
our two hands clasping one knife to cut a stale cake. One day,  
the letter. Surgery. When the treatment did not work,  
she died. I cried over the wishbone body, wondering

what was familiar, watching myself from a long way off.  
I carried the remains in an urn to the allotment,  
trying to remember the feel of her, but it was years,  
years, and what blew back in my face was grey ash, dust.

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## Survivor

For some time now, at the curve of my mind,  
I have longed to embrace my brother, my sister, myself,  
when we were seven years old. It is making me ill.

Also my first love, who was fifteen, Leeds, I know  
it is thirty years, but when I remember him now  
I can feel his wet, young face in my hands, melting  
snow, my empty hands. This is bereavement.

Or I spend the weekend in bed, dozing, lounging  
in the past. Why has this happened? I mime  
the gone years where I lived. I want them back.

My lover rises and plunges above me, not knowing  
I have hidden myself in my heart, where I rock  
and weep for what has been stolen, lost. Please.  
It is like an earthquake and no one to tell.

## M-M-Memory

Scooping spilt, soft, broken oil  
with a silver spoon  
from a flagstone floor  
into a clay bowl –

the dull scrape of the spoon  
on the cool stone,  
lukewarm drops in the bowl –

m-m-memory.

Kneel there,  
words like fossils  
trapped in the roof of the mouth,  
forgotten, half-forgotten, half-  
recalled, the tongue dreaming  
it can trace their shape.

Names, ghosts, m-memory.

Through the high window of the hall  
clouds obfuscate the sun  
and you sit, exhaling grey smoke  
into a purpling religious light  
trying to remember everything

perfectly  
in time and space  
where you cannot.  
Those unstrung beads of oil  
seem precious now, now  
that the light has changed.