

Ain't I a scholar?

Kitty J. Cox

They call me strong before they call me anything else. It comes before my work, before my ideas, before my name even settles into the room. Strong, like a preface. Like a quiet agreement that whatever happens here, I will withstand it. That I will absorb what is difficult without interruption. That I will carry what is heavy without asking who put it there.

And the truth is, I am strong. I have been. I know how to endure. I know how to take what is given and make something of it. But somewhere along the way, that strength stopped being a description and became a demand. It became the reason I am expected to keep going, no matter the cost. It became the justification for why I am allowed to be worn down.

Because if I can survive it, then it is survivable.
And if it is survivable, then it is permissible.

So I am told I must survive.

I survive by learning how to take from myself.

Not all at once. Not in ways that would alarm anyone. It happens gradually, in small extractions that look like discipline from the outside. I give up sleep first, because that feels negotiable. Then I give up rest, not just the act of it, but the idea that I am entitled to it. I ignore hunger until it becomes something dull and distant, something that no longer interrupts the work. I quiet the parts of myself that want softness, that want care, that want to exist without being measured.

Each time, I tell myself it is temporary. Necessary. Worth it.

But it accumulates.

There is a point where it stops feeling like sacrifice and starts feeling like consumption. Like I am sustaining myself on my own depletion. Like the only way to meet the demands of this place is to become a resource for it, to feed it pieces of my body, my time, my health, until there is just enough left to keep producing.

And the most unsettling part is how well it works.

I am successful. I am articulate. I am exceeding expectations. My work is careful, thorough, undeniable. I have learned how to make it airtight, how to anticipate every question before it is asked. I have learned how to present myself in a way that cannot be easily dismissed.

But I can feel what it is costing me.

In the way my body no longer feels like something I live in, but something I manage. In the constant tension, the exhaustion that sleep does not fix, the sense that something inside me is

always being asked for, always being taken. There is a distance growing between who I am and what I produce, like the work is being built from parts of me that are not being returned.

They call this resilience.

But resilience, when it is expected, becomes something else. It becomes a quiet permission for harm. It becomes a way of normalizing the conditions that require it. Because if I continue to rise, to succeed, to endure, then there is no urgency to ask why I have to.

So I rise. I succeed. I endure.

And in doing so, I participate in my own depletion.

There is a particular kind of loneliness in that realization. That the very thing that allows me to remain here, my ability to adapt, to push through, to make something out of nothing, is also the thing that keeps me in a cycle of taking from myself. That my strength is both my survival and the mechanism through which I am slowly undone.

I keep asking the question, but it has changed.

It is no longer just about recognition. It is no longer just about belonging.

It is about whether there is a version of this life where I do not have to harm myself to inhabit it.

Because if being a scholar requires this, this constant negotiation with my own limits, this steady erosion of my health, this quiet, ongoing act of self-consumption, then I am left wondering what, exactly, I am being asked to become.

Ain't I a scholar?

Or am I only ever almost one
as long as I can keep feeding the version of myself
that this place knows how to recognize?