

Apocalypse Mornings – Isabel, Year 10, VIC

The cotton sheets stick to my thighs as I roll over. The orange sunlight spills through the window and splays across the room, hitting the back of my head as I lay half off the bed precariously. Silvio steers himself through the maze of books and contaminated clothes that lay in piles like landmines. He jumps up from a stool onto the bed cuddling in with me and basking in the sun. Sweat clings to every inch of my body, so I push him away until he looks like a lone black island in an ocean of white. He crawls back, his stomach almost dragging against the sheets, and sits right on top of me with his tail next to my face.

“Poor cat,” I say, “Poor, fat cat.” I scratch between his ears and he purrs softly into the pillow.

I can’t open the windows in the small kitchen, but I throw the curtains back to see the silent streets of the city. I’ve watched her die these last few years. People no longer love her, teenagers don’t loiter on her street corners and buskers don’t play their music for rusted change.

It seems meaningful, the weeds breaking through the cracks in the concrete and reclaiming their land, but weeds are invasive and ugly. No one likes invasive and ugly and messy. No one likes invasive and ugly and messy and girls who wake up sweaty and let their cats sleep in their beds.

I eat my breakfast to the low buzz of an air purifier, sucking up the hot, sticky air and recycling it into the fresh, manufactured breeze. Silvio scratches at the glass window, meowing at the outside world for excluding him.

“Oh Silvio, it must be so lonely to have no friends,” I tell him, before picking him up by the stomach and kissing his small round face.

I carry him like a baby into the bathroom and he plays with the cat in the mirror while I brush my teeth and tame my hair. I rub various creams into the most intimate cracks of my face and, when the sun shines against my cheeks, they leave a glowy, whitish tinge to my skin. The cat hides from the tubes of white cream, running from the offensive smell of bleach and into the kitchen where he licks cautiously at the milk left from my sugary cereal. I already feel the churn in my stomach from it.

I fix a comb through Silvio's fur. Just because he’s staying alone today doesn’t mean he should look anything dimmer than sophisticated. Tufts of fur come off him and soon I have a rich littering of them around me. I blow at the bald spot behind his ear and the other on his leg. The news says it’s because of the radiation, seeping through the cracks in the building and living in our walls like rats, and looking at my own reflection in the window I don’t see how they could be wrong. My hair has thinned down to look like plastic straws and my eyebrows have fallen out. A littering of eyelashes remains and on each one I count down how many wishes I have left. It won’t be long until I’m out of luck.

I should consider myself lucky, grateful that I didn’t lose my appetite like old Madge down the hall who is now just skin and bones - she could be dead by now, probably is.

In the reflection of the mirror I can barely see my eyes.

Jack used to call them bright. I guess the confinement of these walls have drained them, or maybe Jack took that away. Take my brightness but leave the old cat.

Silvio bites at my toes as I pull on a pair of slacks and a shirt. They're both stained, but they're safe and unsullied. The old thing follows slowly behind me as I unlock the front door and step into the white room. He knows better than to follow me in here, and from the glass panelling I watch him retreat back into the rays of red sun, curling up gently between piles of mess.

The white room is enough to make anyone panic. The walls are aggressively bright and only a metre of stagnant air separates them. Bumps rise on my skin as the ventilation turns on. It blows around the smell of hospital antiseptic. To the left of me, a tan suit and mask hang on a metal rod. I fasten the mask around my face.

"I am lucky to breathe," I assure myself, adjusting to my laboured breaths.

I cannot take my air for granted when I can still hear him in whispers, taste him in sweet perfumes. I pull the tan hazmat suit over my clothes, zipping it up as if it really helps against the radiation. Despite how frozen the air in the white room felt, sweat starts pricking under my arms and at my temples.

I try to picture Jack's face, but I don't trust myself. Maybe I have replaced his eyes with those of the man from the telly, or his smile with that of a neighbour - not that I see them very often, anyway. I shove my feet into heavy boots and tape the joint between them and the suit pants. I struggle with the gloves, pulling them until they're moulded smoothly to my skin. Finally the hood. It covers what is left of my hair and seals in any heat with me. The clothes hangers sit lonely on the metal rod. The man on the news told me that every time I enter and exit the white room, I invite death into my home but, like most of us, he died a long time ago so I push open the heavy, white door.