

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 39

June 2008

Squander

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Recommended Citation

Hanning, Jenny (2008) "Squander," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 39.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol8/iss1/39>

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SQUANDER

Jenny Hanning

Katherine wakes up one morning, showers, dresses, drinks a cup of coffee, and does all the things that are routine. The children are gone already, and one—the daughter—has left her lunch bag sitting on the counter. Katherine opens it and guesses from the state of the cheese cubes—soft and greasy, corners rounded—that the lunch has been sitting out since the night before, sometime shortly after Katherine packed and placed it in the fridge. Katherine's daughter has a habit of taking her lunches out to check the contents. The daughter is a child who cannot accept any form of change or surprise. As a mother this used to worry Katherine, but for the last few years worry has been shifting steadily toward annoyance.

Katherine's daughter pitched a fit when they bought a new sofa and ottoman. "Where will I eat cereal!" she screamed. She cried until she vomited.

Katherine feels she has made a lot of allowances where her daughter is concerned. She's thrown away a lot of cheese.

Katherine throws away today's cheese and puts the lunch back in the fridge for tomorrow. She lifts the sleeping cat off the windowsill, but before she has opened the door to put it out, it's already trying to get back inside, turning in her arms. The cat becomes liquid, slips from her grasp and vanishes—under the furniture, up the stairs—who knows? Katherine sighs, rinses out her coffee cup, slides into her shoes, and is on her way.

Katherine teaches junior high, Honors English, and finds that she has more and more difficulty not comparing her daughter to the oddball girls in her classes, the ones that get called *spaz* and *freak*, who sit at the front, and always volunteer to read out loud. The ones with terrible ratty hair, droopy clothing, and no friends. The least favorites among Katherine's students, the ones she actually dislikes. She is thinking about this—her daughter—when the car's windshield shatters into a million tiny cubes.

Stupidly, Katherine's final words are, "Rainbows. Rainbows," and no one but her has any idea what it is she means.

Katherine wakes up again. Through half-open eyes she can see the tip of her tail curled neatly over her slim little paws. This sight is not any less strange than it was the first time she woke to it. Across the arch of her shoulder there are at least one dozen shafts of hair, of *fur*, that are not laying appropriately flat. The compulsion to clean and organize is familiar. Katherine had it in her human body too. After a fight with her husband she would go at the baseboards with a toothbrush, as if clean baseboards were a necessity for survival. It could feel that way when she was a person. Katherine feels that way now about her fur, the spaces between her toes, her whiskers, and her genitals. Easier than flipping a pancake, Katherine tucks a leg behind her head and begins a steady licking of her anus, thinking, *If Robbie could see me now.*

The night before Katherine dies Robbie admits he feels their sex life has gotten stale. Katherine is hurt, but not particularly offended. When Robbie says he has a few suggestions, some ideas, Katherine tries to be patient, but then he uses the phrase, *spice things up*, and Katherine cannot help it, she laughs him out of bed. Robbie spends half an hour in the bathroom with the water running, which strikes Katherine as womanly, so by the time he comes out she is no longer sorry that she hurt his feelings. He hurt hers too. She spreads herself out across the bed in the shape of a starfish. It isn't actually comfortable, but it forces Robbie to sleep on the very edge of the mattress. It's less comfortable for him. His alarm goes off before hers. Robbie does not kiss Katherine's sleepy face goodbye. She wonders now if he feels guilty.

Katherine is trying to have a good attitude about this. She has to, so that she doesn't go insane. Sunning herself on the windowsill she makes jokes, *This is what I get for making them read Kafka*—but late at night when she is filled with a thrumming and

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shameful need to poke her paws into the cage holding her son's guinea pig—taking swipes at its head, going at it until her fur is rubbed off on the wire—she becomes desperately philosophical. Katherine runs through everything she knows about heaven and hell and purgatory while licking at her raw skin and fighting the desire to try to knock the lid off of the guinea pig's cage and get its skull in her jaws.

Katherine wonders why she remembers anything. If this is reincarnation—which seems the most plausible explanation—why was she not born as a kitten? What has become of the cat that lived in the cat-body before her, if it was ever a cat all?—and if not, if it were some other person, then what has become of them? Is this *punishment*? These thoughts keep Katherine up through the night stalking the house.

She notices the general untidiness. Dust bunnies and tumbleweeds of human hair and lint gather along the baseboards. She wants to go to Robbie, wake him and say, *What are you doing? What are you doing?* But he closes the bedroom door at night. He should keep it open for the children. He is continuing to let Katherine down.

She tries to split her waking time between her daughter and her son. Katherine watches them sleep at night, pressed against the backs of their knees in the spot where they are warmest through their covers. It is impossible for her to tell if they are in mourning for her. When they speak to her she cannot understand. Words are distorted; they are like fragments of muted conversation heard through a wall. Their voices are familiar, but their *language* so distant and watery that Katherine cannot give it any meaning.

The children may come to her—to the cat—to laugh, or cry, or confide their secrets. They try to hold her close. She feels their chests move, the warmth of their breath on her fur, but then she is skittering away, unsettled by a sudden movement, or the pressure of their arms tightening around her springy ribs.

Katherine comes to avoid them when they are awake.

She discovers new sneakers by the door, drawn to them by their strange new shoe smell—it irritates her nose. Katherine devotes an entire morning to nibbling off the plastic tabs at the ends of the laces.

The snow is melted away. The birds are out again.

Crickets are chirping in the yard. The pounce is satisfying, the crunch of their—*Exoskeleton*—Katherine thinks, is better.

Under the whine of summer insects, sounds inside the house distress her. No one comes to the door when Katherine sits yowling on the welcome mat so she goes around the back and climbs the bittersweet bush lickety-split. This is a phrase that remains. She watches the flex, the grip and release of retractable claws, and thinks of clapping her hands at the front of the classroom: *Let's wrap this up now. Chop-chop. Lickety-split.* There is the hole that she has ripped in the screen. Katherine lands easily on the rim of the sink. Her agility still shocks and delights her.

Upstairs the bedroom door is open and her son is there sprawled out with his face pushed into the sheets on what was once Katherine's side of the bed. They have always been close, she and her boy. The year before Katherine's death, her son began to do badly in school. Unlike the daughter he had always been an easy child, happy, friendly, bright, popular, pleasant all around. Katherine understood. She knew exactly what was happening. She taught the Honors English classes for the eighth grade, and her son would be one of her students. It was something that she was worrying about as well—how awkward it would be for both of them. She loved him for trying to sabotage himself to save them the discomfort of deciding whether he would call her *Mom* in class. As it turned out neither of them needed to worry about it.

Katherine, her chest trembling with love, leaps onto the bed. She pushes her face against her son's neck. He turns over sharply,

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unbalancing her, then pulls his hand from under his stomach and hurls a magazine. It lands open and Katherine recognizes the winged blonde hair of a third rate celebrity her husband once had a crush on. She bought the magazine as a joke—the woman showed her oil slicked breasts in every photo— and tucked it into Robbie's Christmas stocking—it was years ago. Katherine cannot believe Robbie kept the magazine. Her son throws a pillow then, sending her bolting through the bedroom. Katherine leaves without checking to see if her clothes are still hanging in the closet.

They have been there for three days. Squeaking. Squeaking. Squeaking. Katherine has denied herself the pleasure, because they are just little babies, but now she gives in. The nest is tucked into hollow in the stone wall between her house and the neighbors'—*good fences make*—and she scoops them out and eats them down still wriggling. Katherine thinks she can feel the twitching of their miniscule paws inside her. Their blind-blue mucus eyes, now turn her stomach. Katherine delivers them, no longer wriggling, onto the welcome mat in a wash of yellow bile.

Robbie comes at her with the broom. Katherine feels all her fur coming alive. From the corner of the garage she hisses at him. He lifts the broom in one hand, hurling it at her like a spear. If Katherine could speak she would tell him he's a woman, a coward, and that he has never been able to satisfy her sexually. Unable to speak, she dodges the broom and knocks a can of screws off a shelf onto his car.

The neighbors have a kitten. Katherine is hopeful. She's been preparing. Practicing different lines. She does not want to seem desperate or afraid. She decides to go with humor. The kitten is a tabby, a little fluffy girl, and immediately after determining its gender Katherine begins to feel on edge. *Slut*, she thinks as she watches the tabby leap, back curved and legs stiff, pawing for

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a dragonfly obviously out of reach, but Katherine pushes aside the anger, calms herself, then leaps down from the chokecherry tree at the end of the driveway.

The kitten is pushing a piece of gravel back and forth between its paws. Her fur is full of sand. "Mom?" Katherine asks. "Is that you?" She hopes the pitch is right, that the joke will carry. The kitten meows. Katherine feels her tail twitching. *Meow* means nothing to her. Katherine tries again, asking, "How long have you—you know?" Waiting she nervously smoothes her whiskers. Then the kitten—that little goddamned bitch—pounces on her tail. Katherine whaps her sharply on the nose, pins her down and rips one pert little ear. The kitten is yowling and twisting so Katherine lets her up. She runs. Katherine would give chase, but the kitten's blood is on her whiskers and she must clean them immediately.

It is her son who finally catches her. He throws a towel over her head, tangles her feet in it then upends her into a cardboard box. This is unexpected and terrifying. Katherine is panting and frenzied. She cannot find a stable place to put her feet. By the time the motion stops Katherine is too exhausted to hiss and spit and shriek and claw. Robbie lifts her from the box and passes her to her son who holds her against his chest.

Katherine recognizes the brushed metal countertops and floral prints as the standard decor for all the doctors' offices she's ever been to, and knows—with mixed feelings—that this is another end. She would be calm, except for the smell of dogs, it makes her body anxious all around her. Robbie's hand touches her along the spine in all the right places, but Katherine hates his touch. She will not purr for him.

Katherine's head is put through a noose and hands stronger than she hold her to the table. She focuses on her son, on his face next to hers, and she must fight down the urge to bat at his fluttering lashes. One of his hands slips under her stomach, the other cups

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her chin, rubbing gently. Her second chance ending, and it is the same life, wasted in all the same ways. Katherine finds that she is overwhelmed.

As the warm pull of sleep moves through her, she pushes her head down into her son's hand. He puts his nose against hers, and she can see the tears, bright, in his clumped lashes, and there is a floating moment when Katherine is nothing but laughter. Rainbows, she thinks. Rainbows. Rainbows.

Katherine wakes up again. The air is thick with the smell of cedar, and the light that touches her falls in a grid, bands of warmth of shadow divided by the wire walls of the cage holding the body that holds her.

Katherine believes she is beginning to understand.