



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2007

Article 5

1-1-2007

Child of Freedom

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Class of 2009

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Clarke, Caitlin A. (2015) "Child of Freedom," *The Mercury*: Year 2007, Article 5.

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Keywords

creative writing, fiction

Author Bio

Caitlin Clarke was born and spent her first 18 years in Barnegat, New Jersey. She has worked as a counselor at a Boy Scout camp, endured the South African PLTU, and has conquered both Mount Katahdin and Mount Fuji. Caitlin is a Biology major with a neglected interest in languages. She seeks to travel the world after graduating from Gettysburg College, and someday own an inn.

Child of Freedom

Cigarette smoke rose in the glow of the red numbers on my digital alarm clock. I sighed, stubbed out the butt and dropped it in the cut-class ashtray on the bedside table. A quick count told me there were eight butts therein, meaning I had smoked six since laying down to sleep. I sighed again, rubbed my eyes. The clock read 1:49. I did some quick math - I had to be up at seven. If I fell asleep in the next eleven minutes, I would have five good hours of sleep before my self-imposed reveille. I sighed a third time, hoping it would turn into a yawn. No dice. This was pointless.

The wind had been howling all night, rattling the glass in my window, making the branches of the ancient pine out front creak and wail. It seeped into the cracks around the pane (the house was old, no longer airtight) and countered the hot air rising from the metal radiator. The room was small and stiflingly hot on still days. The bitter cold coming in from outside made insomnia a little more tolerable.

As the night wore on I watched the moon pass from east to west. I watched Orion as he traveled from the eastern horizon to a point high in the southern sky. I watched the lilac bushes and forsythias on the far side of the yard as the wind tossed them. I watched the world grow still and silent as the hours passed. No more violent dance from the bushes, no stinging cold thrusting itself in through the window. The howling of the wind quietened, and I slowly realized it had been replaced by a new sound. This was a howling in its own right, but softer, more feeble and somehow more desperate. I listened to this new sound for some minutes, trying to determine its origin: it was weak and intermittent. A hinge on a gate? I sat up, listening intently: it was coming from right outside my window. There were no hinges or gates outside my window. I got up, walked over and put my hand on the cold glass pane. An animal? I looked down. Beneath the window grew a rose bush and, since I never mowed around the rose bush, thick tufts of grass. The perfect hiding place for something sick or distressed.

But why advertise its position to predators by calling, especially if it was sick? I puzzled over this for a few moments before I realized, as it let out a particularly loud call, I was listening to mewling.

I yanked the chain of the light on my bureau, and in doing so caught the clock's red glow in the corner of my eye - 2:36. I grabbed my silk underwear and sweatpants from the floor and threw them on, stuck my feet into my hiking boots (but did not tie them), then threw on my black pea coat and grabbed the flashlight from its home in the nightstand drawer. I rushed from the room, practically fell down the stairs to the front foyer (my landlady slept like the dead, I had no fear of waking her), then slammed out the door. Cold bit into my skin wherever it was exposed - on my face and hands, the back of my neck, even the tops of my feet. Ignoring this, I swung around, passed the pine tree, and crunched through the grass to the rosebush. The mewling ceased.

I shined the flashlight on the ground, then knelt down. The dull cold of the earth worked through my layers, latching onto my knees. I focused my at-

tention on the bush. It was winter, but the bush was still a tangled mess of thick, thorny switches. I had just started pushing these aside when I heard one more "mew" from right beneath my hand. I moved the beam down.

Nestled into the grass, its paws tucked under its body, head drooping so low that its nose almost touched the ground, eyes closed, was a kitten. For a moment I marveled at how tiny it was, probably just having opened its eyes; it could have easily fit into one of my hands. I felt a sudden pain in my chest, empathy for a tiny helpless creature all alone in a cold, dark world. Then, I picked it up.

Delicately, I brought the creature to rest against my bosom, then buttoned my coat, clumsily, with one frozen hand. The kitten resumed its mewling, sounding short, distressed cries in rapid succession, and in the clear light of the moon I could see its tiny spikes of teeth dully glinting. I flicked the flashlight off and hurried back inside, rushing through my own clouds of white breath.

Once inside, I climbed the stairs to my flat slowly and made my way through the birdhouse of a living room to the mouse hole of a kitchen. The glowing red face of the microwave told me it was 2:42. I flipped the switch on the wall, set the flashlight down on the table and shed my coat one-handed, then kicked off my boots. I glanced down at the kitten. It was still mewling softly, having dug its shrimp-sized claws into the wool of my sweater. I stroked its entire body with my free hand, feeling its tiny bones and new fur, absentmindedly searching for injuries. It was calmed by my stroking, stopped its crying, and pointing its tiny nose toward my face, opened its eyes for the first time.

They were still blue, but I figured they would change to green or orange soon enough. The kitten itself was calico, that kind of dusty golden calico that comes from all the colors mixing together the individual strands of hair. It had a white splotch on its chest.

"So you're a little girl," I said to the kitten. She stared at me weakly, head wavering left to right, and mewed in her plaintive voice. "And you're probably hungry." Keeping one hand cradled under her hindquarters, I walked over to the fridge. I took out the milk bottle and closed the door with my hip, placed the bottle on the counter, then pulled a tea saucer from the cupboard. I set her down on the counter, dashed some milk into the saucer, and pushed it towards her face.

She pulled her paws under her body, mewling again.

"It's milk," I said, kneeling so that we were face to face. "It's good for you. Here -" I dabbed my finger in the saucer, then on her nose. Her tiny pink tongue shot out and she tasted cow's milk for the first time; she blinked slowly, swallowing several times as if trying to decide whether or not she liked it.

When the kitten finally tucked into her saucer of milk, I pulled a tin of tuna from the pantry and proceeded to feed her small bites, which she took gratefully if not graciously. By the time she'd finished her meal, she was purring contentedly and crouching on her pinky-sized legs. I stroked her head with a finger and she swung her face over to mine, bright blue eyes burning into me. Again, I felt a stab of softness for the little thing. "Where's your mother? Why did she leave you all alone?" I asked, but I knew the answer. I could paint the picture in my mind. All the other kittens had died, most likely from the cold. The mother came back to her frozen litter, plucked the one warm survivor from her place, and moved her to a safe place (beneath my window) while she went

searching for food. Something went wrong there. It had to, if she was gone so long that her baby started crying for help. It meant one thing: she had died. From the cold, or perhaps a predator of some sort had gotten her - a fox, a hawk, a Chevy. Everything is hungry and desperate in the lean, cold months; everything will take whatever it can get.

At 3:27 I gathered the kitten back into my palms, turned off the kitchen lights, and walked back into my bedroom. I laid some newspapers in an old shoe box and placed the kitten in there, waiting for it to do its business. When separated from me she started crying again, loudly, opening her pink mouth wide.

"Shh, baby, it's okay, I'm right here," I cooed. "I just need to make sure you don't go in my bed." I stroked her head again with my finger and she quietened.

At 3:38 I was curling back into bed, the little ball of fluff warm on my chest. Her tiny humming body, the rapidly beating heart, the small breaths exhaled onto my collarbone were a balm to my soul, and they carried me into sleep.

I slept through the alarm that morning, waking instead to the sound of the phone ringing. I grabbed it from the cradle and sank back into my pillows. My "Hello?" was thick and strained with sleep.

"Kay?"

"Shit," I said. "What time is it?"

"It's 8:30. I just landed. Where are you?"

"I'm sorry Josh, damn it, I missed the alarm."

"You aren't even out of bed?"

"No," I winced, put my hand to my forehead.

"Well, what am I supposed to do here?"

"I don't know honey. I'll uh... I'll come get you."

"No, don't worry about it," Josh said.

"Please don't do the passive aggressive thing."

"I'm not being passive aggressive," he said. I rolled my eyes. "I'll get a taxi. Go back to bed; you need your sleep, right?"

I held the receiver away from my mouth while I sighed, then said, "I'll pick you up from the train station." I knew he'd find a way to make me pay for a taxi.

"Fine. I'll call you when my train gets in."

"See you then," there was the faintest note of pleading in my voice.

"Yep." Click. I dropped the phone back on the cradle, then pressed the balls of my fingers into my temples, thought better of it, and lit a cigarette. I barely had time to wonder where the kitten was before I felt a small thump and a sharp "mew!" from the bottom of my bed. I took a drag of the cigarette, exhaled, and said, "Did you jump all the way up here?"

"Mew!"

"That's a big jump for such a small cat."

"Mew!"

"What, are you hungry?"

"Mew!"

"Alright, alright. Let's see what I have in the kitchen."

At 9:09 I sat down to my kitchen table, spreading the days work out in front of me. In those days I did freelance translations, mostly of scientific papers, from English to Japanese or vice versa. It was kind of an odd job for a woman at that time, but growing up in a Japanese house had given me a rather lucrative language skill, and living in America had enabled me to attend a highly regarded university and leave with a degree in biology. Research hadn't suited my taste, so while I was figuring out what to do with the rest of my life, I banked on my language abilities. It allowed me to live rather comfortably on the second floor an old Japanese lady kept open for boarders. She liked me because I could speak her native tongue and I helped her with the yard work. She liked having another Japanese to celebrate New Years and other holidays with, she liked that I would sometimes cut fresh flowers and leave a crude ikebana arrangement on her kitchen table. I knew I could get away with anything in her house. I knew the kitten would not be a problem.

I found it hard to concentrate that morning, between waiting for Josh's call and watching my new friend. She lapped up the milk and tuna eagerly, and after a trip to the shoe box (which I had moved into the kitchen), she settled on my lap. I didn't have it in me to move her, and wondered vaguely what I would do with her when Josh called.

At 10:25, while I was having my second cigarette and first cup of coffee, I heard the crunch of tires in the driveway. I let the pencil fall from my hand, looked down at the kitten. "Can you believe it?" I asked her. "The bastard took a taxi." She looked back at me, blinked perplexedly. I smiled at her puerile, innocent sweetness. "Don't worry your little head about it," I said. Then I scooped her into my hand and, holding her against my chest, walked downstairs.

Through the half-light glass of the front door, I could see Josh pulling his suitcases from the trunk of a red '72 Impala. I knew that car. My eyes narrowed briefly, but I stopped myself, determined not to greet him with suspicion. He had reason enough to be cross with me, in his mind.

As he walked up the drive, a suitcase in each hand, he called, "Hey Keiko." His voice was flat. He was not excited to see me.

I turned the door handle, pushed it open with my hip.

"How was New York?" I asked.

"Fucking cold. Colder than it is here."

"Why didn't you call me to pick you up?" He was climbing the steps as I asked this, but he stopped suddenly, looking at my hands.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a kitten," I replied nonchalantly. "I'm not good enough to pick you up?" I continued. So much for a warm greeting, I thought. "You had to call Donna for a ride? Donna with her hot rod car?"

"You don't like driving... what the fuck Kay? I hate cats."

"There's coffee on the pot," I said, defeated. "Get inside before I let out all the warm air."

"She bought that car used, anyway."

"Mew!" the kitten said.

I stumped back up the stairs behind Josh and his suitcases, having one of my "Josh moments," wondering why I put up with his bullshit - his flippant

attitude, his constant flirting with other women, his cursing. I've been known to pass a few hells and damns from between my lips, but Josh was truly foul-mouthed. It irked me. I wondered this, and realized these moments had become more frequent in the recent past.

I curled up in an antique armchair in the living room, listening to Josh pour himself some coffee. The kitten was likewise curled up in my lap with her big blue eyes fixed on my face. I felt a wave of calm wash over me, a gem of pure shining happiness.

"Keiko, we've got to talk." Josh was leaning against the doorjamb. The gem was shattered.

"What about?" I asked coolly.

"The cat. There's a box with shit in it in the kitchen. He's got to go."

"She," I corrected.

"She, it, whatever. Gotta go."

"Are you allergic?"

"No, but I hate cats."

"Well," stroking her head slowly, "I don't"

"Where did you get the damn thing anyway? Don't tell me they were giving them away in front of the supermarket or something."

"No -"

"Jesus fucking Christ, I'm gone for three days and you think -"

"Josh -"

"You need to replace me after forty-eight fucking hours, that's -"

"Josh! It has nothing to do with you! Will you please stop cursing?"

"You curse sometimes."

"I know but," I sighed. "I heard her crying outside my window last night. Her mother is dead. She would have frozen to death." This was a strong enough argument for me.

Josh sipped his coffee and muttered, "You should have let the damn thing freeze."

"What?"

"Nothing, listen, what about Mrs. Yokoda?"

"You know she won't care. She'll probably say it's good luck or something."

He slipped back into the kitchen.

"Did you say I should have let the damn thing freeze?"

"Yep."

Looking at the kitten, the helpless ball of fur, the tenderness in my heart returned. Then I imagined finding her frozen and dead beneath the rosebush, and my heart likewise turned to ice. "What's your problem?" I called, and I could hear the edge in my voice. "What if I let you freeze to death while you were crying for warmth?"

He walked back into the doorway and said, "Please don't be melodramatic. You know I hate that," before returning to the kitchen.

I stroked the kitten and let my thoughts wander. I was suddenly thirteen again, staring at the stiff body of the hamster we had kept in my brother's room. I had played with it more than he ever did, I think, but Jim was older and apparently more responsible. He was better suited to care for an animal, my father had

said. I remembered wiping a few tears from my cheek and cupping the lifeless body in my hands, stroking its cold fur. My mother was suddenly kneeling beside me. She had always had a knack for moving silently.

"Put that down," she said to me in Japanese, not unkindly, "you'll get sick."

I had obeyed, placing the body back on its bed of pine chips and slowly closing the door of the cheap wire cage.

"What happened to Hamlet," I had asked (I nodded to myself with the kitten in my lap, smiling a little. We had named him Hamlet; it was my idea. I'd felt so clever).

"He died," she had replied.

"I know that," I had retorted, "but why?"

My mother's face was lit in strips of sunlight from the Venetian blinds; she closed her eyes and said plainly, "Jim forgot to feed him." Simple as that. "You should wash your hands."

Josh stood in the doorway once more, leaning against the jamb. I opened my eyes and looked at him evenly. He returned my look and said, just as evenly, "I'm not living with it."

I finally had something to assert myself with.

"I am," I said.

"Well, I guess I won't be living with you." He must have meant it as a joke.

"I guess not." Simple as that.

"What?"

"Get out." We both disbelieved me at first.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. I'm keeping the cat. If you're going to have a problem with it, you can leave. No one's stopping you. Your bags are mostly packed already, anyway."

He stared at me from the doorway, mouth hanging open, coffee mug still in hand. I rolled my eyes. "Josh, you've been looking for an excuse to leave for months. Don't deny it."

He didn't.

"I'm saving you the trouble. Leave. Now. Please."

There were no foul words or nasty looks thrown in my direction to mark Josh's exodus from my life. He left as simply and easily as he came, leaving nothing behind save for a single sock that I found weeks later, lodged between the mattress and the box spring. This quickly became a toy for the kitten. I didn't see him again until several years later, at a festival in San Francisco. He was married by then, and looked a lot older, something had happened around his eyes to make him look softer. His wife had a clean, plain look about her; when we met she was glowing with pregnancy. I felt happy for him.

By 12:03 it was just me and the kitten on my second floor flat, and I was well into the day's work when I heard the front door slam and a cracked old voice call, "Tadaima!" I smiled, put down my pencil, knowing what was next. "Shall I make some tea?"

"Yes, thank you!" I called down in Japanese. Shortly thereafter I stood, gathered the kitten from the bathtub (she'd been exploring for most of the morning and had taken a liking to the bathtub), and headed downstairs.

Although the house she owned was clearly Victorian in its architecture, Mrs. Yokoda treated it like a mansion from our motherland. She had converted the bay window in the sitting room into a kind of tokonoma, with fresh flowers every week (at the moment there was a potted poinsettia) and a Japanese scroll. She'd had the traditional low tables sent in from Japan for the sitting room and the dining room, and surrounded them with cushions. She had even put down tatami mats like throw rugs in those two rooms, despite the fact that they didn't match the dimensions. I loved this about her; I loved her insistence on living like a Japanese. She once told me that she couldn't make this country Japan, but she could at least make her space in the country as Japanese as possible.

I stopped at the edge of the carpeted sitting room and the hardwood foyer, stepped out of my clogs and into the soft blue slippers she kept for me.

"I have a surprise for you," I said. She bustled out of the kitchen, a small woman with graying hair and dark skin splotched with liver spots. Her face broke into a grin when she saw the kitten. She said, "We have received a gift. This is cause for celebration."

We knelt over our tea while the kitten played with a ball of yarn bigger than itself. Mrs. Yokoda made small talk in Japanese for a while, but I could tell she wanted to discuss something other than the baker's sticky buns and the florist's orchids. I also knew better than to try pulling whatever that was from her lips.

Eventually, she said, "Did Josh return from New York?"

"Yes," I said, keeping my eyes on my tea.

"But his car isn't in the drive."

"I suppose it isn't."

Mrs. Yokoda sipped her tea, then made a small, knowing noise in her throat before replacing her cup on the table. "Well, you can use my car whenever you need to."

"Thank you," I said, "but that's not necessary. I have my bike, and it isn't far to town..."

"You know, I never liked him."

"I know," I said. I enjoyed that she talked to me like she was my mother.

"It was because of the cat that he left?" she probed.

"It was because of the cat that I made him leave," I said softly, and looked up at Mrs. Yokoda. She was smiling.

"Good," was all she said. We sat in silence for a few moments, then: "You ought to name her Fukiko."

I wrapped my tongue around the syllables, "Fukiko," then I said in English, "Child of freedom." I switched back to Japanese. "It's appropriate, isn't it?"