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^ Cat

From that social stock Ash repeats 'I can see you're angry'.

'Oh *that* you can see, can you? *Whoopedee-fucking-do*'.

'The feeling passes away, Kim. It will pass away under the hour, I am certain I will see that'.

There is a long general issue for Ash, the time-lag in expression of emotions and moods. The onset of affect. The cessation of affect.

'*Whoopyedee-fucking-do*'.

'Falling tone expletive – slammed door'.

Kim goes to the cat on the floor, to its broken tail whimpering, to a song of bestial orphanhood, burdens it with the entire history of her own sympathy, with empathic optimism amid the cat in soprano wails.

In the bedroom, on a hard chair at the side of the bed, Ash waits for all the hidden hurts of her youth to re-emerge from an earlier session with Kim, and when they trickle down she watches herself on the webcam. 'Is this real?' She should ask Kim quickly to observe her now before it's gone. Ash is a wretched monstrosity, crying in secret only at virtual wrongs in books and films. When real disasters strike, tornadoes in the bible belt, torture of the innocent, death of a family member, some polished process steers her into the void. Ash records the self-observations monotonously into a field recorder.

There are ways of demonstrating hardness, hiding tears, that can be perfected given evolutionary time. When the tears do come Ash is proud to say that they carry a burden of genuineness. Is genuine from the stock? Or is genuine where the stock ends? Kim's cat emotion is stock, real, but facile. It moves to every other single instance in a broken universe. Kim banks on the scientific understanding of heart-ache, thinks Ash. Kim is making no

progress, thinks Ash. Ash is stuck in reasonable thoughts, days rushing in, and days dribbling out.

Flat against the rug, the tail has a right angle close to the body with a gash. A neural pathway Kim engrave-etches the shape of that tail, she feels it burning into being, into the grey matter, fanned by her deep oxygen breaths, and this shaped 'heart-ache' is further referenced 'ignore' leading to Ash drawing as ever Kim's counter-tag 'feel sorry for Ash, terrible life, broken life, broken tail of the life of Ash. Continue to feel sorry for Ash because she can't admit to genuine emotions'. Is this love? Love is a complex emotion that is either invented or cannot be disassembled into simpler emotions and shoved back together again as love, which would be a vicious cycle. That's what Ash would say.

It is because there is no forgiveness for 'the trouble with you, Ash, is ...'. When those same friends want a cheap laugh, or a rise from her: 'The trouble with you, Ash, is ...'. And Ash, it is me, is saying it to herself now, 'the trouble with you, Ash, is that you're all fucked up because you can't untangle the bundled mass of feelings, and can't stop yourself watching yourself in that mass. Do you feel anything at all, Ash? Are you the stock empty emotional monster? Is Kim the stock emoter, the stock attractive opposite? Are you dead, Ash? A ghost in Kim's career?'

Kim wants ever so much to take the cat to the vet, Kim lives the pain of a cat, the beautiful tabby, with the most beautiful markings she has ever seen on a cat, with the most beautiful 'M' mark she has ever seen on a forehead. The desolate animal is on its side, trying to move. She lays down on the floor facing it staring into its face. Unable to bear the pains and the break in its tail, Kim eases herself up with her powerful arms, putting no pressure on her legs, and goes to the edge of the room, to the window where the wind heaves at the apartment block, fetches up rubbish, spins it round outside you Kim, throws it back to earth. Ash says Kim makes up feelings, imagines pain and suffering where there is none, projects

empty expressions, but there are times, such as now, she will point out to Ash, where there is genuine pain in another, in you, and in what world can it be doubted? In Ash's world? Ash says she doesn't doubt it. She, Ash, is the one who picked up the cat, wasn't it me, not you Kim? Wanted to help it, love it, wasn't it me? She is the one who brings all the cats back, isn't she, so she can watch you suffer as well. You are a stock sufferer, Kim. And I am the cunt.

'Tell me Ash, the story of your mother'.

'There is no story. *Your* mother liked your shins and her boots, that's *your* explanation for *you*. My mother was a blank'.

'Surface only Ash, only on the surface'.

'I'm tired, Kim, my head hurts again, heavy. I don't even remember getting into bed. Did you help me in? I'm off to bed. Why do we have to talk about such things? Can't we just be together? I'll lay off my stuff if you'll lay off yours'.

'Because of the cat'.

'We can't afford a vet Kim, we can't afford a broken cat, and that's the end of it'.

'If you didn't spend all your time looking for a new expression to catalogue'.

'Not expressions in myself, at least, which is a saving grace. I'm off to bed Kim. Come if you want'.

'I'm going to take the cat to the vet's I can't bear it any more'.

'It's too late'.

'There's a woman called Cass who does animals and you pay what you can afford'.

'In the building?'

‘Two blocks away. I’ll walk. I’ll carry the cat’.

‘Please yourself’.

‘You’re an absolute cunt Ash, do you know that?’

‘Nice’.

It’s a backways from now, so you see who you are now from where you come from, and the key moments as you do the walk.

Kicking shins?

I don’t know Ash. You always carry me back there, to the country, to your summer house, to your mother’s emptiness, but you don’t connect it with your own emotional life. What’s inside you? You say you don’t have an inside. That cannot be true. You’re pretending not to live inside, which is why you wouldn’t help me with the cat.

There’s a brain memory the shape of a broken tail montage over a map and the tip of the tail is at the coast, so you say.

The cat is heavy after one block, and Kim is fainting with the pain in her legs and the cat’s anguish. Was the tail punish-stamped? Who did you wrong, Kitty?

We have no money Cass. Can I ask you some questions about your kitty days? Ash is workshy and I’m too sensitive. We both are, workshy, we know why. Ash is an empty box.

The sky black-orange and black-purple, Jupiter in blinding form, Kim heaved Kitty upwards onto her shoulder like a brick hod, just like daddy used to, and moved between the alleys. ‘Daddy, can I have some money? Daddy, can I?’ From the same old stock. Ash wants to be mother now. Is this everything? Ash, stuck in her reasonable thoughts.

All this time, is it about the cat? Can cats cry? We’re both exhausted.

She remembers the dog, which she never cared for, its cheek muscles working upwards to its squinty eyes, its mashed-up mouth when it was run over. Why couldn't she care for a dog?

Kim ascends with Kitty to the third floor. 'Cass, I have a cat with a broken tail'.

'You've brought me a cat with a broken tail?'

'Are you a vet?'

'You think I'm not a vet?'

'Are you?' She could see all the equipment in Cass's apartment through the latch-open door. 'Please Cass, I'm at my wit's end. Look at the poor cat'.

Cass paid attention to Kim's strange posture, the constant changing of standing leg as if she were desperate for the toilet.

'Kitty has a broken tail?'

'You *are* a vet, Cass'.

'Sit down your legs your legs what's the matter with your legs. Nevermind Kitty what about you, my God what's happened to your legs? Is that recent?'

Ash slumps.

No, not new. Basic? 'Slump'.

Every culture has a slump, the language of shoulders.

With Kim and Kitty out Ash slumps for a second time.

Upper body falls. Falls from what? Grace, after everything? Goes down. From what?

Slump. For a third time. Slump is the opposite of walking tall. Opposite of grace. We are not graceful, not me, not Kim, not an elegant couple.

When Kim comes back I will get her to slump by ignoring the cat. This I will do as she walks through the door ‘When a woman is indignant or defiant does she frown, hold her body and head erect, square her shoulders and lock her jaw?’, I will read this out loud to her and see what happens to her body, not her face. Too much emphasis on the muscles of the face.

What if I never discover a new expression?

Is there a stock hurt not shared by humans and apes? ‘Are there twitches of enchantment around the eyes which disclose no animal trace?’ ‘Can a look of aesthetic disinterest play across the face?’ Prof Caitlin – what a fake, asking those questions like that. No wonder they gave her acres of gardening leave. ‘I’m off to watch the smile of a ladybird’, she said.

Ash sat on the bed and propped up a mirror and watched her externalities, concluding that there was nothing new under the sun and that she was wholly stock. And that others around the world were exhibiting the same at this minute, and slumping at the thought, and wondering and worrying about slumping and aping and brains made completely of mirrors, and wondering and worrying when and how cessation would come, which didn’t appear in the mirror on the bed.

Kim placed the cat on Cass’s floor, carefully withdrew her supporting hands, clove them in prayer in front of her chest, hoped Cass wouldn’t start with the cash. Cass’s head lamp was a fixture.

‘Is it bad? Is it suffering?’

‘I’ve seen this one before’.

‘You’ve seen Kitty before?’

Cass would have knelt down, and stared into its angled gash where Kim would have seen the shape of the tail etched into the heartache of Cass, turned to Kim with news and opinion, and with a look she had never seen before, would have some kind of pity that was from the abyss, that would be from a place without pity. What would have brought Cass to this state of mind, to this profundity that her face could hardly account for? Even Kim would look away, back to Kitty, who was breathing hard.

‘Yes, I’ve seen this Kitty before. I have a perfect memory for cats and what they look like’.

‘Is she suffering? I hate to see dumb animals suffer’.

‘They’re not dumb’.

‘Of course not. I don’t think that, I don’t know why I said it. I’m very nervous’.

Kim looked at Cass, her grumpy seen-it-all demeanour, apperceived the tight grey curly locks, squishy sixty-year-old face, the knowledge that she must have a heart of gold inside somewhere. Cass realised that Kim needed help getting up off the floor.

‘I think there’s a little pain there, which is why he’s breathing heavy, it’s a he. I’ll bandage it and put on a collar to stop him worrying away’.

‘Can you fix it?’

‘“That which is crooked cannot be made straight”.’

‘“...and that which is wanting cannot be numbered”’ Kim traded, cries as the kicks are hammered into her shins. ‘Can I use your bathroom? My legs are hurting’.

‘Yes. Over there’.

Cass shows a door past the operating table and Kim wonders why there are no animals in the apartment besides Kitty. Cass watches Kim quietly sobbing hobble round the

table, catch her hip on a corner and not mutter imprecations or burst forth any more. When Kim returns Cass is rubbing cheeks with Kitty.

‘I’ve got a walking stick you can use’.

‘My mother will never win. It’s obvious isn’t it that some days are better than others, it’s obvious, stock goes without saying. “That’s what stock is”, Ash would say’.

‘You believe in stock behaviour?’

‘I’ll take him now. Thank you Cass’.

‘I’ll walk with you’.

‘No, that’s kind though’.

‘You can’t carry Kitty’.

‘I carried her here, I’ll carry her back. I’ll manage. I always do. I don’t have any money on me because I don’t have any money. Me and Ash don’t have any. We’re workshy, but for different reasons, which I think is important. I gabble when I’m nervous. Here’s my address, two blocks away, and number. Call round if you’d like to eat. I do a great goulash’.

‘Take this. I made it myself’. It is a small green wheelbarrow with a cat box and a tartan blanket. ‘I’ll carry it down to the front of the building for you. Kitty will sleep for another hour so you won’t need to put her in the cat box’. Cass removes the cat box and Kim wheels Kitty through the dimming city.

‘Is there any one time you remember or are they all the same?’

“Are they *all the same*”, Kim? It’s tedious, you ask me every time. Look at the expression on my face. I am losing patience. Look at the expression on my face. I’ve had enough ... mother was blank. Always the same, nothing there. They could get consent to wire

her up and jolt out laughter and tears for a short while and then back to the emptiness, mother's resting state'.

'Are they *all the same*, Ash, each memory you have of her?'

'You don't understand'.

'Does this improve your coping?'

'I don't need to cope. You're the one who has to cope, Kim, you're the one in need'.

'Is there any one time you remember? Is there any one specific time you remember we could talk about? One time that's different in some way?'

'You don't understand that there's nothing to understand'.

'You know that can't be true'.

'She stopped kicking me when I called her a cunt and ran away'.

'Why that word?'

'I didn't know what it meant, just knew it was bad, the worst. Men threw it at her when they'd had enough'.

'Enough of what?'

'When they got fed up. I didn't know what it meant, just knew it was a bad word. Men threw it at her. So she'd kick me. Nothing to understand, really, is there?'

'You wear skirts to show off your shins. Why?'

'Why not? I'm not ashamed of them'.

'You're proud of them then?'

'Not that either'.

She found Kitty cowering in the kitchen away from the therapeutic yelps, picked her up. ‘I loved you Kitty, loved you to bits’ walking with her to the bedroom ‘loved your crooked tail. Remember Cass, “that which is crooked cannot be made straight”’? Lay on the bed and Kitty stayed with Kim, snuggled right up to her.

Ash jotted down some notes in her commonplace book. She would give Kim an hour and start again, focussing on ‘not that either’.

After Kim had refused more corrective surgery on the tibia and after Kim had refused to use a stick, Kitty had learned to live with the tail, didn’t notice it, and moved out onto the streets with the other street cats. Cass had broken up Ash and Kim one day at the beach. ‘Would I be wrong Ash to think you and Kim would be better off apart from each other? You should move out, just like Kitty. Is the angle of Kim’s arm there, the one behind her head, the same as the cat’s tail? You do know it’s etched in her brain, the shape of the tail, don’t you, a neural mirror? All her gestures will be that of the cat. That tail has finally broken her. *You* haven’t done it’.

‘It’s too cold for the beach’.

Ash has set herself up to pursue her new theory of shape discernibility after the day on the beach. ‘How do we do this, Cass? It’s not an easy task, we’re complex beings. It can be painful’.

‘Ash the same shape is not always a symptom of the same emotion, the same shape is not always a sign of the same expression’.

‘Kim used to slump in the shape of the cat’s tail. That is not a matter of interpretation, it’s a fact relating to the shape of the cat’s tail’.

They could hear the clumsy oaf Kim come to the door crossing the room in a single zig-zag to let them in to celebrate her thirty-seventh birthday. Thirty-seven and she can barely walk she needs a ground floor apartment.

‘Because there is nothing wrong with the knee joints’ explains Ash later ‘there is no L-leg and in that would be obvious to the person with an L-leg. The structure of life and the emotional key to it and the person is in the unwitting performance of these shapes which we may as yet be able to identify in the brain. I don’t want to pigeon-hole myself with behaviour. I may have been wrong about the possibility of new stock. There are “new” moves that may follow shapes nobody has registered before but there is nothing new under the sun. You heard the shape of the path she took to open the door to us. It’s all there’.

The extra weight Kim has carried since Ash departed takes its toll and Cass persuades her charge for the evening to sit down. Cass brings in the tureen of Kim’s goulash, places it in the middle of the table and ladles it out into the white bowls, Kim’s, Cass’s, Ash’s own, me she thinks, brings out the soured cream and dollops in each bowl, and they help themselves to dumplings, a mute agonised tv flickering in the background. Kim talks about her new job as a peripatetic child psychologist and she’s off sick now with stress and will lose the job after one year, like the jobs she had before. Cass has been outed as an unlicensed vet and Kim has never really forgiven her for kicking out at a pestering dog.

‘This is *Jass* who I’ve taught to love my legs’ and the cat glides in and out of the shin horrors before it is lifted onto Kim’s lap. ‘You sit there while I have my goulash and dumplings and talk. There’s no more screaming and there’s no more puzzling the empty Ash for Kim. Isn’t that right Jass? That’s right, Jass, that’s right, isn’t it my little kitty?’

Jass leaps off her lap at the stock sound of her name, stretches by arching her back into a recognisable angle. ‘Ash’ says Kim under her breath hauling her self into the kitchen to throw some sedative into Ash’s beer, ‘Ash’, who will certainly be staying over now when Cass leaves.

The new kitty sleeps at the edge of the bed, whole, undisturbed when Cass helps Kim lay out the hollow Ash in the bed. Cass departs praising the goulash and dumplings. It’s me thinks Kim, it’s me. She gets the indoor matt paint cans from under the sink and some fine-haired brushes and puts them in the green barrow and pushes them into the bedroom, pulls back the duvet and removes all Ash’s clothes. From the book of cats she props up the picture of a mackerel tabby on the pillow, and after undercoating the front of Ash with a dull grey begins the detailed work of the ‘M’ on her forehead with a mix of brown and dark grey spots and short lines. This establishes a good design base for mapping the rest of Kim’s front. As the paint dries Kim crawls onto the bed and with difficulty, propping herself against the wall, stands and kicks Ash in the shins. There is no power, with shattered legs, on a bed, in slippers with cat faces and it does not last for too long for in diminishing there is a sense of diminishment which Kim does recognise, that this is me, keeping things together, and now I would prefer not to. ‘Ash is hollow. I can give her whatever. Whatever it is that I need to give to come back to myself. I can pick up some clothes, I am ordering a cab and ask the driver to

help me with the luggage for which I will pay extra. Goodbye Ash I am saying and goodbye whatever. Until you came along I was really good thank you. 'I have an honest face' you said, 'don't you think I have an honest face?' and I should have known then that you would make me ill when I was as well as could be expected, I am thinking on all the grounds of diminishing responsibility, the shifting sands, the beach with the far-out sea. That day on the beach when the tide started to take loving from us. There you go Kitty, into the cat box into the green barrow on to the tartan blanket. Why pump your Jass blood heart for me? My own heart pumps blood for you kitty. Love at last kitty. Goodbye Ash.

The head has been like this before, when she drugged me before, when I was too much, 'too much Ash, too much, you're much too much', when Ashness spreads itself and is ground into all. It was the night of 'I have an honest face, don't I' and the refusal to elaborate. I do have an honest face though and must have repeated it last night. The head is full of lead on waking, just like before. Ash has not been rigorous enough, have I? And of course, the smell is new and I feel as if I've been kicked and my back is broken, and I'm on my side half-creased at my pivot point to form a right-angle.

So this is how it is for me part tabby part human smelling of paint. Not bad. Flat's warm enough. There's food. As Ash I will do ok. It's not as if there's anything else to do now Kim casts me in the role. Cass will have helped – I owe her advice and money it's time I did something.

I feel myself in the shape of a stock kitty. How many others share this? Is it a question of probabilities? Is that what stock is? And if we don't perform the behaviours during our lifetimes...? Do they die out from the social stock and make us less than the humans we could

be? Will I have cat and human or hybrid cat-human behaviours or something new all together, new external emotions not known elsewhere nobody knows what it is like to be like this, painted tabby in the front and flesh-tones down the back of the neck the back the buttocks the backs of legs achilles all human. It is difficult to know what feelings are. The mood is feline colour burnished-buff yellow.

I will see out the end of my days here Kim with the animals you have created like some latterday originator. You never struck me as original when you brought one cat like all other cats one broken tail and your unoriginal sadness at the shape of the world in the middle of the dimming city stuck in that brutal relationship. Did you kick me good? Kick me to see out the end of my days? Pathetic. Of course, all that's gone now and you don't think that or kick or cry too much it's all sealed up no good to anybody picking away at open wounds and scabs. You'll never walk again? You should invite Cass to the farm do you think? Meld her with Jass? Meld things before it's too late, is that what you're thinking Kim and Cass?

THE END