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The Vernal Pool

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The Things Rain Brings

By Maha Zaman

This piece is dedicated to Cleo, Dr. Tracey, and the strays I've met in Merced.

October of last year, there was a lot of rain. It was cold and thin, pelting anyone under the gray sky at a thirty-degree angle from the ground; a cold that was almost inevitable. In sunny southern California, most days, if you dared to look up, all there'd be is bright blue. I remember hoping in elementary school, that on "Fun-Run Fridays" the clouds would meet above the dusty red track, just so the mile run would be canceled, and everyone could sit inside to watch old episodes of Spongebob. But, even on the cloudiest of days, there always was the convenient light of the heavens, shining down upon the school; the track was certainly a holy site. If the air was dry for 15 minutes, the mile was timed, paced, and graded, no matter how bone chilling the icy winds would be. I remember wishing I could hear the rain patter on the walls, watch the water droplets collect and roll down the windows and smell the petrichor the first rain diffused through the fall air. Those gentle, precious few drops were all the rain I saw in my California—until I drove five hours up the 99 freeway to attend college in Merced.

I knew from what I read that it rained heavily in the fall and winter months; summer and late spring, however, were climates more familiar to me. The air in Merced was light and cool, and to my surprise because of the abundance of cows in the area, did *not* smell strongly of methane gas.

After saying my goodbyes to family, I started the fall semester with a 5:40 am walk to the bus stop; it was times like this where I wish I knew how to drive. Above the cream walls and red bricks of suburban homes was a new sky. The sky, jeweled in stars, touched the ground, and the sunrise colored the morning fog, making the early rise worth the long day. I always passed a small garden on the side of the sidewalk, where an elderly woman kept peppers, carrots, bamboo shoots and other plants. Occasionally, bright yellow pairs of eyes would catch my gaze as cats would rustle the plants in the small garden, revealing the numerous strays which ventured into the area. Rex, a rather plump Russian blue, was the alpha of the street. Nearly everyone fed him, even going as far as letting him into their homes to take a venturesome sniff. Often, on my walks to the bus stop, I'd find him amongst his other feline friends, balancing on fences, chasing lizards and bluebirds.

As October approached, the weather became cooler, the sky gained tints of grey, and red and orange leaves blanketed yellow-green grass. The first rain was initially light, gluing the leaves to the sidewalk, and making way for worms and snails to cross the concrete. The air was dense and carried a musky earthiness across the street to the park. I'd leave a food bowl under the sheltered door for any visiting felines to snack on. Rex was the frequent visitor, as his owner would put out warm blankets and a post for him to watch the cat traffic. As the rain went from gentle droplets to hosing down the block, cats hid under cars, trashcans, and migrated further downtown for cover. Paw prints were left on the windshields of cars out on the curb and worms ruled the concrete.

During my first thunderstorm, I was up late, working away a little past

midnight when I heard something slide along the backyard door. At first, I thought it was the neighbors; the walls of the house were thin after all. The sound continued, but faster and more vigorous. I went to the door and turned on the backlight, trying to see what the noise was. I pulled the blinds which covered the sliding glass door, revealing small muddled paw marks on the window. Right behind them, a small, bony Siamese took note of my appearance and brushed her wet head against the dirtied window, then continued to paw at the door. Her face, ears, and paws were dark brown with a few splotches of lighter brown along her pelt and a small splash of white on her back paw. The wind picked up, knocking over a trashcan nearby; her ears marked the location of the sound, but her eyes continued to follow me. She meowed, swishing her J-shaped tail into the air.

“I know how you feel, I’m not really a fan of this weather when I’m in it,” I replied.

“Mrroowww,” she mumbled, looking up at me.

“Okay, I’ll let you in just for a little bit. I can’t really keep you out of the rain the whole night. At most I can keep you in for a few minutes.”

I unlocked the handle and began sliding the door when thumping sounds came down from the second floor of the house. I heard tired feet drag down each step of the staircase, each step louder and more upset than the previous. The small Siamese brought up her gray-blue eyes, peering through the glass behind me to see the Stomper. The old lemon tree in the yard shook as the Stomper shuffled in, her face made flawless for a night out with friends. Upon noticing me she let out an “Oh, it’s you,” opening the front door and slamming it shut. Upon closing the door, I turned back to the cat, her eyes wide with curiosity. “If she saw you, she would’ve been pissed, she hates strays,” I whispered. I waited to hear the

thud of her dented 2015 Beetle door slamming shut and the rugged hum of her exhaust, before opening the back door.

From the small window in the door, her wet paws dampened the tiles floor leaving a muddied trail as she jumped up to rub her soaking fur against my legs. I picked up a nearby microfiber cloth and placed it over her heart-shaped head, drying her ears and face. She purred loudly as I continued, blotting her saturated paws and drippy tail. Making herself comfortable, she jumped onto a nearby chair and licked herself with vigor. I placed the cloth in the sink and prepared a bowl of cat food for her since she looked as if she hadn't eaten in days. Upon setting it down she jumped down and instantly began to chomp away at the food, purring her way through. After she finished, she wiped her face with her paws and head butted my hand, demanding to be petted. I rubbed her small chin and her forehead as she continued to headbutt my hand. The rain started slowing down, returning to a gentle patter and the wind became soft. It was at this moment she decided her stay was coming to an end, so semi-wet, she led me back to the back door to return to the rain once more.

It was after this, that she became a frequent visitor to my house. When I'd return from the bus, she was always there, waiting for me by the garden for a small meal. She'd follow me through the neighborhood to the house and then afterward, we'd head out for a short walk under the stars. We'd become close friends in a matter of two weeks. She was dubbed Cleo, short for the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, after scaling a table to snatch a bite of a croissant... while I was eating it. As the rain showers became softer, so did she. Light drizzles, silver skies, and rays of light made their way across the Central Valley. Along with this came midterms, projects,

papers, and the greater demands of college life. I was running out of food, living on plain quesadillas, and smelling of Expo markers; I became thin, pale from the lack of sunlight, and bent at the back from long hours at a desk.

Cleo helped ease the stress that came with the workload. Her visits took me to places slightly away from the suburban homes, to places where the wind blew shimmering grass and small hills looked like waves. Her belly became soft and her face rounded. Deeper tones of brown colored her pelt, where patches of white would poke through, leaving only her chest a blank canvas. She knew well that when she heard the slam of a certain dented car door, it was time to leave the premises. After mopping the floors one day, I left the door open to dry the floor and Cleo waltzed in without me noticing. It wasn't until I heard Stomper's scream and the sounds of objects hitting the floor that I saw Cleo dash out of the house. Following shortly was the Stomper, her makeup almost perfect, except for a thick, long black mark down her left eye and bronzing powder on her white tank.

As fall fell, the leaves on the pavement turned black. Empty nests held onto the trees which gripped the velvety green grass. Strange weather arrived in December; the air was cold and dry in the morning with a pale (almost white) shade of grey blanketing the sky. Rex perused the dry streets, often coming by for a snack. The tree pollen in combination with my allergies gave me a runny nose and red eyes when I'd walk to and from the bus stop. Cleo seemed to have disappeared from our usual routine—it would be a few weeks until I'd see her again. I figured she'd wander off downtown with other cats or adventure other parts of the neighborhood.

The sky was pink, and the sun was close to touching the horizon. The

plants in the garden were sheltered in plastic bags. On the pavement, I noticed a bloody paw print, a trail of droplets running ahead of them. I peered through the fallen bamboo shoots and a pair of glistening blue eyes jumped in fear. A single leg was lifted in the air, and the dirtied creature hobbled towards me. Looking closer at the creature, I realized it was Cleo. With a soft, broken “mrow”, water dripped from her pink nose. She hopped out, her back foot in the air, refusing to touch the ground. I scooped her up into my arms and brought her into the house. Her eyes were closing, and her meows were loud and out of breath. I placed my hand over her head to calm her down, massaging her ears until she softened her meows and fell asleep. The sun came in through the windows and the door began to open. Oh no. I looked at the door and there she was, the Stomper. She opened the door and saw me with Cleo and spoke, “I don’t like it when there are animals in the house.”

“She’s hurt! She can barely walk, and she has cuts on her belly!” I snapped back.

“She’ll be fine, just call animal control or something!”

“I can’t! The shelter closes at five and animal control isn’t open right now.”

“Call the police then!”

“I’m going home this weekend anyway, I can take her to a vet and get her fixed up.”

“Okay then just put it in your room! Not here!”

I lifted Cleo and took her to my room as the Stomper watched. “Make sure it stays in the room, I don’t want it out here since it’s dirty,” she said.

I looked around my room. I’d have to keep her for two days until the weekend and one day until my next midterm. I didn’t have supplies to take

care of a cat, or a car to go and buy supplies. The sun was still up but not for long, and I knew I had no choice but to walk. I walked to Target, a 30-minute walk through boarded up neighborhoods infamous for the men who would “offer” rides to young girls.

By the time I got home, I was too weak to move, out of cash, and stressed for an upcoming exam. I managed through the next two days, coming home early to check on Cleo. Then on Friday night, my parents came, and Cleo came back with me to sunny southern California.

The vet’s office was small and homey; I’d been there before for my cat, Clyde. Dr. Tracey was kind, patient, and aware of the nature of pain in animals. Upon taking her in, Dr. Tracey did an x-ray for her back foot, finding no debris in the wound, but an infection in her back foot caused by the bite. The doctor said that it was likely that Cleo was being pursued by another cat, who’d bit her on her back foot. She could’ve died from her injuries. She had a hernia which could have ruptured in the fight, and she would have bled to death. Dr. Tracey took note that she should stay indoors; the fight likely breaking out over territory, increasing the likelihood that she’d be bitten again. Cleo looked up at me from behind the carrier’s mesh, her back paw bandaged in bright orange. We went to the front desk, decorated with feline décor. I paid for her treatment and \$300 x-rays with the last of the money I saved since high school.

“We heard what you did for ‘er, bringin’ her in from so far. You’re an angel!”

“Well, we’ve known each other for a while. She practically follows me home from the bus stop.”

“She must really love you! You goin’ to keep her?”

“I would, but I can’t really care for her since I’m on campus most of the time... and I can’t really keep pets where I live.”

“Ooo!” Dr. Tracey persisted. “You love her too! I can see it! She’s a little finicky, but she trusts you. Just keep her back here, at home!”

“I’d love to, but I’d have to see with my family. I hope I can find her a good home. She’s young... playful... so probably with a family with older children.”

“Alrighty, kiddo. Don’t stress out too much over college! You’re a smart girl with a good head and a big heart.”

Cleo was coned so she wouldn’t lick her wounds, and she stayed in my old room in sunny Southern California. I returned to Merced with a stock of food and a stern warning from my mother to call as soon as I’d run out. While I was away, Cleo and Clyde apparently developed a mutual hatred. Clyde got sick, stopped eating, and developed an aggression towards my room’s door. Additionally, Cleo was another expense... and difficult to afford. Things were getting hard, so my family looked for a rescue who would take her and find her a home. We asked several organizations (even one specializing in Siamese cats) most of which were already full. She was spayed, given shots, and ready for a new life away from Merced.

The search for Cleo’s forever home took weeks until a rescue contacted us with a match for Cleo’s profile. Sunny southern California, where the sky is a perennial blue and the summer heat wavered in spring. My last night with Cleo was spent indoors, under a starless sky, where the 5 freeway ran north and south, twisting through mountains. We drove out to a beach town near Irvine, where we met a man who wore black leather, shades, and full sleeve of tattoos. Due to the pressure to get her adopted,

and her inability to stay in my home in both Merced and So Cal, I had no choice but to relinquish her to a stranger. We decided to give Cleo away with all her things (toys, litter box, bowls).

“Just put her bowl over there and the other things wherever, thanks.”

Those were the only words her new owner said other than a hello and an I’m sorry I must leave for a meeting. We exchanged phone numbers and I asked him to text us if he had any concerns about her care, which he agreed to do.

No kids, no family, and not home for days. Just a bowl of food and water, and a small window to peak out through.

This was where I left Cleo.

A few days after The Stomper moved, Cleo’s new owner texted, letting us know that he had given her to another rescue group to find her a forever home. My only thought was of her locked in a cage in a strange place, away from everything she once knew. I look at the sky and wonder where she is... if I should have brought her back to Merced, returning her to the suburban roads she knew so well. I take a step out of my Merced home, shells of snails glued to the walls of the house. A metal bowl lays in the front yard upside down and I turn it over to see snails as the new residents.

I wonder if she has a home where she’s warm for the night, cool for the day...

away from a glass wall separating her from the others...free to roam and love as she pleases.



Cleo in Fall by Maha Zaman