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FRAGILE THINGS

BY STEPHEN POLESKIE

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The raccoon dances playfully on the evening grass. Its secret betrayed, you watch from one of your upstairs windows, wondering if this is the same raccoon who has been lately raiding your bird feeder. On other nights you have chased it away with noise and flashing lights, but now it's back. Or is it? This masked creature appears somewhat smaller. Or is it a trick of the fading light on your fading eyes?

Studying its gamesome movements, you ask yourself if raccoons aren't as entertaining as birds. You wonder why it is you feed birds, buying them the most expensive sunflower seeds, while guarding the seeds from squirrels and raccoons in a special feeder, with a spring loaded lid that closes when anything heavier than a Blue Jay steps on the feeding rail, on a high pole girdled by a stainless steel baffle that does keep squirrels away, but only serves as a buffet for the raccoons.

Your mother had told you Nip was gone. You called him Nip after the name of the dog, along with Tuck, that was in the book you were using to learn to read. Your mother said she thought that maybe the mailman had taken him away as he was very friendly to Nip, patting your dog on the head whenever he came by. She said that the last time she had seen Nip was just before the mailman's truck came. You wondered if perhaps Nip hadn't run away. He had made a mistake in the house last night, his first ever mistake, and your father had beaten him for it and rubbed his nose in it, which was what your father said you were supposed to do to punish dogs, and so that they would never do it again. Your mother said that maybe it wasn't Nips fault, that he was getting old and that such things just happened. She told you that Nip was twice as old as you, and that he had been her dog before she married your father.

The next day you waited suspiciously for the mailman, asking him if he had seen Nip. The mailman said that he had not, and was sorry to hear that Nip was lost as he was such a nice dog, but would keep his eyes open for your pet as he drove around the neighborhood. Everyday you waited for the mailman, and everyday he told you he had not seen Nip. About a week later the mailman brought you something he had torn out of the newspaper. You couldn't read it all but it was a picture of Nip, who didn't have a name under him only a number. The mailman said Nip was at a place where they take lost dogs, or dogs that people gave away, and that you should show the paper to your father, and he would take you there to get Nip back.

When your father came home from work you showed him the picture, but he said that the mailman was mistaken, that although the dog in the picture looked something like Nip, he was sure it was not Nip, so there was no use going there

and wasting time because the place was far away.

Without a sound the raccoon moves closer to your house, and your bounteous feeder. A butterfly flutters by in the twilight, the sun's last rays slanting off its wings. Through your open window you hear the whir of a hummingbird, but the tiny flyer is gone before you can identify it.

Darkness is gathering itself around the ordered acre that is your garden, all that separates your world from the extravagance of the woods beyond. You can still see well enough to recognize that it is a young raccoon that is coming, with its strange pavane, moving stealthily into your world. You want to tell it that it comes too early. This creature has not learned that its kind ply their trade at night; knocking over your garbage cans and scattering the contents, robbing your bird feeder, digging up your wife's plantings to look for grubs. Or would the raccoon tell you that it was its rival the skunk, that committed these crimes against your space, this land you bought thirty years ago so you would have no neighbors, and on which you now pay such high property taxes that you spend almost as much money per year in taxes as you originally paid to buy the land.

You noticed Puss Cat was getting fatter. Your mother had got a cat for you when Nip had not come back. You weren't allowed to pet Puss Cat because she might scratch you, which she never did. But she had scratched your father, which was why there was that rule. You petted her, and even let her in the cellar on cold nights, where she was not allowed, and found out that she had her own secret way in and out.

Then Puss Cat went missing for several days and no one knew where she was, but you did. You found her in a box in the cellar, and there were three other small creatures in the box with her. They were little and wet and their eyes were closed, and you wondered where they had come from. And then you saw that she had another creature half coming out of her bottom. You watched fascinated as Puss Cat twirled her body in a circle causing the small creature to pop out all the way. But it was still attached by a kind of string, which she bit and then ate, and then the little creature, guided by you did not know what, wobbled over to the pile of other little creatures, and huddled with them while Puss Cat cleaned them with her tongue. After which she lay down next to the pile and they each began to take milk, which you knew what they were doing because you had done that yourself not that many years ago. Then you cautiously put your little hand in the box and petted Puss Cat, who was already purring, and she smiled at you with her little cat smile. And then carefully, so very carefully, you touched each of the new creatures on the top of their head, but they did not open their eyes, only wiggled their noses, and kept on doing what they had been doing. Puss Cat licked the little ones and purred louder, giving you a bigger smile.

When your parents caught you sneaking down the cellar stairs with a saucer of milk you told them where Puss Cat was, and about the kittens, who had their eyes open by now. You told your parents what you had seen; however your father said that you shouldn't have watched, and that you should forget about what you saw because you were too young to know about such things. Your mother put her hand in the box and touched the little animals, but when your father tried Puss Cat swiped at him, drawing blood. He hit her on the face and called her a bad cat. She hissed at him and covered the kittens with her body. Your parents had not seemed happy to find the kittens. Your father said that one cat around here was enough, that he had better things to do with his time than making life comfortable for animals.

The next day at breakfast your mother told you that the kittens were gone. She explained that sometimes mother cats take their kittens away and hide them. But you knew this was not true. You had seen your father last night with the box of kittens out in the back yard, taking them from the box and dropping them one at a

time down the vent pipe to the old septic tank.

Having often dropped rotten apples down that pipe to hear them splash, you knew there was no water in the sump now, only mud. After breakfast, when your parents had gone, you put your ear to the pipe. You could hear the kitten's cries coming up from below. You tied an empty paint can to a rope and lowered it into the pipe. Although you waited all afternoon no kittens got into the can. The next day you put food in the can, but still no one got in. On the third day you heard no more cries.

The raccoon stands on its hind legs, head held high sniffing the wind, its masked face looking cute, its eyes studying your bird feeder, deciding if this is its feeder. Lying with your belly pressed to the squeaky bed, you slowly ease the barrel of your shotgun out the open window; you make no noise. Your enemy darts under the garden bench. You wait.

Lucy had sounded the alarm, barking at the window as you worked at your desk. Neither you nor your wife had wanted a dog, you were cat lovers. You hadn't had a dog since Nip, which was over fifty years ago, and your wife had never had a dog. However, after your house had been broken into for the sixth time in two years, and the investigating office had revealed that yours was the most burglarized house in the county, you decided to get a dog – a big dog.

You found Lucy cowering in a kennel at the local SPCA. She looked like a German Shepherd, had nice eyes, and was free, which had been good enough for you; although a couple down the road, who fancied themselves dog experts, never tired of pointing out that Lucy's hind legs were too long and her tail too curly to be a real Shepherd. But she did her job, barking loudly at everyone who came near the house.

Lucy had not been barking at a potential burglar. The robberies had stopped when the police discovered that the burglar of your house was actually the teenage son of one of their own officers who lived on the other side of the woods. Rather than arrest the delinquent, he had been encouraged to become one of the proud and the few in the Marine Corps. Your watchdog had been barking at a small gray cat standing outside the window in the foot-high snow.

You told the cat to go away, that you already had a cat, who was old and guarded her place and didn't want to share. You told it to go back to where it came from, but you remembered that you had seen this cat all summer, hiding in the field next to the house, either lost or thrown out, trying to catch something to eat, and that it had no place to go. So you made it a place on the porch, a cut-out box, with a carpet and some rags to keep warm, and its own dishes for water and food. And the gray cat thanked you with its look, and slept in the box all that night and most of the next day, but the rest of the time it sat on the window ledge looking in at your cat and dog. And when you walked your dog in the field the gray cat followed along, at a safe distance, hopping in the tracks in the snow that you and Lucy made. And you and your wife had started to call the gray cat "Second Cat", knowing that it was only a matter of time before Second Cat was allowed in the house.

Your dog and cat accepted Second Cat, but you could tell that he was an old cat, and would probably not be around too long. Yet it was Lucy who died first. She had been an older dog when you got her, and in sad shape. You had been told that you were the dog's third owner, and that she was taken away from the two previous owners who had mistreated her. Lucy had gotten into the habit of running off, and being gone for several days, returning all worn out and dirty. You and your wife wondered if she might be looking for the puppies that she had had, or maybe the children of one of her previous owners who had played with her, or perhaps illegally chasing deer in the woods. Then Lucy could no longer hold her water. Lying by the fire she would suddenly look up, guilt on her face, and walk away from a damp puddle.

After Lucy had been put down the two cats began to fight constantly, only then did you realize the position she had maintained as peacekeeper between them.

Scampering back out into the open, crossing the grass on all fours, the raccoon is in your sight, the setting sun reflecting in the fluorescent plastic insert at the end of your barrels. To you the marauder, obscured by the glowing plastic sight, is no longer a living creature, only a dark gray target. Your thumb inches the safety lock forward. Perhaps the raccoon hears this, or perhaps it is intuition; it starts to run. You squeeze the trigger, not carefully as you should, but hurriedly, jerking the gun upward. The right barrel sends out its expanding circle of deadly pellets.

Second Cat became the first cat to die. It was your wife's birthday. The summer day had been beautiful, and you and your wife made a lobster feast, just the two of you, out on the back deck. You had watched your two cats playing on the grass. When it was beginning to get dark, Blaze, so named because of the pattern on her red and white fur, had come in, but Second Cat was nowhere to be seen. He had never stayed out overnight since coming to live with you, and so you were worried and looked for him in the woods with flashlights. The next day Second Cat returned home, but was out of sorts, and would not eat. That night he came up on the bed, where you and your wife were reading, and curled up on your lap, as Blaze was already on your wife's. He didn't stay long. After a few minutes, he jumped down and ran into a corner, breathing heavily and gagging and choking. You called your veterinarian; however it was Sunday night and she was not there. The answering service said to keep an eye on your cat, and call back if it got worse. You stayed up all night with Second Cat, stroking his head and offering him chicken broth from a spoon, which was all you could think to do.

The next morning you took Second Cat to the animal hospital, he did not look very good, and gave you a sad face as you handed him over for his stay. You told the veterinarian it was the first day of your wife's vacation and you had plans to go to a theatre festival in Canada, and that the tickets and room at a bed and breakfast had been paid in advance, but you would cancel your plans if she thought it necessary. The vet said she would look after Second Cat, and that you should go on your trip and call her the next day.

You phoned from the festival, a pay phone in a park in the middle of town. The veterinarian told you Second Cat had taken a turn for the worse, that some organ inside him had failed, an organ you can't remember now, but an organ he couldn't do without, and he was going to die. He was sedated, and feeling no pain, and the vet wanted your permission to put him down. You put your hand over the receiver to consult with your wife, and then answered that if it had to be done it should be done. After you hung up you and your wife sat on a bench in the park for a long time, holding hands, and you both cried. You hadn't cried when your father died, but you cried then. After a while the two of you got up, and without speaking walked back to your room, packed your bags, and left for home without seeing any of the plays.

The next day you dug a hole in your garden in the spot where Second Cat used to wait in ambush for squirrels, which he never managed to catch or perhaps just wanted the sport, on route to the bird feeder. Your wife brought his body back from the animal hospital sealed in a cardboard box left over from medical supplies. You wanted so much to open the box and see Second Cat one more time, but your wife said it was better to remember him as he had been. You buried him in the box, putting some of his favorite toys in the hole with him.

The raccoon falls, rolls over, gets up and heads for the garden, crashes down upon reaching the safety of the tomato plants, and unseen, begins the pitiful cry of the wounded animal. It needs another shot to stop the misery, but is beyond the edge of the house; you cannot shoot.

You rush down the stairs, plunging into darkness, forgetting to turn on the light in

your haste, forgetting that you are old and have fallen on these same stairs several times in the past, forgetting that you are carrying a shotgun with one barrel still loaded, and the safety still in the “fire” position.

Your cats, roused from their sleep by the shot, scurry about the kitchen, under your feet, racing you to the door. “Go away cats! Get back, stay in the house!”

Blaze had waited for you to come home before she died. She was very old for a cat, 20 years, which was as long as you and your wife had been married. Your wife had called you at the school where you taught and told you that Blaze was dying, that she probably had only a few hours left. But this was one of the days you had an evening class and would not be home until much later. Your wife told you the regular veterinarian could not come; she had sent for another vet who made house calls. When you finally got home Blaze was upstairs in your bedroom, still alive, but very weak. The poor old cat recognized you when you came into the room and got up and tried to come over to you, but she just fell down on her unsteady legs. You went over to her and began to stroke her head, and she turned over and looked up at you, her little smile seeming to say thank you for finally coming. There was a knock on the door, and your wife went downstairs to let in the vet, who apologized for being three hours late because her car had broken down. But it did not matter for before they could come upstairs, and as you were stroking her, Blaze gave a shudder and a gasp, and, releasing her body fluids, gave up her life.

You cannot let them out, your beloved cats, there is a dying animal, not much bigger than they are, out there in the darkness. Despite their instincts, you tried to teach your cats not to kill. You took away baby rabbits and squirrels they caught, even nursing back to health a particularly pitiful squirrel that one of them had brought to you when the cat tired of playing with it since it was near death, and no longer entertaining. The cat had not killed it, but brought it to you, and you had healed it, feeding it birdseed from your hand. How can you feed a dying squirrel birdseed from your hand, and yet shoot other squirrels and raccoons who would take the same seeds from the feeder on their own?

You stand there in the darkness, your body shaking, pointing the barrels of your shotgun at the whimpering sounds of dying. You move the safety back and squeeze the trigger. There is no response. Confused you squeeze the trigger again. Then you realize that the safety had been off all the while. Returning the safety to “fire,” you aim the ready gun into the darkness, in the direction the noise had come from.

But there is no noise, only silence, an echo of the tremulous creature's despair, as the raccoon is alive no more.

Tears are in your eyes.

Stephen Poleskie is an artist and writer. His artwork is in the collections of numerous museums including the Metropolitan Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Tate Gallery in London. His writing, fiction and art criticism, has appeared in many journals both here and abroad. Among these are *American Writing*, *Leonardo*, *Lightworks*, and the *Sulphur River Literary Review* in the USA; *D'Arts*, and *Domus* in Italy; *Himmelschreiber* in Germany; and *Imago* in Australia. He also has a story in the anthology *The Book of Love*, from W. W. Norton. A handmade book of his poetry was published by Loughborough College of Art in England. His novel, *The Balloonist, The Story of T. S. C. Lowe*, has recently been published by Frederic C. Beil. He has taught, or been a visiting professor at 26 colleges and art schools throughout the world, including the School of Visual Art in NYC and the University of California, Berkeley. Poleskie is a professor emeritus at Cornell University.