

Before Sleep

Inspired by 'A Day in the Afterlife' and Phillip K Dick , with thanks to Speaking Volumes and Your Local Arena.

Free Woman Decoy adjusted to the darkness,
some wrinkle of which coalesced into a cat –
Shayu?
She reached out to stroke absence –
not Shayu
There were two ways a person could explore space
In some alternate universe, her life as an astronaut
was a subterranean montage of libraries and gyms,
her lifeline a taproot which palely inched into daily abnegations,
retreating from all appetites, save the one which burned for stars until,
strapped to metal, she was blasted into the uninhabitable,
long hauled by the Orphean roar of science
towards storyless constellations
Only then could she look back at her Earth,
spinning alone in the vast claustrophobia of space
and mourn the weight of gravity
To embark on this kind of space travel was a dead end,
and fortunately, well above her metaphorical pay grade
The other way, infinitely more elegant,
was to uncollapse one's eigenstate,
be simultaneously particle and wave
Eyes closed, she attempted to glimpse the universe behind her blind spots
Instead, her mind flipped through places where Shayu might be -
pouncing for spiders in the undergrowth,
sphinx-like on the recycling bin,
outside her bedroom door
The cat had been missing before
She'd presumed him dead, prayed he had found,
in the euphoria of endorphins between heartbeat and none,
a presentness, where all time unfolds and there,

she hoped, as his neurons fired off the last and everlasting salute,
that he remembered kindness
Then, four years on, a call came through
from Mitcham Cats Rescue which existed on an industrial estate
that appeared like the portal to Atlantis
She had lugged him home, in a borrowed carrier
Where Shayu had been remained a mystery
Now, he was, once again, somewhere, not here,
was right now, living many lives
his every magical apparition collapsing the illusion of linearity,
cantilevering causality into a fractal origami
of multidimensional folds
Or he was dead, by the side of the road
There was no way of knowing
She reached out for her familiar, her phone,
but the device was numb, a severed limb
Sabotage
Her past self, conspiring against her future self,
had removed the charger by the bed,
so now she lay, untethered in the seething dark,
stupefied by freefall, body rigid, breath shallow,
porous to swarming waves of story trash,
her system a carcass on the ocean floor,
a civilization in disintegration,
the iteration of that stage in a process
where something intricate and complexly organised,
breaks down
Unspooled space rewound, leapt up into Shayu
He purred rhythmically against her heart in friendly CPR,
electric tonic for all dread,
uncertainty manifest as a tiny miracle
Elsewhere in the entangled universe,
matter transferred to energy
Nothing comes from nothing,

everything is compost
She was natural as plastic,
essential as bacteria,
metaphysical as the last person on Earth,
as the first on a new planet,
not a space explorer, more a caretaker,
custodian of local reality,
mopping at the leaky edges of entropy
occupied in random, pointless acts of kindness,
motiveless positivity, spending her lunch hour
in the rescue of a spider, witnessing how
barely rooted weeds struggle up to flower,
observing, in a cat's return, the truth,
that though nothing means anything,
everything can mean something
wonderful, and as she drifted towards the deep,
she knew we are not alone, we have in ourselves
a purpose, like a lost twin
and she sent a wish into space that she,
that they would be worthy

Francesca Beard, London 15th October, 2024