

Fearful Symmetry

Holly Barratt

I first met my sister when I was five. She was twice the size of a house cat, with a soft little bear-face, snowy whiskers and a baffled smile. She rolled over and stretched out her fluffy limbs. I instantly loved the pin cushion pads of her paws, and the wiggle of stripes as she shook herself out. She balance-walked up my body, rolled around on my belly, and then placed a paw on my nose. Her claws grazed my cheeks but I wasn't hurt. My sister wouldn't hurt me, ever. Her white throat moved up and down fast with either heartbeat or breathing, letting me know she was alive, alive.

"Hello," I whispered, so as not to wake Mum and Dad. We shouldn't be playing at this time of night. My sister tilted her head then jumped onto the carpet, and batted at my red ball. I got out of bed, and rolled it across the room. She chased it, jumped on it, and attacked it with her teeth. It wrecked the ball but I didn't care. I didn't care at all. We played until the sun came up and she needed to go, because my sister is nocturnal.

She visited me most nights. We played ball. We curled up close in bed and I put my hand on her side to feel her rise and fall. She tried not to scratch or bite me, but sometimes she drew blood just because that's her nature. I never cried out or told her off because I knew she might never come back again.

Before I was born, my sister was like me. There are photographs of us both in frames on the wall by the stairs. Until I was four there were more of her than of me. Now there are more of me than there are of her. The living room has only one photograph, which sits on a corner shelf behind the arm of the sofa. You only see it if you decide to look at it. She is like me and not like me. She has dark yellow hair that drags across her forehead and into her ice-cream. Her eyes are screwed up because it's sunny and I can't see what colour they are. Mum says her eyes were brown like mine. Her teeth are blunt and wonky, with a gap near the front. Her skin is tan, and she wears a yellow hat. The picture reminds me of sand.

"The summer we lost her," Mum told a visitor, before she went into the bathroom to be sick.

When I was seven, I noticed my sister getting bigger. She moved slow, like wading through water. Her pounces were exclamation marks at the end of a strolling sentence. She yawned often: showing the length of her fangs. She looked dangerous and I was glad she was my sister. I felt safe around her. If she could draw blood on me, imagine what she could do to an enemy.

"We don't keep photographs from that day," Mum told another visitor. "I deleted them all. I don't want to remember her that way."

She had the picture in her lap.

“It helps to talk about her. To talk about her, not about what happened to her. There’s no reason to relive that. I wouldn’t want to upset Lily. She never knew her sister, but we always wanted her to see the happy, beautiful girl she always was.”

I spent nights with my sister, and by day I typed her name into the internet and read old newspaper articles. The articles asked questions: has the safari park improved safety? Is it right to keep beautiful wild animals in captivity? And there was a newer story, about someone else’s sister, a zookeeper in another country.

My sister is full grown. She is bigger than me and can’t lie on the bed without her back legs hanging off, so she lies mainly on the floor, licking her huge claws. I see blood on them, but it isn’t mine, so I don’t know what she eats before she visits. Although I told her to be quiet, sometimes she can’t help but roar: she opens wide, her teeth like knives and the sound makes my bones vibrate. She makes the room stink of sugary pee, she leaves hairs on the carpet and she hurts me – she scraped a claw right down my left arm when I tried to hug her and it was so painful I thought I might faint. I wore long sleeves for weeks. The scar is ugly but I like to feel it and sometimes I want her to scar me more. My sister can’t talk at all and all I want her to tell me is what it feels like to be ripped apart.