

Hearth Sprite

Kirsten Irving
& Friends

sidekickBOOKS

Preface

Anyone who has chosen to live with cats both knows and – to some degree – embraces the chaos and unpredictability they bring. Sharing your home with these semi-wild animals means disruption, surprise encounters, a skewed sense of time, endless requests to open doors and turn on taps, denials of reality, and an acute awareness of where your resident ghosts are at any one time.

This book is similarly disrupted and non-linear. The introduction appears and disappears as it pleases. The contents stray from history to poetry and folklore to biology, as we slink from birth to death, and beyond. At intervals, it will cry to go outside and then cry to come back in.

Play with this book and it will adore you. Dip in and out as you like. Run a finger behind the ear of each page. Come and go and let it greet you when you return. Settle in the strangest of spots.

On the Approach

How It All Began: Five Stories

“Ultimately, cats either followed their human companions, or were intentionally brought along, as humans migrated across the globe... In many ways, we didn’t domesticate cats, they domesticated us.”

—Dr. Ruth MacPete

There is no one story of how cats came to live with us. Choose the version you like best.

i.

Felis is for the group’s genus and *catus* is the individual’s name, meaning domestic. Before *Felix catus* there was *Felis silvestris lybica*, the North African/Southwest Asian wildcat.

When humans developed agriculture (approx. 12,000 years ago), our stored grain fell prey to mice. Wildcats looking for food caught the animals eating our harvest, so we encouraged them to hang around. Slowly, they grew to trust us and rely on us, while never completely giving up their hunter selves.

ii.

With the ark overrun by rats, Noah prayed to God for help. The lion and lioness yawned and from their mouths walked two cats. This pair set about killing all but the original two rats. When the flood receded, the cats were given the honour of leading the parade of animals leaving the boat. This is how cats acquired their proud nature.

iii.

The Destroyer God, fearful of mousekind's wiles and angered by our hiding skills, resolved to make mice run in the open. He stirred blood and horn and fur to make brother-servants, Musio and Capto. Each one leapt rivers, had a whip for a tail, could scent us many miles away. Back then, we were all white and gold, a gift from the goddess who made us. We called to our creator. When she saw the harvest of snowy bodies snared and strewn by her brother's cats, she took pity. Though she could not deny them food, she sent down a layer of soft brown ash to help the white mice disappear. Next she gave the two cats and all their descendants the softest fur, irresistible to humans. They were suddenly accompanied, scrutinised.

iv.

We are here until Leo fades from sight. As Regulus and Denebola dim, we will begin to disentangle our lives from firesides and cotton toys. The lion led us to the lantern in the window, the lap. We needed and were needed. When Leo goes, we will know of another country.

v.

She appeared one day, defiant and pregnant, camped by the fire as I arrived home. I asked my daughter, who held my hand, if she saw the same thing I did: striped and insistent, a message in her eye. *I do*, said my child. *Do you think she will stay?*

Hallway

Rough Tongue

a house is a series of timed predations, timed traps and timed invasions / young kitter, new tenant / I say to you *mi-ouw* / *mi-ouw* the dreaming tall one who coaxes you from the kidnap box / whose *tut* are long and swinging / potential snares / but whose pro are blunt, unable / there are those who will wound you with barrelling pad / but harder to dodge are those who forget / who love / who do not mean you injury / who one day leave and forget to leave your *aelio* / who may one day declare you the finest cat and worth the finest *bl* / and present a naked haunch of *bleeme-bl* / a dainty saucer of cool white lae / worst / it is too easy to go and pour no quenching *aliloo* / not a spitlet drop / your bowl a bone and the sun as war through the glass / true true / we never forget how to catch *ptlee-bl* / the earthworm tail and spasming limbs / soon stunned by our pad / but *aliloo* can not be chased / and the *papoo* is ash without / you cannot let them slip the dance / announce yourself: *mieouw* / keep them bright with a begged *parriere* at the just-shut door / reward their attention with *purrieu* / most of all *mi-ouw* the incumbent, whose knowledgeable *leo* will whip your way / whose well-kept *oolie* – be it tabby or midnight – will rise like a field of spears / too late at the signal *yow* / break-second and they are on you / instead prepare / young kitter *mieouw* / heed the barely-open mouth that croons *mi-ouw*

Feline terms from *Pussy and Her Language* (1895) by Marvin R. Clark and Alphonse Grimaldi. See back of book for translation table.

Next time you travel and meet a strange cat in a strange house, greet it in the local language...

Afrikaans	miaau
Albanian	mjau-mjau
Arabic	مِاؤ (muwà-) miao (وایم)
Armenian	միաւ (mee-av)
Basque	mau
Bengali	মিউ মিউ (miu miu)
Bulgarian	мяу (mjau)
Catalan	marramèu, mèu [(mərə) 'mɛw], marramau, mau
Cantonese	喵喵 (mēu-mēu)
Mandarin	喵 (miāo)
Croatian	mijau; mrnjau (tomcat)
Czech	mňau [mɲau]
Danish	mjau, mjav, miau, miav
Dutch	miauw, mauw
Egyptian	mjw (miu)
English (UK)	miaow
English (US)	meow
Estonian	mäu, mjäu, näu, njau, kurnjau
Filipino	meyaw, miyaw, ngiyaw
Finnish	miau, mau, nau, kurnau
French	miaou [mja.u]
Galician	jau jau
German	miau
Greek	μιάου (niau)
Hebrew	מִיָּאוּ (miāw)
Hindi	myaaau, myaaoo
Hungarian	miaú, nyau
Icelandic	mjá
Indonesian	meong
Italian	miao, miau, mao
Japanese	ニャー (nyā)

Kazakh	мияу-мияу (mijau-mijau)
Korean	야옹 (yaong)
Latgalian	ṛau ṛau
Latvian	mjau, ṛau
Lithuanian	miau
Macedonian	mјau (mjau)
Malayalam	ങയററു ങയററു(ngyaoο ngyaoο)
Marathi	म्यांव (meow/myao)
Nepali	म्याउँ ([mjãũ])
Norwegian	mјau
Persian	وی مویم (mioο mioο)
Polish	miau
Portuguese	miau
Romanian	miau
Russian	мяу (mjau)
Serbian	мњау (mṇјau)
Sinhalese	ඤවු (ñāvū)
Slovak	mňau
Slovene	mijav
Spanish	miau
Swedish	mјau, mјao, jam
Tamil	மியா (miaow(m))
Telugu	miao(m)
Thai	เมี้ยว (miaο), แมว (ngaew)
Turkish	miyav
Ukrainian	няв (niav)
Urdu	meow

Hidden Nook

Autogrooming



Library

In Any Sleep

'Cats are never in a hurry, never angular.'

—Leonard Tsuguharu Foujita, painter

and there are many, into which you fall
like a wedding ring into a pool,
you are one of these two:
a snail, upright and tucked,
parcelled like a Sunday roast,
or a nautilus, as I see you now,
with parts of you venturing out and away.

This foot, which I will not touch,
is an excellent cakelet, held out
to be cooled. Sometimes it is the pair,
bone-white and stiff, each shielding
a cluster of sea-smoothed pebbles.

You find bed in any square of sun,
on a pile of printouts,
the corner of a chair,
across two pairs of jeans,
twisted together
and waiting forever to be mended.

You go comma, weasel,
pain au raisin – unmappable
before you change again.



Objects Chased and Embraced By A Cat

