

# The City

Three stray cats are walking along a sidewalk. They move together, side by side, paws reaching forward in union. Dust and dirt of the city has turned their once dazzling coats into a dark faded grey with glimpses of white and brown. They are all around the same size, the one on the left, however, is the smallest of the three.

Apart from these three cats, the entire cityscape that surrounds them is deserted. It had rained some time ago, leaving the streets with the musk of fresh rain and stretches of dry barren concrete riddled with a few remaining puddles. Clouds from the downpour quickly disappeared into the deep abyss of the sky, leaving a lone bright round sphere amongst the darkness. No stars can be seen from the city. Rays of the moon that try to penetrate the tall buildings are dwarfed by the omnipotent glow of neon lights and billboards that envelops these three stray cats. The sidewalk they walk on is cold concrete, which has experienced almost as many nights as it had feet walk over it, evenly spaced breaks in the slabs provide a pattern amongst the dull grey where the cats are careful not to tread. The streets are silent.

Their paws touch down on the concrete without the smallest of sounds, while the gentle trickle of water along the gutter beside them seems to echo between the buildings. The water runs down the gutters the same direction the cats walk. Every hundred metres the water disappears down an empty black break in the gutter, amplifying the gentle trickle into a hollow splash. The cat on the right, the largest of the three, is the closest to the gutter. This water doesn't seem to bother them, none of the cats glance to their right towards the gutter or look behind them to see how far they've come, they all just look straight forward as they walk, tails swaying in an even rhythm.

Three stray cats leave behind them a trail of wet paw-prints. Dampness from the rain that has left the concrete remains in the pads of their feet and stamps the ground with a perfect shape as they take each step. Each cat leaves two pairs of prints evenly spaced from one another as they proceed, which seem to get further and further apart behind them. Their isolation amongst the buildings is interrupted as they walk further. In front of the three cats a flock of almost a dozen pigeons pick mindlessly at the bare concrete surrounding a single green bin. They don't seem to notice the three stray cats taking even measured steps towards them.

Hunger churns and twists the three cat's stomachs, yet they don't show it, they just walk together side by side, heads bobbing and tails swaying together. Their movements delicately increase speed as they get closer to the pigeons, which are still bent over by the green bin, unaware. The cats gain momentum as the rainwater by their side starts to run faster, now gushing down through the gutter, the echo of the gentle trickle now a booming wave of sound that fills the cats' ears. One pigeon raises their head in suspicion and then a sudden contagion affects the flock, and with the flutter of two dozen wings the pigeons disappear. The three stray cats, returning back to their original pace, continue on unaffected.

Three cats move on, steady measured steps take them further down the long concrete stretch that seems to get thinner and thinner in the distance. The smallest of the cats, with streaks of amber that seem to tumble down the contours of its body, passes a

large puddle. The pool of rainwater lying stagnant on the concrete is illuminated by the hundreds of colours still radiating from the bright advertisements that envelop the city's walls. The shadows of the three cats stretch across the empty concrete streets, gradually getting closer to the flock of pigeons that have landed some distance in front on them, next to a lone green bin.

Three cats slink closer and closer to the flock. They know they are running out of time, the sun will rise soon and with the sun comes people. None of the cats have eaten in days, but they refuse to show it, walking together in perfect harmony. Water still dribbles down the gutter to the right of the three, soaking the streets with its distinct echo as the water disappears into the deep dark breaks beside the sidewalk. Twelve wet paw prints follow them as they walk along the concrete, each a perfect copy of the print preceding it. Yet none of the three turn their heads to see how far they've come, they simply continue on towards the flock of pigeons, without even the slightest turn of ear.

A gentle coo comes from the pigeons as they have their heads buried in the concrete surrounding the green bin. The three stray cats are now merely metres away from the flock, but they keep their composure. This time there is no suspicious pigeon, not a single head is raised as the cats approach, and there is no contagion of fear that scares the flock away. All three cats pounce at once, each selecting a different bird, each exploding forward from their hind legs. A sense of utter chaos sweeps through the flock, as the birds that can't fly away are ripped down to the ground by their throats, leaving a flurry of smoky-grey feathers. The water running down the gutter has stopped.

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The sun is rising, and the cats know the people are coming, yet the cats still walk in rhythm, none of them looking backward. For a moment as the sun rises the streets become completely silent, the neon buzzing has ceased and the trickle of water through the gutters has dried up, allowing the warm glow of the sun to wash over the city to give birth to a new day. This moment doesn't last long. Footsteps and shoeprints soon make the once clear paw prints fade from the concrete, yet still the three cats don't look back. All three cats purring now continue on walking forward, pigeons dangling from their jaws, vanishing into the glare of the rising sun.

“Time is a violent torrent; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by, and another takes its place, before this too will be swept away.”

- Marcus Aurelius

# Reflective Commentary

In this piece I have extracted ideas and elements from Alain Robbe-Grillet's story, '*The Beach*', in order to mould my own narrative into one of the same form as the author. The original represents a sort of melodic dream where images of timelessness and continuity can be noticed throughout the text. This surreal dreamscape, a mathematical universe, contains natural occurrences and bizarre phenomena that recur at enumerated intervals. The changing colour of the sea, the flock of birds and the description of the three children are repeated by Robbe-Grillet in a detached narrative form which allows the reader to become familiar with the peculiar dreamscape illustrated by the author.

My own version of Robbe-Grillet's text, entitled 'The City', shares many of the same literary features as the original. The three children's footsteps, and the sense of mathematical precision that they represent, are emulated by three cats' own paw prints which leave a mark on the concrete they pass. These paw prints on the concrete, like the children's footprints in the sand, symbolize the character's mark in time. The flock of birds appear in my own story as well, which with the same repetitiveness as the original, keep flying further down the cats' path as they proceed forward. These birds in my story play a key role in the representation of life and death, as it is revealed that the cats are actually stalking the birds as prey. The running water down the gutter next to the cats parallels this notion of life and death, as water is a universally known symbol for life. Stopping the water after the cats catch the pigeons is a representation of death.

I have adopted the dispassionate, methodical narrative voice of a third person that the original author applies in his text to use in my own piece, allowing the mathematical exactness that Robbe-Grillet's incorporates in his writing to be emulated. I have loosely followed Robbe-Grillet's structure of introducing a new idea or motif with each paragraph, followed by the repetition of details already articulated by the previous text. This technique of writing allows the author to instil a clear picture of the scene he is describing to the reader.

My story ends, somewhat like the original, with no clear ending, allowing the reader to make their own presumptions about the meaning of the ending my piece. The cats continuing on walking into the distance symbolises the requirement to have a sense of destination, a sort of forward progress, while also signifying the concept of time. Death is a major part of life and the incorporation of the pigeons and running water can be seen as a metaphor for this concept. The three cats constant journey forward is a representation of time itself, illustrating that time will never cease and ultimately, will kill you. I have chosen to use a quote at the end of my story from Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor and philosopher of the second century, which brings to light the incredible impact the notion of time has on life, describing it as a "violent torrent." Although the original piece does not include any quotes, I find that this inclusion presents a clearer picture of the meaning of my story to the reader.

Thus my story becomes a metaphorical journey through life. As the cats, representing time and the inevitability of forward progress, stalk and eventually kill some of the pigeons, which are used as symbols for a being's own mortal life.