



Catalien, Oliver Findlay Price
(Dryad Press, 2020)

In its fusion of two words, ‘cat’ and ‘alien’, the title of Oliver Findlay Price’s debut collection is an indication of the nature of the poet’s work, characterised as it is by the juxtaposition of enigmatic—and sometimes elusive—images and non sequiturs, in the Surrealist style. The title also neatly features the poet’s perception of himself as an outsider (‘alien’), and of

felines (‘cat’), not only as fascinating creatures in themselves, but also as metaphors for humans.

The opening poem, ‘Alien’, establishes the poet’s sense of himself as an outsider, a view endorsed in subsequent pieces, such as ‘Mole’, in which the distinguishing blemish claims, “I crown him alien to his fingertips”; ‘In the motes of time’, where the poet declares, “Alien am I, of no space, no place—”; and the carefully wrought ‘Home’, where we find the writer presenting himself as anti-social, inclined to the solitariness that “opens up... [his] rhymes”.

Felines abound, either in poems that focus entirely on a given cat, or in passing images, a repeated one referring to the pose of a cat, licking itself, “hindfoot stretched to heaven—” (‘In Tomcat’s Dream’ and ‘Paradise’). In ‘Territorial Cat’, the feline speaker voices his—and by extension, humans’—proprietary sense, as he considers the expanse of his territory and his dominance over other inhabitants and trespassers, such as the “two passing feral cats / whom I see off with fearsome efficiency”.

In ‘Academy Cat’ Price satirises academia, as the protagonist “pads / campus corridors”, where Bastet, the cat goddess, lectures on “stalk and catch”. Qualifying as “an elite and subtle predator”, the cat exhibits its graduate arrogance, anticipating “divinity and mummy-bandages” in the afterlife.

‘Bastet’ showcases Price’s techniques. It purports to be about the feline deity, but is essentially about writing. Bastet/Price is a creator for whom “the Word” is a “toy”. The cat/writer is depicted as a “verbivore” who has to “capture” words and digest them. Thus, moving from “cartilaginous apple” (the throat, indicated here by the Adam’s apple) to “flexible clay”, in the digestive process, swallowed words are metamorphosed “for expulsion / and writing in the image / of The Cat.”

While Price's interest in and observation of cats is particularly evident, other creatures—birds, insects, reptiles and sea creatures also feature. And Price's respect—even reverence—for the earth, indeed for the cosmos, is clear. In 'What is this bondage,' Price expresses his attachment "to a piece of earth" and sees himself as intimately part of the environment: "I am embroidered in this cloth". However, the destructive behaviour of humankind is seen as reprehensible. In his clever poem, 'Blood Moon,' the moon speaks to earth during an eclipse, as if to a lover: "I glow unclad in your dark." However, while the moon observes that some "carry banners", protesting on behalf of the protection of the earth, most humans are perceived as diminutive and destructive. They are "microbes" engaged in "cancerous work". They are also bent on exploring the moon itself, as seen in Price's delightful distortion of Neil Armstrong's iconic lines when he set foot on the moon: "...one small step for a microbe, / one giant leap for microbia". The moon bemoans the presence of these noisome microorganisms that "scout my back and tramp my dust."

Criticism of human destructiveness is further highlighted in two poems about carnivores, which are "delicately nourished on slivered livers." ('The Kidney of Rhetoric'). The speaker in 'Psychopath' argues that meat eaters are as guilty as he is of subjecting their "victims" to "frightful ends."

In 'Psychopath,' Price employs the sonnet form, as he does in several other poems, including 'Empty Shells,' which, with its Macbethian allusions, mourns the passing of one who "should have died hereafter." Playfully, he also embraces the challenge of the villanelle in two pieces.

"I rest in my iniquity", writes Price in the opening poem, 'Alien'. His is certainly a unique voice, which makes considerable demands on the reader. Nevertheless, the work—teasing and testing—is enchanting.

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