

Wet or Dry

It's raining and I'm in my car, because there's somewhere for me to go. The sound is nice for me, and nice for my car. She purrs, and I purr back to her. It's funny that I describe us this way—we are going to get my cat. She'll be my cat now, although she has been someone else's. I found her last week, from a newspaper ad, or something like it. She looked so cute, so withered and ready for me. I named her immediately, after someone named Michelle. I cut out the picture. And the picture purred, and I purred back. I'm trying to remember the sounds being made by my car and the weather outside of it. It's hard to remember something while it's happening, and I wonder how talented at that a cat might be. This one is, probably. I did a lot of reading on what a cat and her body might like. As I'm driving now those pieces are floating in my head, wet food and toy mice and windowsills.

I'm nervous to see her again, because I really want her to like me. When I first visited her I drove up with fantasies of instant attachment. Maybe a nuzzle that would shock her caretaker—she never lets anyone pet her! Instead she turned her back to me and purred to the wall. Her now-owner said she was a bitch cat. "She thinks she's too good for me and all my other cats. When she had babies she avoided them, and when they suckled she didn't move or want them. And she pretends she's blind, knocks into things and when she looks straight at you she acts like you aren't there. She never lets anyone pet her." She thought I might change my mind and not want the cat, who she called Celia. I've considered the dangers of renaming an old animal, but my hope is that it will signal to her my dominance and attentiveness, and turn her affection. She looks more like a Michelle. I'm ready to love her. There is nothing else to love but my car. My parents are very far away, in another state, where it's not raining.

Michelle is waiting on the porch of the house I'm returning to. The house is on the left side of the street, at least it is when driving the direction I am. And the house is blue and the porch is white. I've seen plenty of houses which are blue with white porches. They look good in the rain, like all houses. Michelle is waiting on the white porch, sitting up. She's very still and she doesn't look at me when I climb the

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stairs. She has a note taped to her, and it says "Here is the cat." So there the cat is. She doesn't seem cold. I pick her up, which she accepts. And I put her in my passenger seat and buckle her in, sitting the same way she was before. We make turns in my car, and are silent. The rain stops, which bothers me and Michelle, because the sound had been nice for us. But we are grateful that at least it's still grey.

At home I open the cat door for her, but she doesn't go in. I tell her it's ok and I go inside alone, through the regular door. She faces the house for a while, and then I stop paying attention to her so I don't know what she does after that. The house is ready for us. Michelle's bathroom items are by the laundry, and her food by my food, which is in the kitchen. I can't tell if my food is wet or dry, like sauteed spinach, is that wet? Wet with oil. I love things that are wet with oil. I think a good way to love a thing is to make it wet with oil, but you can't do that to a cat, their hair would be an obstacle. I could shave her. That would be funny but there's no one else around to laugh at it.

I tape the note onto the fridge, so she feels at home. It's funny to me because it says "Here is the cat," but it's on the fridge, so it's like it's saying that the cat is in the fridge. I hope she never goes in there. I had a friend in high school who was from Taiwan, and she used to joke about eating cats and dogs. I send her a picture of the fridge. She says something back in Chinese, so I don't understand. I think about putting it into Google Translate or consulting a dictionary, but then I remember that I don't care very much about anyone other than myself. I hope now I will also care about this cat. And then if she sends me texts I will read them carefully to make sure I understand. I could also teach her Chinese, and then we both might end up caring about Chinese.

There is no food in the refrigerator. That is lucky, if there were I would eat some. Instead I make a list of food I might buy later on. On the list I put almonds, tuna fish, fuji apples. I never did know which kind of apple to prefer until somebody taught me. Fujis are crisp and they have a nice streaking to their skin, which is the exact red that red is supposed to be, when you make red in your mind. I will not feed

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Michelle apples or almonds, I vow to myself. But tuna fish anytime. If I eat it next to her she could think I am a cat too. Maybe that's what she needs to soften. Her previous owner told me she loved to eat tuna, but I bet they never ate it together. I go into the living room to use it for a second. I see that Michelle has come inside. I'm relieved because if she hadn't she would still be outside.

I sit on the couch, which is brown but in a clean way. My knees just touch the glass coffee table, a feeling I sometimes like. Today I like it, and I use my hands and the coffee table to roll two cigarettes. I light one and offer the other to the cat, but she turns her nose up, which proves to be very cute. It looks so good on her I decide to try it myself, and then there we are, two perched, opposite noses, pointing to that wet ceiling.

After a few mornings have passed, I'm beginning to identify the cat's routines and personalities. She's awake when I crawl through the halls to reach the coffee maker, but she ignores the padding of my knees. And she ignores my coos and mouth sounds, which want to entice her into my love, into my lap. She responds only to the smell of tuna fish, as far as I can tell. Her eyes change shape when I open the can. Sometimes while I'm pouring out the water I think I feel her tail brush my legs. This isn't happening physically, because Michelle is across the room, sitting by her bowl, but ghosts from the future encourage me nonetheless.

On a hot day I take us on a hot walk to the library. I'm not allowed pets in there, so I tie Michelle's leash to a bike rack. Inside I head straight to Reference and ask for books on pets. They point to the stairs and say the number three and shrug. I climb the stairs twice and begin my search. The big shelves hold Cooking Gardening Crafting. At the back there is Pet-Rearing. I look for titles that have the words Cat

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and Food. After crouching a while and crawling through the aisles, because the best books are always at the bottom, I get satisfied. The book is called *Wet or Dry: Your Kitty's Little Stomach* by Hannah Gavin. The book is huge. I tuck Hannah into my sweatshirt, which I brought because the library has air conditioning. Downstairs I wave to the Reference woman, and say You have nothing on pets! She looks away. From what I understand, working in Reference does not involve the kind of relationship to individual books that might lead a person to ask about the lump under my sweatshirt. I untie Michelle and show her the book. It has a picture of feline stomach anatomy on the cover. I think she likes it. We walk home slowly, and she peers carefully at all we pass.

At home Michelle goes straight for the cigarettes. I sit cross-legged and lay the book out on the coffee table, with my notebook in my lap. Most of the information in the book I've already found on the internet, but I'm struck by a delicious sounding recipe: Salmon Delight.

I put Michelle back on her leash because we need to shop for ingredients. She's a little huffy about it but then it starts to rain, so we both perk up. She can tell I'm doing something for her, and her tail rubs on me, for real this time. She gets to come into the market with me. I put a bunch of stuff into a basket and pay for most of it.

At home Michelle goes straight for the tuna fish. She must be hungry because making this food is taking more of the day than I told her it would. I put a cup of salmon into boiling water, and turn the heat off after five minutes. I preheat the oven and mix 1/2 cup of cornmeal, a cup of rice flour, 1 1/2 cups of whole wheat flour, 1/2 cup of wheat germ, 1/3 cup of yeast. I use an applesauce masher on the cooked salmon and mix in a tablespoon of canola oil and one of sesame oil. Then I put 2 cups of water into the dry ingredients. I knead this dough for a bit and then add the salmon mixture. I roll the dough out and cut tiny diamonds. They bake for 25 minutes, enough for three games of Cat Chases Rat with Michelle. This is a game where Michelle scurries like a rodent and I prowl like I'm her. I think this is so cool, something

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Freud would like. Michelle came up with it all on her own. When the oven dings I call her to dinner. She sits up straight and proper. I tuck a napkin into her collar and bite into a Fuji apple. She likes the food, but she vomits it back up into her bowl.

I have to go to school at some point, which means leaving Michelle alone. I have decided that the cat cannot be the only thing in my life. In school I take notes on paper I have already used. On one side it says Tuna Almonds Apple and on the other it says Anecdote: Rabbi Yohanan had an advisor, Resh Lakish, who responded to all his declarations 24 reasons that he was wrong. When Resh Lakish dies, Elazar ben Pedat is sent to replace him. When the rabbi declares, Elazar ben Pedat says There is a ruling that supports you. The rabbi feels his mind decaying, his one human need, for antithesis, denied him. The rabbi tears his clothes and keels and stuff and the other rabbis pray for mercy upon him and then he dies. I look at the people around me and wonder if I could guess who lives in their houses. The people around me are all one, a gloriously empty gelatinous structure, a cavernous other. I love them and they look forward, and down. They write 'Talmudic study is disputatious.' I practice disputing myself.

Another time, I go to the café. They are having one of those nights that cafes have, with music, to encourage people to come in and buy coffee. I get a coffee, but I don't pay, because the barista, Darla, is in my Religions class. I put some Irish cream in my drink. I'm allergic to it, which is exhilarating, and makes it taste better. The place is very empty, there are musicians and me and two older men who are listening and two older women who are not listening. Darla comes to sit with me, because she has nothing to do. She says, I have nothing to do, what are you doing? She has a rag in her hands. We play gin rummy, which I'm not good at even though my father taught me, and Darla beats me. She's delighted to, which is very sweet. I give her a kiss on the cheek to congratulate her, a small wet one, the size and wetness of my mouth. She blushes and I blush too. It's fun that both of our faces are hot at once. It's extraordinary to be

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one in our temperature and color. She takes a small stumble as she stands, and wipes the rest of the tables with her rag. She brings me a croissant without looking at me. The music is slow. One of the musicians is doing something discordant, but it's not his fault, the café has a very weird post near the corner of the alcove they're performing in, and depending on where you stand in the room you will hear an error in the reverberation of his notes. I hope that Michelle has remembered to eat dinner, and I spend some time making horrible little sketches of the musicians, and some of my room at home.

When the concert ends, I wait for Darla to clean the place. I help her by sorting sugar packets, and slip a couple of the fancy ones into my jacket pocket. Then I sit at the counter and work on a list of all the songs I know. Over time I've made it to the D section. Don't Go Breaking My Heart. Don't Let Us Get Sick. Diamond Day. I don't know of any songs called Darla, but I know there has to be one, so I write Darla.

I stand against the brick while she locks the door. I smoke. Her car is right there, on the street. It's dark but I know that in the light the car is brown. I ask her to turn the heat on, OK, but it doesn't work very well, my car's old. She kisses my cheek this time, we both get hot. Even though it's cold we take our shirts off, we're so brave. I push her into the backseat, quickly and she shrieks. Our bodies are weird together, smushing, slapping. We get wetter and wetter, she is as wet as my mouth. We touch and touch. My hands cradle her skull, my body pushes onto her. Her voice is touching her breath, a modest noise, she's a lady. I'm so good with her, and so we go forever. We push into each other selfishly. We spread each other open and put ourselves in our mouths, and we make and touch things, light and dark. When she cums she says my name just like I've woken her from her backseat nap. And I am satisfied but not as satisfied as she is.

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I remember that Michelle isn't capable of feeding herself, I have to do it. I leave Darla, sleeping sweaty in her car under the streetlights. She is naked so I lock the doors and I hope that in her sleep her body gets rowdy, knowing it can be seen. I write a note on the back of my song list and attach it to her steering wheel with spit. The note says I have gone; See you soon. The walk home is stiff. My body acclimates to the air, abandoning that languid past. I breathe on my hands, which turns me on again, hands, breath, mine. They need a bit longer than normal to get the door open, but they can do it. Michelle is sitting in front of the door. She's not angry, but she expects dinner. I provide, from the cabinet to her shining bowl. She eats with her pride next to her. I am her god. I go to sleep.

In the morning, across the table from her, smoking our breakfast cigarettes, I confide: "Michelle, I was with a woman last night." I fantasize that Michelle is jealous. Michelle tells me she's actually just nauseous. "I did this woman last night, and you know I could be in love with her, as I could with anyone. Michelle, it was so strange in the café, I was all alone. So I had to...If you would agree to come to the café we could drink together and then I might not have to see her again. But I might still." I'm lying for no reason—Michelle doesn't speak English.

After her nausea passes, we have a dance party in the hallway. Michelle just taught herself to dance, and kept it a secret from me until she was performance-ready. I'm amazed at her choreography. It's something I've never seen before from a cat. She moves jerkily and trips over herself, gyrates, pulses, making eye contact with me the whole time. I pirouette, I trip the light fantastic. I take hers as a prodigious commentary on the art of dance. I clap and whistle, and she gives a shaky bow.

I remember how I used to get dressed in my room before she lived here. In a cloud of some splendid melancholy. An empty space where my thoughts became wordless, which never happens

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anymore—the cat is hypervocal. I was always aware of being alone, every day I would consider that natural container of my body, house, myself. Now I am always kept above that, I always think of her. I hear her meowing or she stumbles in. She does look at me now. And I am with her. It is so sweet to be with. I wonder if this is that reward of motherhood. That great secret about it. Even in the café I am wordy, I am a person. I have context.

And if something else were to be, if this time I have—when there is a note on my fridge and I smoke with Michelle—becomes another point in my long life and I stretch out into the next, how sad will I be then instead?

Darla comes over. I invited her. She turns up with a plate, and on the plate is plopped a can of tuna fish. I told her, into her ear, once, wetly, that Michelle enjoyed cans of tuna fish. (She has dumped it out, turned it over, so it sits upside down, a naked, grey-pink cake. A perfect mound.) Darla sets the plate on the glass of the coffee table. It makes a clattering sound, because she did it imprecisely. She raises her eyebrows, hoping I will laugh. I don't, because the coffee table is special to me. I don't scratch or hit it, but I guess Darla will have to learn to respect my stuff. I lead her by hand around the house. I show her the note on the fridge, and the stuff inside it, and the sink in the bathroom, and my little bed. She likes the bed. She sits down on it. I do hope I can love Darla, and I do wonder if she hopes to love me too.

Darla likes the bed. We get sweaty, she puts scratches on my rough skin. (My skin is not rough—I am just imaginative.) Michelle wanders in, slits her eyes more than normal. Watches us and licks herself. I take her cue and lick myself. Darla goes wild for this. She asks if the cat always watches me. I say Yes she likes to know what I do, and to set down her judgments. Darla licks herself too, which I don't go wild for. I pin her arms and lick her armpits. Michelle coughs a hairball onto the carpet. I stick my finger, wet

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from my own mouth, in the girl's asshole. She hates this. She squirms and then learns to love it, like every time.

We attack Michelle. We think it will be fun, that she will wriggle and howl. She becomes limp instead. It is actually harder to shave a limp cat than a rigid one. Razors don't take well. But we manage it, and don't nick her. We leave all the hair on her head. She is naked, with a mane, a sickly lion, and she accepts a celebratory shot of whiskey, shared. The lion pads proudly into the living room, raises her body onto the coffee table, and attacks the tuna. I rub her tummy while she coughs bits of it back up, into my other hand. I tuck these bits under the couch cushions, for safekeeping.

I rub oil on Michelle every day now. After she eats her breakfast I take her in my lap as you should take a baby into a lap and she relents. I use jojoba oil I get from the store, with cash Darla gives me. Her skin is stretchy and foldable, it makes me remember that she's pretty old. I purr through the oiling and she purrs back, her sour breath landing on me.

One day when I rub her she feels mealy, her skin looks yellower. She looks at me, our eyes right on each other's. I oil her slowly, then pick her up against my shoulder. We sit swaying on the couch and beat together. Michelle asks me to call the vet.

I know that Michelle is making me crazy. I see things I've never seen before, like a cat smoking a cigarette. There's something that lives in her stomach that can drive a person crazy. And this is why in Egypt they were deified. Michelle has more control over my mind's reality than I have had for a long

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time. I like it like this. She moves my body, tells it how fast to chase the cat and which curtains to buy. She especially is in charge when I fuck Darla. She sits on the carpet and I have to mimic her gestures.

Darla is making me crazy too. She's been texting me one word at a time, about her own cats and how they can teleport. She does it to make me feel insecure, because Michelle can't do that. I tried teaching her but she just stared at me. I'm not good at teaching teleportation.

It's a worm in Michelle's stomach, and I draw pictures of it and give it eyes and name it Adam. When Michelle throws up I root through the matter to see if Adam has come out. But he never does.

When Michelle throws up she looks straight at me. We make sweet eye contact as she retches. Sometimes I retch too, but I don't throw up because there's nothing in my stomach, not even a worm.

I ask Darla to drive us to the vet in her brown car. I have a car but I want the human support. I figure we can fuck in her backseat to take my mind off Michelle's little fate. It's a raining day, gorgeously somber. Michelle shits blood all over the seat. I look at Darla emptily. If she were to get mad at me for this I would kill her. Darla waits in the car while I carry the cat in, curled again like a baby. The veterinarian does her work in a wooden house, and walking up to it I imagine it to be falling down, weak boards slapped together in the shape of a teepee, wet from the rain. The rain falls on Michelle's bare skin, her favorite thing now. I've been taking her for rainy walks on her leash, bringing her in the shower with me. But she prefers cold water. The doctor has no name to me. She takes Michelle from my arms, and is not surprised by the texture of her skin. It makes sense that she would have touched bald cats before, I think they are often shaved before surgery.

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Darla gets out of the car to open the door for me. She slides me into the passenger seat like a baby, so I suck my thumb. I try to suck hers when she gets back in the car, but she misinterprets me and puts her arm around me. She says I made you a playlist and starts playing it. I stare into the rain past her windshield. When she plays a song I like I say I like this song, what is this? Oh, I thought you knew it. It was on the list of songs you left me. Darla thinks I wrote her a special love list of songs and stuck it on her steering wheel with spit, but it was just the only paper I had. Darla, I made that song up. I knew in my heart that somewhere in the world there was a song called Darla, and I wanted there to be so I could sing it into you. She doesn't hear me. She is stroking my arm all this time, kissing my head. She has learned that great secret of motherhood. I fall into it, the secret.

I'm not worried about Michelle. I know she's in there glaring at the vet, looking at the cats framed on the walls, past patients. She is prettier than all of them, even when bald and sick, and she knows it. When she is all better, she will go on the wall too, another testament to the doctor's talent. And her picture will go up even if she dies, she knows I'll make sure of it. She knows I have plenty of pictures to put up all around the world. And the people will call the number and say I don't think I'll be able to find this lost cat, she seems dead. And I'll send them the reward, because they figured it out. I wonder if Michelle's children will know the secret when their mother dies. Her past-owner told me she had four sons, and they've been scattered through the county. When she meows deeply I feel them turning their heads, coming, crawling toward us. I think I hear her meowing deeply inside the walls of the shack.

I am grieving so heavily and silently that Darla has to take care of me. She feeds me tuna fish and almonds, and oils me after my sullen baths. She throws balls of yarn at me and I bat them away with pathetic glares. Once she drags me to the café and lets me sleep, head on arms, on the bar. She lines up

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mugs in front of me and pours things into them. When I lift my head I see paper stuck under a mug. I love paper so I reach for it. Darla's given me a note, offering to bring one of the musicians to her car for us.

I put my head back into the counter. One of the musicians pats me on the shoulders. He's drawn a drawing of Michelle, in a coffin, with hearts in the sky behind it. I let him pin it to my back.

At home I get on all fours and chase pretend rats. I make Darla draw whiskers on her cheeks with eyeliner and scurry from me like a mouse. When I catch her I bite her. I catch her every time. Darla is very slow.

On a Tuesday I make a batch of dry food. We're out of vegetable oil so I use olive, which is better for you anyway. When it comes out of the oven, on my cookie sheet, in my bare hands, I arrange it in spirals on all the plates in the house. Most go in the fridge. I clatter one onto the coffee table and light a cigarette. I hum while I inhale so it doesn't feel like I'm breathing. The door opens as I finish my meal. I can't see through the smoke who's come in. Arms of medium size place themselves under shoulders and ass and carry me through the smoke. I imagine the oven is on fire and firefighters come to put it out and are murdered by a million hairball spitting dragon-kittens. But it's only from my million cigarettes. One of the musicians carries me a few blocks and ends our journey in Darla's backseat. The two of them turn the world's lights off and twist off my pajamas. Darla crouches on my chest and pets my whole head. He puts her tits in my mouth and he groans. They hold hands and rub my clit with the joint knuckles. It feels so good it forces my voice out. My atrophied voice. My atrophied voice says Thank you both. Darla coos, so happy to get me in the car and hear me. She moves to kiss me upside down, and the man gets into me, stiff as someone's spine, smooth as he should be. The whole car buckles from the force.

At the end we lean naked on the hood and they each put a cigarette in my mouth and light it and rub circles on my back. At this moment I remember that Resh Lakish actually died of shame, leaving

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Rabbi Yohanan alone to fight the stupid. I cry silently, thinking of Michelle. The people start to hit my back to force the sobs and coughs out. I curl up onto the hood and spit out a hairball.