Hunger
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Every morning is the same. In the pre-dawn darkness, a figure rises. Sometimes from a chair. Sometimes from the couch. Sometimes from the floor. The blankets and comforters have become wrapped around them, nestlike, in the night. Like the swelling over a bad bruise. The mornings on which they find themselves waking in the bed are becoming less and less frequent. Wherever they are hauled out of sleep, the morning is always the same.

A yawn.

A stretch.

A check of the day’s weather.

The human dresses. The cat unwinds itself from its own nest beneath the twin bed. It looks up and yawns, then hops to the windowsill. It preens in the dusky morning. The human wonders briefly who exactly owns whom; whose routine has been shaped by the other. Food is next.

The cat eats shreds of meat in gravy. Dollar-a-can wet food bought on deep discount. It likes the fish. Dislikes the chicken. Perhaps it has been fed too much real bird for its own good, thinks its human as they fill the dish.

Keys.

Bag.
Wallet.

Time to leave. Keys in hand, the human picks up the cat and holds it before the mirror for a short time. They sit there together and observe their collective reflection. The cat perches on the human’s arm the same as on the windowsill. It blinks. They blink. The relationship is small, unadorned. Un presumptuous. When the human holds the cat, they are focused primarily on making it comfortable, ensuring it does not run away. Before the mirror, this is a great gift. It draws their attention away from their own face and the too-strong lines of the chin, the too-square frame of the shoulders. The human pats the small feline on its head on the way out the door, instructing it to be good while they are away. The door slams behind them.

On weekdays, the human is gone after this; not to return until the late evening, save for a brief stop over what is ostensibly lunchtime to put out more food for the cat. The routine deviates slightly for the workless weekend, when the human leaves with the laundry and returns after starting the machines.

The human walks to the gym on weekdays. Down a short street, across an intersection that is semi-busy on the heaviest of days, and through the campus of a small business. They work. Hard. Kettlebells, ropes, freeweights, punching bags. Soreness of muscles: internal screaming. The mirror behind the bags is fit for critiquing form and footwork; but is more often used to identify the features that will one day be thrown into the fire. The human rages.

After, water. And then work. A short walk from their gym. The nature of the work is unimportant, both to our ends and to the human themselves. They often daydream at their desk. Idle thoughts are interrupted at semi-regular intervals by a well-intentioned but politically outmoded boss who believes that “chromosomes determine the gender of the person, full stop.”

Since that day of conversation, the human has been very careful to avoid the topics of personal politics and identity.
A notification from the News Center on iOS: Trump Administration orders sweeping ICE raids countrywide this Sunday. The human contemplates the town where they grew up. Where each summer they learned the rough Spanish spoken by migrants thousands and thousands of miles from the border and further thousands, they are sure, from their families. Strangers in a strange land, to the last. The human contemplates riding an unairconditioned bus, robin egg blue chipping off the sides, the 20 hours to El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville. They cannot imagine that each of these people makes that trip, even once a season. They think of the families they grew up going to church with. The kids they used to smoke weed with, more paranoid than even stoned stoners should be.

Someone has to do something.

But the human cannot even fathom doing something about their own life. The boss comes in once again.

Can you stay until 6?

Sure, I guess. Anything you need done?

Just data processing. I’m sick of having to do it in the mornings.

The boss is not a bad person. He stays and works with his employees, especially if they are staying late. They discuss spreadsheets. Baseball (the Tigers are bombing again). Briefly, the topic of scheduled ICE raids appears on the horizon, but the human takes the opportunity presented when their phone buzzes to duck the conversation. One can only hear “Go back to your own country,” so many times before becoming numb to it. For while the human has been a legal resident of these United States for the entirety of their twenty-five year existence, they have not once felt American.

The year is 2010. The human and their mother stand in front of a tired DMV bureaucrat named Richard. The human is exhausted. A day of golf workout and play rehearsal. Comedy of Errors. They are Angelo, the goldsmith. A bit part, which means running around dressing set. Getting strong from
carrying props. They stand mute as their mother goes through the proof of citizenship and documentation necessary for the acquisition of a first driver’s license.

We can’t accept a Korean birth certificate.

Okay, well we don’t have an American one. He’s adopted.

The clerk sizes the mute teenager standing at the Polish woman’s side. His eyes narrow.

Does he have a green card? He asks, looking straight at the human.

The mother is silent.

Does he speak English?

Does he speak English?

In the human’s life, appearances have been the ultimate downfall. In America, no-one knows the difference between Korean and Japanese, Japanese and Vietnamese, Vietnamese or Thai. The black-haired, yellow-skinned, squinting ones are always simply “Asians,” or when feeling courageous, “Chinese”. Several times, especially in previous work as a cashier, they have been called “oriental” to their face. To square this, the eternal feeling of being an import, a coolie with no railroad to build, they have put on airs of occidentality like layers of callous. They have studied comedians and philosophers and all of the classics. They have learned the history of Rome and its fall to autocracy, idolized Cato and Cicero and the classical Republicans of antiquity. They have learned the American Constitution article by article, Federalist paper by dogged Federalist paper; dreamt of themselves in the halls of that Pennsylvania State House, arguing how the meaning of the word ‘militia’ might be brought down through the anteceding generations.

It is as though all of this is kindling – no, gasoline – on the fire pile. A lifetime’s worth of acquired value and learning turned to fury and self-
hatred at as simple a question as ‘does he speak English?’ One which, no doubt, was posed without malintent – simply in the interest of efficient communication.

The memory, or some fragmented part of it, returns to the human as they leave the office and bid the boss goodnight. Silently, their sinuses clear and moistness creeps to the edges of their eyes.

When they return home, the cat is, again, hungry. Always hungry. The human feeds the cat, whistling when the dish is full to attract the cat, then sets about making their first meal of the day. It is well past 7:30 by now. The gradual progression of summer sunset has reached its golden climax outside the bay windows of the small apartment. Their stomach no longer registers hunger, but the need to eat is immanent. Sitting at table, they contemplate their ever-burning desire to be seen and taken on their own terms. Another day, perhaps. The cat mrrrrrs and pokes its head at the human’s shins. The human wonders at cats for a moment. How little they seem to comprehend compared with their canine counterparts. How little they have been domesticated when compared with the same. How connected they have become, despite the cat’s eternal attitude of independence. They imagine an Egyptian pharoh stroking a Nile mau. Little wonder they were once worshiped as gods.

Staring out the windows at the golden sunset, the human again sets the cat on their arm, as steady and stable as a shelf. It presses itself against them, uncomprehending, for a moment, of the drop to the tile floor as it rubs the top of its head into the crook of their elbow. The cat purrs. The human brings it to the mirror and again eyes their collective reflection. They are focused primarily on making it comfortable, ensuring it does not run away. This is a great gift. It draws their attention away from their own face and the too-strong lines of the chin, the too-square frame of the shoulders.

The cat blinks, long, slow, maintaining eye contact.

The human blinks back, just as long, just as slow.

Their gazes remain this way, intertwined as the arms of the Geminii, for an interminable amount of time.