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A Poem For Ahab

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P.H. Liotta

A POEM FOR AHAB

Tonight as I knelt down to take the wild face of the white cat named Ahab into my hands, as he licked the salt from my palms, I found the traces of blood on his teeth and on the rasp of his tongue which cannot speak, speak, that is, in the way we know the morphemes of language. The blood may, may not be his; it blossoms like a signature along the smoothed-back fur around his lower lip. Maybe it's from the other cat, perfectly black who lives like Ahab's negative underneath the tongue-and-groove planked level floor of this tiny cabin in the woods. Ahab has felt his life invaded. He growls with the soft purr of menace. Sometimes, long into dark, they tear and claw outside, they hiss and spit like two adversaries that have always hated each other. What can I make of this? How can I blame them, when I am surrounded by messages I cannot understand? Tonight in this town two old women die simply because it's winter; in St. Louis some innocent asshole chucks a lantern through a tenement window: three children and their mother, gone; in Afghanistan, Iraq—or some place I haven't heard of yet—a canister of VR55, chemical agent which implodes each lung, cuts off breath and turns the veins of each unwilling victim to a rubbery jelly, will lie on a grainy hillside waiting for the thaw of spring; in the fertile delta of that sad country we once named Vietnam, the green shock of hunger strikes, whole families starve, and deaths go unreported. They are all denied—and no one comes to invade our living rooms via airwaves, where the disembodied Oxfam voice deliberately explains the inevitable and numbing pain of kwashiokor, how, through lack of protein, it stunts both physical and mental growth, brings loss of hair and swelling tissues. The statistics of distance strike like a cold tangent:

Today I read in a magazine of a distant relative, maybe not so distant, who coolly murdered his lover and then did his best to represent her absence with a wellspring of grief, how he had taken her face and then slapped it once and then again and then again against the blue tile of the bathroom floor, how he had dragged her to the kitchen and sunk the three-inch blade of an instrument used for peeling vegetables into her breast, and then, almost lovingly, carried her still warm body back to their bed, laid her back as if to sleep. I keep mouthing his name: *Liotta...Liotta...* a strange and neutral signifier of practically nothing, a name which is my name, of course. I keep thinking of how I rise each day from a cold bed to breathe the living fire and cannot separate myself from distance, how each day I step across the surface of a planet passing always thirteen-and-one-third-miles every minute, thirty-thousand-miles-more-or-less-per-hour, elliptically displaced about a star three-and-one-half-million miles every week and each year we are only closer to hurling ourselves across the universe. Caught in reflection, to pass so smoothly through a world that runs on and on like an aimless river that knows nothing more than it is being pulled, and must respond. And so tonight, as I knelt down to take the white body of the wild cat named Ahab into my arms, and wiped the blood from his mouth, as he returned my cool attempts at care with the cold indifference of his species, and as I heard the sullen grumble of the black cat's growl beneath our feet, I wreathed myself in space, and knew, and not so suddenly—the embrace is all I have to shock me into love. There is always something underneath the porch, behind the closed yet unlocked door.