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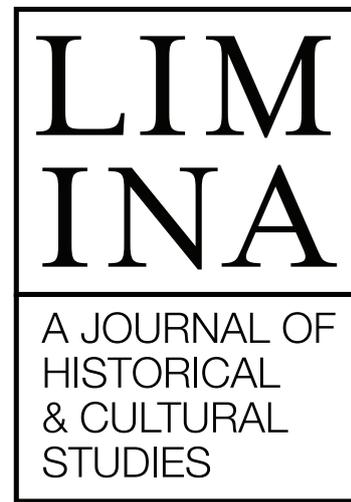
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Submitting to Limina

Information regarding the journal and how to submit can be found at <https://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/future>.

Cover Image

UWA Japanese Garden, Perth, Western Australia. Photograph by Rebecca Repper.



Hello Cat

Miriam Fisher

I first heard Hello Cat the night I arrived at the cottage. It had been a long and tiresome trip; I fell into bed as soon as the linen was laid. The early summer heat had accumulated in the loft, so I kept the sloped window above my bed ajar. The light breeze brought the smells and sounds of the forest with it and I thirstily drank them in, intoxicated by their promises.

The soft mewling began just as sleep started to close in around my ears, and was swiftly snuffed out in the darkness and disorder of dreams. When I was awakened early by the alien cacophony of sounds – tapping woodpeckers and the rush of the stream running alongside the cottage – the curious mewling was all but forgotten.

The second night I heard her lucidly. Her voice, oddly amplified, echoed as though she were boxed into the eaves that ran alongside the cottage. It called suddenly and startled me with its impossible closeness. I leapt to my feet; scanning the room until I discovered a wall between my strange squatter and me.

I called back.

'Hello?!'

She replied in form, this time without the questioning inflection at the end.

We exchanged pleasantries until I fell asleep, a smile touching my lips.

The next night was the same. And the night after that. Hello Cat would visit every evening with impeccable consistency.

'Hello, hello, hello...Herrooooww, herrooooww, herrooooww.'

The same mournful call punctuated by pregnant pauses.

I would ask how her day had been. Sometimes we would discuss the beauty and the beasts of the forest, but other days she would fall silent and I could feel her uncertainty. I wondered how my tone had been received, softening it to appeal to her feline sensibilities.

I was never sure whether she spent the nights sleeping rough in the cavity under the wooden eaves or just waiting until the deepest part of night to creep off, soundlessly, into the forest to stalk her prey.

No one in the countryside spoke English. Not even me, except for my exchanges with Hello Cat. We were comrades in language and the night.

I didn't need to see her to know what she looked like. Her husky voice rose from soft pudge cloaked in silky white fur, flecked with errant black hairs. Her features were rounded; no sharp edges save for her short, pointed ears tufted with black, her spray of white whiskers. Her thick-skulled head as wide as it was tall, too small for

her plump body. Her features were held within an ovoid of pitch-black fur, centring a shining dark Roman nose, the almost imperceptible line of her mouth below. Her luminescent blue eyes large and wide-set, pupils thin vertical slits that flickered as she blinked.

She had luxurious white paws with soft pink pads and razor-sharp claws that mostly stayed retracted, deep within her fur. She must have used them for climbing, to hook into the grain of the cottage's wooden walls in her ungainly scabble against gravity, to hoist her bulk into the small gap under the eaves. There, she would pant in the cool darkness until the frenzied galloping of her heart slowed.

Her tail floated around her body like the plume of smoke from an extinguished candlewick.

In the daytime, I would search for Hello Cat. I would wander about the garden and into the forest, calling for her in our language. She never answered.

Sometimes I thought I saw the flick of her tail disappearing around the side of the house, or behind a tree, or underneath the wood stack.

I allowed myself time, in the first few months after my arrival, to acclimatise to the tangled quiet of the landscape. Aside from horses and carts clopping by, creaking under the weight of fresh-cut timber, the only other traffic was a sporadic village bus or the occasional wanderer.

I rambled in the forest among the spruce and stone pine, the hemlock and red oak that dropped ticks into my hair. I picked wild berries, nuts, and mushrooms to eat as I lay on the verandah, listening to the distant squeals of swine being slaughtered for sausage, and unscrewing arachnids from my skin while I built my world in the clouds that passed.

In autumn, the trees outside my window were aflame. Fiery reds, deep magentas, golden browns, burnt ambers, royal yellows. A dream coat of leaves wrapped around the hills and valleys from which gentle zephyrs carried the scent of apples and cinnamon.

As the temperature dropped and the communist-grey skies deepened, so too did the colour of the leaves that shivered against them. I wondered how Hello Cat would fare on the nights strong winds raced through the eaves, rattling and lifting the edges of the wooden planks around her.

As the months passed, my replies became more cat-like. More maudlin. Until they mimicked her sad call.

'Herrooowww?'

I began leaving a saucer of milk and a thick wedge of bread out every morning. But each evening, the sodden loaf would sit untouched on the porch, a thickened milky soup dotted with drowned black bugs. It would be gone by morning, taken by the forest creatures that visited in the night.

I began growing tired of humoring the elusive cat.

I tried to catch her. The moment her siren call wound up, I rushed outside to climb the old ladder I kept propped against the eaves, a metal torch clamped between my teeth. The light settled on the cobwebs in the foreground but the gloom of the cavity behind it remained empty.

Not even the prospect of a tiny trapped field mouse would flush her out. I freed the broken-tailed creature to the forest to be among the wolves that bayed at night and the wild boar that rooted through leaves for fallen apples. The rodent returned the next day, only this time her mistake was fatal; the trap spilling her steamy innards over that bent tail and leaving an oily stain in the porous terracotta tiling.

I wondered how we were allies at all.

When winter came, I learned about the differences in snow. The first flakes that fell; perfect, pearlescent sequins that danced lightly to their deaths, entombed in the sheet ice that layered the windows and streams. And the feathery white clumps that dropped straight down, landing like a whisper. And the wizened, heavy-falling mush that collected grit from the air on its way down.

From above, the house was two-dimensional, white and flat, with just a single column of black smoke rising from the chimney.

It was those all-white days that scattered my resolve, punctuated by a steady metronome of hope, possibility, exasperation, and despair; gently, but malignantly, ticking the time away before I could grasp it. One moment it was there, the next gone. My weeks were absorbed in the relentlessness of that ticking. I leaned into it until my forehead rested among the pixels flickering on the monitor, as if it were a porthole pulling me in or, perhaps, just a sliver of black mirror masquerading as one.

Winter plunged its claws deep into the earth and stunned it solid. I could no longer sleep nor think while awake. Her voice followed me into the daylight hours. It rang viscerally, like the grandfather clock at my grandparents' place when I was a child. I would lie frozen in that house. So silent, but for the undying pendulum swinging in that clock's belly like a hideous prolapse. Its hourly chimes reverberated into the night as my family slept like corpses.

The corners of my room stretched and contracted as the darkness breathed. I was never sure whether I was awake or asleep.

Night and day I spent fatigued, staring at the whited-out window, listening for Hello Cat's call and imagining her sitting in that cavity among the spiders and the icicles and the gloom. I sat with my ear to the wall, wondering what she was thinking.

In the evenings, I lay in the small bath, shivering against the chill that rose through the floorboards and pressed itself against the poorly insulated walls. Just the centre of my face showing above the water, while underneath I scratched at jagged mouthparts left behind in my skin from the broken jaws of ticks.

Outside, the bare limbs of frozen trees reached their dark fingers towards the windows.

Keeping the drafty cottage warm in winter was an ongoing battle. I left taps running so the pipes wouldn't freeze and set an alarm clock to wake me during the night to put more logs in the fireplace.

One night I arrived home late after becoming lost in the forest. Swollen cans had burst in the pantry. A lumpen sack of potatoes stood like rocks. Drops of water paused at the faucets. The floors, walls, and wooden ornaments muted with cold. My breath was the only movement in the petrified house, my hair an icy snake latched around my neck. I took my hand from its glove and thrust it into the ash, but there was nothing left besides pale, silken layers of cremated wood. The fire had been out for

hours. I shivered by the short-circuiting electric heater, sparking matches with shaking hands and blowing ash where embers should be.

Upstairs it began. Slow. Steady. Muffled by the skin of snow enveloping the house.

The axe I kept by the fireplace was frozen into its chopping block but three wrenches pulled it free. Her calls quickened with each double step, up into the loft, the walls rattling around us. My study was as I had left it, a *tabula rasa* suspended in time.

'Herrooooww!'

Behind the desk.

I flung it aside and swung, the impact against the shuddering wall sent pain ricocheting into my back.

'Herrooooww!'

I swung again, and again, and it loosened. I pushed the blade into the gap and levered the board loose until the axe slipped, skinning my knuckles as they lost purchase and drove splinters deep into the quick behind my ragged fingernails.

I roared into the silence, howling on the floor as white-hot agony pulsed through me.

'Herrooooww!'

She was right there.

I tore at the board and was thrown backwards as it came free in my bleeding fingers.

Inside was a collection of dust, cobwebs, and icy dark. A dense labyrinth of emptiness.

I cried tearlessly until the wood around me was filmed in salt. Dragging a thick blanket around my neck, I fell into monochrome dreams.

The screech of thick ice sliding from the tin roof woke me, the cottage shaking on its foundations as it thudded to the ground. I lay still as sobriety replaced sleep. Blue had returned to the window above my bed.

My thawing fingers creaked as they pushed words onto the page. The black mirror stayed open as long as I didn't pause. Its leonine eye regarded my face patiently, scanning the steadiness of my eyes and the sharpness of my cheekbones and the gradient of darkness underneath them.

Staying silent while I wrote.