

Mark Doty

Beginners

The year Miss Tynes enrolled our class
in the Object of the Month Club,
a heavy box arrived each month
from the Metropolitan Museum.
What emerged once — when volunteers
opened each latch, and one lucky girl

lifted the wooded lid away —
was an Egyptian cat, upright on its haunches,
unapproachable, one golden earring flashing,
a carved cartouche between its legs.
Miss Tynes read a translation of the hieroglyphics
and a paragraph depicting the glory

of thousands of mummies ranged on shelves
in the dark — cased and muslined cats,
ibis, baboons — their jewelry ready to offer
any sliver of sunlight back, if it ever touched them.
Later, the cat ruled the back of the room,
fixed on a countertop beside a model

of the planets and a display of moths.
When we'd finished our work it was all right
to go and stand beside it,
even, if we were careful, touch it.
I'd read a story in which two children
drank an emerald medicine from a pharmacy urn,

forgot their parents, and understood
the speech of cats. Their adventures were nocturnal
and heroic, and their cat became, I think,
the King of Cats, and was lost to them,

so they drank red medicine from the drugstore urn,
and returned to the human world

of speech. I cried, not for their lost pet
but for the loss of language, and my father
forbad me sad books. Some days, after school,
I'd go to my friend Walter's, and we'd play
a simple game: because he was smaller than me,
though no younger, Walter would be the son.

He'd take off his shirt and sit in my lap,
and I'd put my arms around him
and rub his stomach, and he would pretend
to cry or be content, liking my hands.
We were ten, or eight. It's too easy
to think of our game as sex before we knew

what bodies could do, before bodies could do
much. There was something else,
at least for me: the pleasure
of touching what became pure form,
not Walter any more but the sensation
of skin over supple muscle. I was the heroic

father, I loved — not him, exactly,
with his narrow crewcut head which reminded me,
even then, of a mouse — but the formal thing
he'd become, in his room, with the door closed.
We never changed roles; I was the good lover,
I fathered him. We knew enough to keep

the game private, less out of guilt
than a sense of something exposure
might dilute. It was like the way the children
in my class touched the cat, even talked to it,
hesitantly, beginners in a new language,
maybe imagined it might speak back to us.

Though it was the perfect confidant,
since it could take in anything
and remain calm and black and golden

until it was packed away in the varnished box
to another school, where other children
might lean towards it and whisper,
until it was more ancient, with all it knew.