

# The cats of Avignon

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### Un mistero del XIV secolo nella città papale in Francia

#### An introduction

Truly strange experiences are rare. The déjà vu, the foretelling dream, yes many people experience these things. But it is normally alone. These are private and personal experiences that scientists call subjective. More spiritual types of people will credit that they happen. However, no one knows how to approach another person's vision or dream except, perhaps, a few fortune tellers or psychologists following in the footsteps of Sigmund Freud or Carl Gustav Jung. Our strange experience was not like any of these. First it occurred in a real place, the city of Avignon near the ruined papal palace. Second it happened in real time, afternoon turning into evening in the summer of 1961. The people and animals and objects in it were all three dimensional and whole. Helli and I shared this experience simultaneously. We saw what we saw before we spoke about it. Thus, we both saw what was happening before us and we have been comparing impressions for a long time afterward. It was, of course, on our marriage trip but we had been travelling for a couple of weeks already and we were not acting dreamy or being overly romantic. It was, of course, after lunch too, but we definitely did not drink too much wine that day because we still wanted to sight-see. We still hoped to gather more impressions of Avignon. And we did get more impressions of what was happening there but they were peculiar impressions, like nothing we had ever seen or ever even thought to see. The events did not appear to foretell anything. They occurred independently of us; we could have been two other people or, possibly, no people at all and yet the story I tell in the poem The Cats of Avignon did happen. Briefly, it was like this: we noticed

two small women with far eastern features. They wore habits that could have been nun's habits or just unusual costumes. Their clothes were not particularly eastern and looked like the garments of some western religious order before shorter skirts and modern shoes became acceptable. However, there were no visible crosses on them. At first we thought they were just two nice ladies feeding cats. But the food was unusual, grainy, and they gave them water to drink as well. They moved on a bit and so did we and they repeated the feeding again and again in different spots along a long trail. That trail was pursued by huge numbers of cats, by many, many more cats than we could expect to see in any place on one afternoon. Also all of these cats were white or black or spotted, black and white. Needless to say, the costumes of the ladies were also black and white. Cats and ladies all ignored us completely; yet we watched this apparent ritual for the better part of an hour. A few other people were around. They seemed to be going about their business. For all we know, this ritual may have been a common one in Avignon at that time but for newcomers it looked very strange. Unusual events were happening in a place, a city of great spiritual ambiguity. The far history of 14th century schism, of controversial Popes, and of long subsequent disorder contributed, or seemed to contribute to the rare atmosphere around us on that afternoon. But what was our experience in the summer of 1961 about? What did it all mean? For an answer to that you will have to read the poem.

## **THE CATS OF AVIGNON**

**-1-**

It may be mystery of papal city of '300  
We saw the cats in Avignon  
those cats that did peculiar things  
and no others.  
Feline brothers all hid or absconded,  
never were.

Were owls or bats,  
possibly hiding in the vats of wine,  
by design?  
«Drunk and orderly»  
all the greys and reds, blues and browns,  
bedded down where we could not see  
them.  
Gone to ground,  
hidden, quiet and alert,  
safe, or bound by spells.  
Twitchings of ears and tails implied  
cats that lived, me-ewed and died,  
most of all are those who hide away,  
hide away,  
as we walk among the ruins  
tracking two strangers,  
ministering to others.  
Mysterious mothers  
asian nuns, perhaps  
in exotic habits of white and black  
fixed on each elegant nun,  
toting sacks of magic.  
Sad, no tragic expression on each mask;  
each pearl grey face without a trace  
of bumps or lines, frowns or grins,  
small flat noses, tiny chins,  
opaque eyes might hide great sins;  
opaque eyes of robotic twins,  
ubiquitous others?  
Shifting,  
sifting from their sacks while twisting,  
murmuring prayers or calls or spells.  
Raising angels, devils,  
ghosts or saints,  
banshees, deities (Gehenna's  
hells-angels)?  
Their insubstantial sounds were calling,

wailing, hidden underground;  
calling incorporeal beings to the scene,  
that curious scene,  
no shady dream;  
for us,  
it was substantial.

Pinch me, push me spin me round  
on those Papal Palace grounds,  
tell me afternoons abound with visions!  
Apparitions in late sun,  
not yet evening, daytime gone,  
silver light and wispy bright,  
we saw them  
moving;  
we were not in trance,  
we saw them.

Saw them do their curious dance:  
processing deft twists and turns,  
leaning, bending,  
giving grains,  
grains like seeds or millet pods, in ritual  
demonic, odd!

Sister up, her twin around  
unturned, bending towards the ground;  
leaving bowls of clearest water  
placed by oriental daughters.  
Witnessing strange charity, we followed,  
stalked those ladies up ahead,  
just ahead.

She looks right while she turns round;  
surrounding them down on the ground,  
white ones, black ones darted, flit;  
crept by gates, stood still or sit;  
tails held high – some,  
whiskers down for lapping drink  
placed on a mound of grass;  
chewing grains from magic sack,

black and white and white and black,  
peering at their human muses, staring,  
grooming.  
So confusing.  
for our weary tourist brains.  
Fifties -more -a hundred throngs.  
Numinous their feline eyes,  
filled with need or love or sighs.  
Filled with fabulous devotion.  
Never static;  
swift in motion cats.  
Astarte, Frea, Frey may call,  
Isis, Bastet, Amen-Ra,  
Stella, Mary, Devi, Hera,  
Venus, Pan or sweetest Gaia,  
Indra, Flora: where are we?  
Juno, Nanna, Nut: we see.  
Bless us holy Trinity!  
Help us, tell us what we see:  
omniscient singularities?  
Nuns or not-nuns if you please.  
Shades with eyes and spells, just that.  
Spells that summon whites and darks,  
not one tortoise shell in pack,  
nor one siamese or manx.  
High on ledges,  
In between flowered borders,  
rock, hedge, bush;  
sudden -rushing in a run of felines  
winding.  
Habit colours,  
only those, not any others.  
Only those of white and black,  
munching pods tossed from the stacks  
of polished grain,  
towed in the sacks of spirits.  
Near to dusk in Avignon,

passing heaven, lost, astray;  
some silent sowers wend their way.  
Christ saw. He carne and gathered them.  
Strange cats, they carne and gathered  
them as fruits of earth and genesis.  
Liquid sunlight sapped the day,  
shade transmuted into night;  
into twilight stole whole bursts of being.  
Energy is mystery.  
Vital flight from feline play,  
white-lit nights, while darkest days  
portend emotions.  
Something known about all things;  
something understood is best.  
Best above authority on one event,  
leaving the rest outside.  
This event had mystery implicit.  
Our predicament:  
what we see,  
we said we saw  
near the Papal Palace door, moving,  
turning more and more towards nothing.  
Nothing known by saints or nuns,  
friars, priests or abbots' sons.  
Secrets told by whispering ones  
and their purring cats vacluse.  
Chrystal Rhones besotted muses  
servil e in humility  
they bow to Bastet's issue,  
keeping quiet dignity.  
No cat me-ewed,  
no cat refused.  
Tranquil rumbling worship heard,  
not a squawk. No crying bird  
broke their murmurs in the grass,  
on the paths of Clement six in Babylon.  
Heretics and criminals

once sought solace in these walls.  
Baudy houses multiplied.  
Sinners played, then wept and sighed.  
Lively felines ate and died?  
Ask redemption in this place.  
Ask for more, the human race;  
seek some mercy, by the grace of nature.  
No sick feline did we see.  
Not one dead deformity,  
but their actions were not free  
or plausible.  
Movements jerky, taut, unsound  
in those Papal Garden grounds:  
witchy cats enthralled  
ought they to suffer?  
Drugged or held by hidden chords,  
crunching grains and lapping lotus  
water.  
Kittens, dams or toms beset  
by some god, some ill or spell.  
White is black in God or hell.  
Black is white in nil or all.  
Infinity in Babylon;  
atop the rock of Israel,  
where flagellants transported.  
Nuns or cats, which can you be?  
Ladies transformed, tended, wild,  
two escapees from the child of spirit?  
Cats to nuns or nuns to cats,  
never, ever shall we know,  
while the nightrights pulse and glow  
and the moist air closes in,  
as the heat, uncertain, folds  
round old decaying Avignon.  
Dorothy Koenigsberger  
già docente al Politecnico «Hartfield»

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Never static;  
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Stella, Mary, Devi, Hera,  
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Juno, Nanna, Nut: we see.

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l'icona!

*Dorothy Koenigsberger*

*già docente al Politecnico «Hartfield»*

*Università di Hertfordshire*