



Chapter Thirteen: Chatu

Sheena did not sleep. There was too much at stake. She did not know for certain that Nyanya wouldn't leave the acacia tree before morning: old animals, like old people, don't like to sleep a lot, as if that's a waste of whatever time they have left; and The Old One might prefer to wander through the later part of the night.

So she was ready when, just as the line of the plains to the East was beginning to show against a brightening sky, Nyanya got up slowly and stiffly, shook herself and walked over to the dried-up pool.

Sheena knew she too would have to drink there before they set off, even if the water wasn't much more than runny mud and she would have to suck it in through her teeth to keep the worst of the grit out of her mouth.

She had no idea how far they would be travelling that day. That was up to Nyanya. Everything was up to Nyanya...for the moment.

She moved down to ground level – with care, so as not to attract Nyanya's attention. She then peered cautiously round the tree trunk. Nyanya was still drinking. Watching her made Sheena thirsty. She crept two trees nearer to the pool.

Then, 'Crash!' something very heavy fell on her from above, flattening her to the ground and pinning her there so that she couldn't move. It felt as if she was underneath a thick tree

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branch. The breath had been knocked from her body and she had to gasp once, twice, three times before she could start to wriggle free.

Wriggle she did, and succeed she nearly did also, squirming out backwards from beneath the crushing weight. But, ‘Crash!’ again, and another branch fell on her.

‘Is the tree coming down bit by bit?’ she thought desperately.

She continued to struggle, and kicked out with her back legs; but then she felt herself seized by the hind quarters, just past her bob of a tail. Sharp teeth, although small, penetrated her skin through the fur. Then they took hold further along her body and her back legs too were gripped so that she could no longer kick.

There was something awful and *slow* about this bite, as though the creature that held her was in no hurry.

Her face had been forced down into the dust so that she could see out of only one eye. Part of what was on top of her lay directly in front of that eye. It didn’t look like a tree branch at all. It was olive-green with brown patches outlined in yellow. And it moved, rolling and sliding past her and then partly over her so that she felt its great heaviness once more.

What with the weight pressing down on her and the grip on her back half she could barely move. She managed to twist around slightly and look down her body. Then she knew.

She was being held tight in the jaws of a massive snake.

It was a python.

Pythons live mainly in holes in the ground, but sometimes climb trees and drop down on unsuspecting animals underneath. Sheena had been unsuspecting and now she was certainly underneath – underneath the snake...and partly inside it already.

This was very different from the other encounters she had had in the Park. This was much more serious – and more painful:

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although the teeth had not gone far into her flesh, she was being squeezed by the jaws. As if that wasn't bad enough she now felt herself being rolled over, and a scaly and heavy coil wrapped itself around her upper body.

She couldn't run away because she was already caught. She couldn't wriggle out of the snake's coils because she couldn't wriggle. She probably wouldn't be able to talk her way out of things either, since conversation with her captor would be difficult – she had hardly any breath in her body and the python had a cat stuffed half way into its mouth.

At least her head was up off the ground now, and she could see more clearly. Not that that helped; in fact it frightened her even more.

The head that held her in its grip was square and scaly. She was looking directly into its eyes, which were cold and gleaming. A diamond-shaped marking covered its head, with the point touching its nose (no more than two small holes in the bony snout). Sheena was terrified to see the bottom half of her body, of which she was very fond, disappearing down a throat that seemed to be stretching to receive her as she was dragged slowly into the smooth, clammy tunnel of the snake's insides by muscles she could feel working in ripples down her legs.

At the same time the coil around her chest began to tighten, and she remembered that pythons are what are called constrictors: they kill their prey not by biting them (they aren't poisonous) but by squeezing them to death. Then they squeeze them some more to crush their bones so that they're easier to swallow.

'Well, well.'

Sheena knew the voice, slightly quavering, slightly sneering. It was Nyanya's. The old lion was standing very close, muddy slime

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still dripping from her jaws.



‘So Chatu’s got you. That’s what comes of snooping. Don’t think I didn’t know you were behind me last night. But I can’t imagine why you’d want to trail around after *me*. It’s not as if I was going to be catching juicy impala and leaving bits lying round for you to scavenge. What did you want?’

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Sheena wasn't very happy to hear Nyanya use the past tense, *did*, as if all Sheena's wanting was now over.

'Sorry, can't talk,' she gasped. Every time she breathed out, the coil around her chest tightened a little, so that when she tried to breathe in again her lungs wouldn't expand as far as they had the time before. Soon she wouldn't be able to breathe at all.

'Need help.'

Gasp.

'Sorry, can't give you any!' said Nyanya. 'You're well on your way down to Chatu's little mottled sock. And even if I could have helped you I would have been more likely to help myself *to* you: you look as if you might have been quite a tasty little snack.'

Lots of past tenses again: 'could have helped', 'might have been', and so on. Nyanya needed some grammar lessons; or lessons in how to assist relatives in distress; or lessons in how little cats don't give up easily.

'But...'

'Sorry again – got to go: I'm having some people for supper.'

At those words Sheena began struggling again, even more violently. Nyanya was getting away; and Sheena knew who 'some people' were.

The lion walked steadily off, out of Sheena's line of vision. Sheena stretched her neck to watch her go. That was a bad move, because it elongated her body slightly, and the coils tightened once more.

'Got to...get out of...this.'

Sheena gasped again. Cats might have nine lives – but how many gasps would she be allowed before she used up one of the nine?

First of all she had to stop the slide: she wanted to go NO further into the python.

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She remembered an old riddle Amy had had difficulty in understanding since she'd never lived in a house with a chimney: 'What can go up a chimney down but not down a chimney up?'

She forced her back legs to straighten against the squeeze from the python's throat, and locked her joints like the spokes of an umbrella. At the same time she dug into the sides of the throat with her back claws.

Now the bottom half of her body couldn't be drawn in any further. But the top half was still being crushed, without mercy.

Then she saw two more lengths of the snake's body sliding slowly past her, in opposite directions. The one closer to her head came to a pointed end. It was the python's tail.

Sheena knew that if a python manages to wrap its tail around something solid, it can squeeze with much more force. Maybe the python was reaching out with its tail towards the trunk of the tree, and her problem was about to get even worse.

So she twisted her head sideways until she could get her mouth around the last few inches of the tail. Then she bit.

The snake writhed. What that meant as far as Sheena was concerned was that she was rolled over and over in the snake's coils until she was dizzy; and when the writhing stopped she was upside down. The coils hadn't got any tighter; but they hadn't slackened at all either.

She had managed to hold onto the tail with her teeth. She took more of it into her mouth and bit again, more deeply this time.

More writhing. Now she was the right way up, but still held tightly.

The mouthful of tail didn't stop her from talking. She found it was possible, by turning her head sideways, to speak out of the corner of her mouth. She might be about to be transferred from the Department of Espionage to the Mincery of the Interior, but

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she was going to give the python a problem or two of its own first.

‘Hello! Hello Out There!’

(There was enough of her In to make ‘Out There’ quite appropriate.)

‘Hello! Hiss if you can hear me!’

What with her shortage of breath and the contortions of her mouth Sheena wasn’t sure she was making any intelligible sounds.

But the snake hissed. Sheena felt the rush of cold air along her sides.

‘Ssssssss.’

‘Ok. Now we’re going to talk. Hiss once for yes and twice for no. Do you understand?’

‘Ssssssss.’

That’s no good! I can’t tell whether that’s one hiss or two! Try one again!’

‘Ssssssssss.’

‘Now try two. Remember your full stops and capitals.’

‘Ssss. Ssss.’

There was some hope here. Sheena felt as if she was beginning to take control; and the python was doing what it was told. Maybe its tail was very tender.

‘Good. So let’s try a little test. Does this hurt?’

She bit hard. There were lots of loud hisses, all running into each other.

‘Sorry, that confused the hissue.

‘But now you know where we lie: half way into each other. That means we can hurt each other if we want.

‘We can also eat each other if we want. You can swallow me and I can swallow you until we meet in the middle, eye to eye. All we’ll be able to do then is roll around in the grass until we’re

stepped on by an elephant.’

This was all nonsense, she knew; but pythons weren’t very smart – she’d heard them described as very primitive snakes – and she’d much rather this one swallowed her nonsense than swallowed *her*. So to prove her point she grabbed the tail an inch further along. She had to open her throat to do so, but as a cat she was able to do that so that she could swallow birds and mice whole.

‘This is a classic tails I lose, tails you lose situation, understand?’

‘Ssssssss.’

‘So why don’t we just both let go?’

‘Can’t.’

The snake’s voice was very gurgly and strangled; but at least it was managing to speak.

‘Why not?’

‘One-way throat. Got to swallow you all the way and digest you before I can bring your bones back up.’

That was a journey, and a transformation, Sheena did not at all fancy.

‘One-way throat? Turn the sign around,’ she suggested.

‘Can’t. Got to wait for my digestive juices to do their job first.’

Then Sheena had an idea. Jamming her back legs across the python’s throat had taken some of the pressure off her hind quarters. She found she could move her tail. For once she was glad it was only a stump with a furry fuzz on it. She was remembering the monitor lizard’s trick with the millipede.

She began to move her tail gently as if it was a brush and she was painting the python’s throat with delicate strokes. Stroke, stroke, stroke.

She felt the python’s muscles begin to relax.

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Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke.

The muscles began to ripple once more, but this time up rather than down.

Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke.

Sheena found that her whole body was being urged forward, carried out of the python's mouth until she flopped out onto the ground, slightly slimy, slightly crushed and with a few punctures in her bum, but otherwise fine.

She had no time to waste. It seemed a lifetime (and nearly had been) since Nyanya had disappeared. But with her natural cat politeness (which if you understand cats you will know is never very far away from cat unpoliteness) she felt she should formalise her farewell to the snake. She wanted to bring closure to what had been a most unpleasant experience.

'Very squeezed to meet you. Had an absolutely gripping time.'

'My pressure,' replied the python, with more wit than Sheena had expected.

And so they parted, like two animals – or people for that matter – who have met and matched each other and hope never to meet again.

Paka Mdogo – *Little Cat* by H.S. Toshack.....Chapter Fifteen, *Chatu* - Study Tasks

Page by page (understanding and interpreting texts):

Page	Task	Suggested responses, teaching notes
139	The sudden event at the end of this page comes as even more of a shock because Sheena has just been behaving so cautiously. In what ways has she been doing that?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She has not slept, but has kept watch instead. • She has climbed down carefully from the tree. • She has peered round the trunk. • She has crept closer to the pool.
140	Explain why the fact that the bite is slow makes it also seem 'awful'.	The creature biting her is in no hurry, suggesting that it is confident that she can not escape.
141	Almost everything on this page suggests that things are very bad for Sheena; one detail, however, near the beginning of the page, notes something that could have been even worse. What is it?	The python's teeth have not gone a long way into her.
142	<p>a) Where has Nyanya just come from?</p> <p>b) Why do you think she has come?</p>	<p>a) The muddy pool</p> <p>b)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To find out why Sheena was following her. • To gloat – make Sheena feel stupid for having been caught while 'snooping'
143	<p>Sheena thinks Nyanya needs lessons of one kind or another. Which of the following is NOT a reason why Sheena thinks that?</p> <p>a) Because she needs to learn which animals make tasty food and which don't.</p> <p>b) Because she is using lots of past tenses, as if Sheena's story is over (and Sheena thinks it isn't, yet).</p> <p>c) Because she needs to learn that even little cats have a great determination to survive.</p> <p>d) Because although she is a Big Cat, she is still a cat, and she should have been willing to help Sheena for that reason alone.</p>	a) Because she needs to learn which animals make tasty food and which don't.

144	What suggests that Sheena has managed to retain something of her sense of humour (even if it's grim humour)?	Her joke at the end of the page. 'The Mincery of the Interior' is of course a play (pun) on the similar-sounding phrase 'The Ministry of the Interior'.
145	Why does Sheena tell the python to remember its full stops and capitals?	Because it needs to break its long sounds into short ones to make them easier to understand. <i>[Additional teaching opportunity: A reminder of how full stops and capitals work – by separating a word or group of words (not only complete sentences) that make sense on their own.]</i>
146	a) What journey, and b) what transformation, do not appeal to Sheena?	a) The journey down into the python's stomach and back again. b) The transformation from a live animal into a collection of bones.
147	Both Sheena and the python pun (play on words) at the end of the page. What other words do they have in mind, when they use each of the following? a) squeezed. b) gripping. c) pressure.	a) Pleased b) Ripping c) Pleasure

Whole chapter (other activities):

Activities	Task	Suggested responses; additional teaching opportunities; notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaking Listening and responding 	In pairs or a group, stage an interview in which one of you asks questions and the other(s) respond(s), not with words but with a set of sound-signals agreed beforehand (like Chatu's 'Sssssss' for 'Yes' and 'Ssss. Ssss' for 'No'). You can include signals for more than those two words – for 'Maybe', 'You', 'Me' and so on – but the questioners will have to make sure they ask questions that can be answered with one of them.	<i>The signals should be spoken sounds, but visual (e.g. hand) signals could be tried as well.</i>

Activities	Task	Suggested responses; additional teaching opportunities; notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word structure and spelling 	<p>Pythons are ‘constrictors’ – they kill their prey by constricting their breathing.</p> <p>a) Can you see the root word from which it is derived?</p> <p>b) Use the root word, and any other related words you can think of, in sentences of your own.</p>	<p>a) Strict (tight, narrow)</p> <p>b) [Teaching examples]:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>His mother was very strict.</i> <i>His father treated him just as strictly.</i> <i>They placed lots of restrictions on what he could do at night.</i> <i>They laid down stringent rules about what time he had to come home.</i> <i>He was tired of his restrictive home environment.</i> <i>He was also tired of the strictures (criticisms) he received every time he did something wrong.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with, respond to texts. Creating and shaping texts 	<p>a) What would you need to do to change this chapter into a short story (one that you could understand and enjoy even if <i>Paka Mdogo</i> had never been written)?</p> <p>b) Think of a suitable title for the short story.</p> <p>c) Rewrite the opening of the chapter as if it <i>were</i> a short story.</p>	<p>a)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide enough information on the first page of the short story to explain why a domestic cat is alone in a Game Park, following a lioness. Take out the whole section involving Nyanya (perhaps). Remove the reference to Amy on Page 144. Remove all other references to things that have happened earlier in <i>Paka Mdogo</i>. <p>b) [Teaching Example: ‘A Tight Squeeze’.]</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating and shaping texts 	<p>Throughout this page two opposing sets of forces are in conflict: those that are trying to keep Sheena from moving, and Sheena's own attempts to move.</p> <p>a) Make a list of the words and phrases that tell us she is being stopped from moving.</p> <p>b) Make a list of the words and phrases telling us how she struggles.</p> <p>The comparative length of the two lists might suggest which side is likely to win in the end.</p> <p>c) Write a paragraph describing a struggle between two opposing forces. Use two sets of words and phrases to represent the two sides, and intersperse them (mix them up, taking one from one set then one from the other) to show how the struggle moves backwards and forwards.</p>	<p>a)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinning • Couldn't move • Crushing weight • Seized • Took hold • Gripped • Bite • Forced down into the dust • Great heaviness • Weight pressing down on her • The grip on her back half • Held tight • Underneath the snake <p>b)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wriggle • Wriggle • Squirming • Continued to struggle • Kicked out • Twist around <p><i>[Additional teaching opportunity: The important thing to notice is how the two sets of words and phrases are interwoven through the whole account, so that there is a continual tension in the narrative, a sense of things pulling against each other.]</i></p> <p>c) <i>[Teaching example: Climbing a mountain slope against wind and snow coming down from the peak. Two sets of words (a selection only to be used)...</i> <i>Crawl, force, heave, lean against, push, resist, shoulder (as a verb), strain, strength, struggle, thrust, withstand</i> <i>Batter, bear down on, beat, blast, blow, bully, heavy, lean on, powerful, press down on, shake, swirl around, unbalance, weight.]</i></p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Text structure and organisation 	<p>a) Examine the structure of the sentences in the paragraph at the end of Page 140 (beginning ‘This was very different’). What do you notice about how the sentences begin?</p> <p>b) Now examine the structure of the sentences in the first complete paragraph on Page 141. What do you notice about how these sentences begin?</p> <p>c) What is the overall effect of that?</p> <p>d) Write a paragraph of your own, with three or more sentences all beginning in the same, or a similar, way. It can be about anything you like, but you should try to create a sense of climax and finality.</p>	<p>a) They begin in very similar ways (‘This was...This was...As if that was...’)</p> <p>b) Their beginnings are even more similar (‘She couldn’t...She couldn’t...She probably wouldn’t...’)</p> <p>c) There’s a rising tension in the first paragraph, leading to what seems finality in the second: each of the page’s last three sentences reads like a blow, pinning Sheena down with no hope of escape.</p> <p>d) <i>[Teaching example: ‘The fire roared closer. The flames of the fire rose higher. The fire reached out for him. The fire would not be denied, and would devour him. The flames of the fire engulfed him, and he was gone.’ Further suggestion: a rising flood.]</i></p>
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Possibly new vocabulary:

- constrictors
- mottled
- elongated
- contortions
- intelligible
- formalize

Questions on the illustrations:

Page	Task	Suggested responses, teaching notes
142	Which details in this drawing make it horrifying?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sight of Sheena half-way into the python. The despair on Sheena’s face. The nastiness on Nyanya’s face. The python’s small, cold eyes. Sheena’s paw waving in the air as if she is asking for help.

Personal writing:

Task	Teaching support
<p>Sheena helps herself out of this tricky situation by remembering two things. What are they? Write about a time when you were in a tricky situation and got out of it by remembering something useful. You can write about either a real or an imaginary situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amy’s riddle about the umbrella.• The monitor lizard’s trick with the millipede. <p><i>Students can recount either an actual episode or a fictional one. The ‘thing remembered’ could be a fact (including a scientific fact), or a previous experience, or a piece of advice.</i></p>

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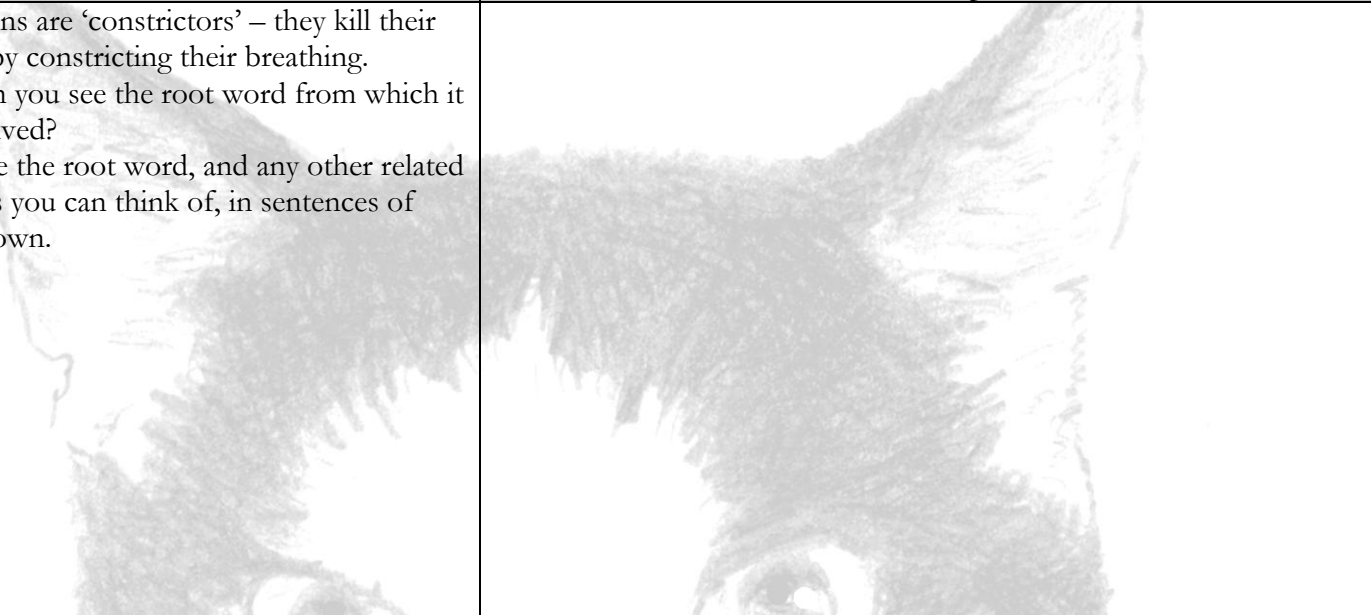
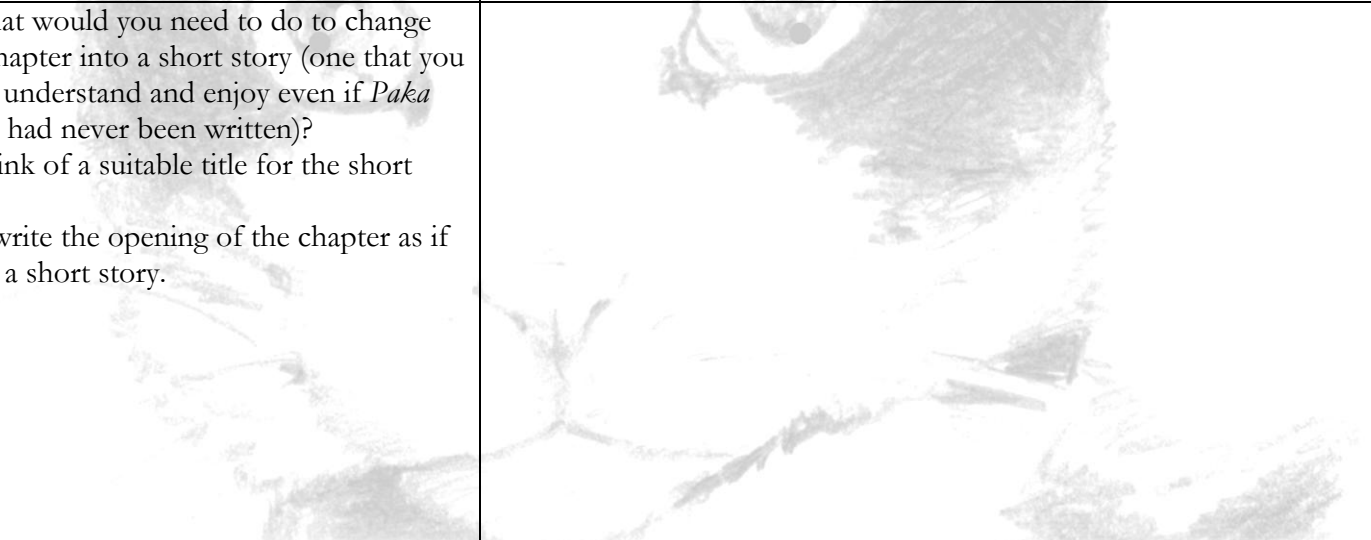
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- Creating and shaping texts

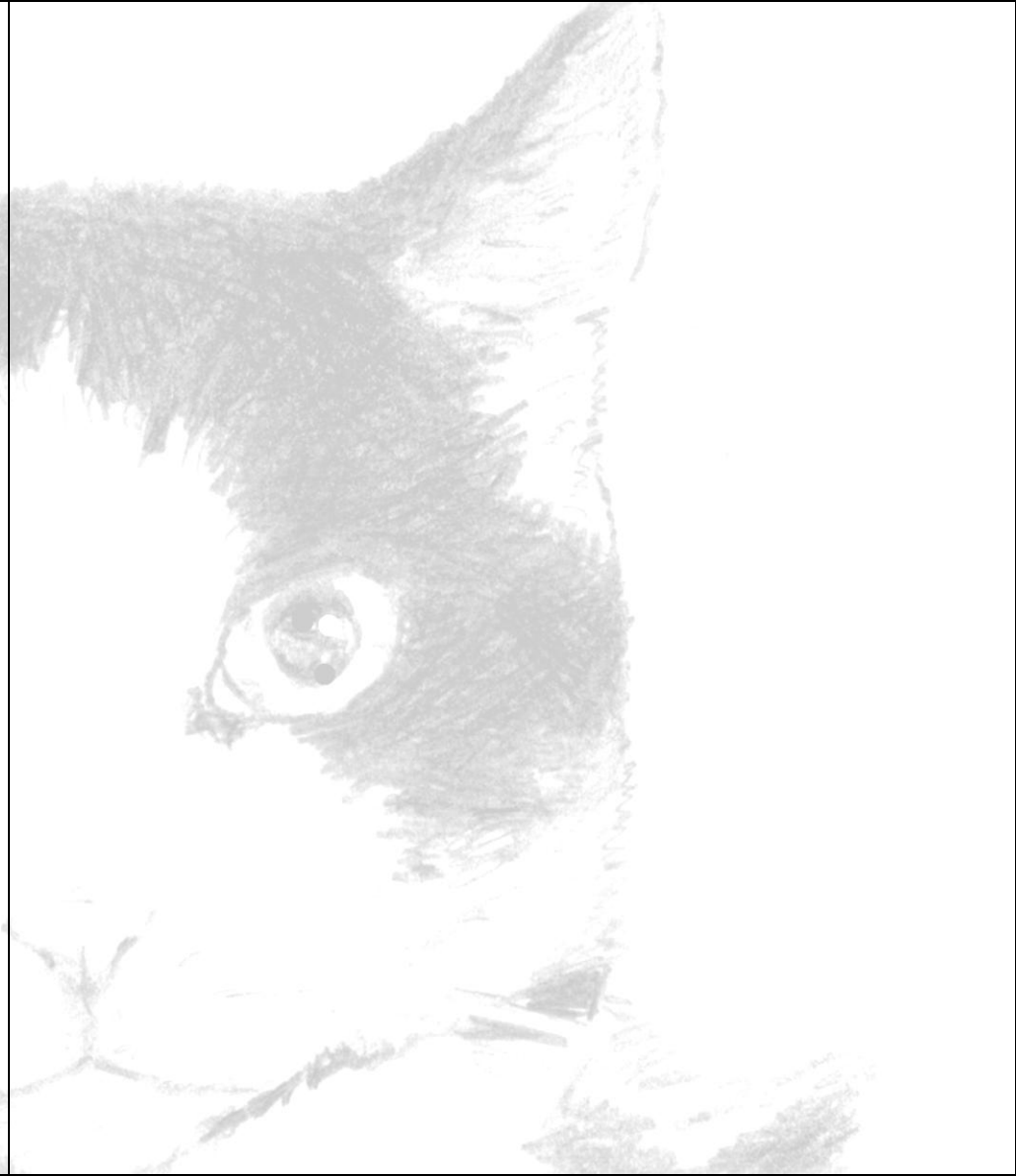
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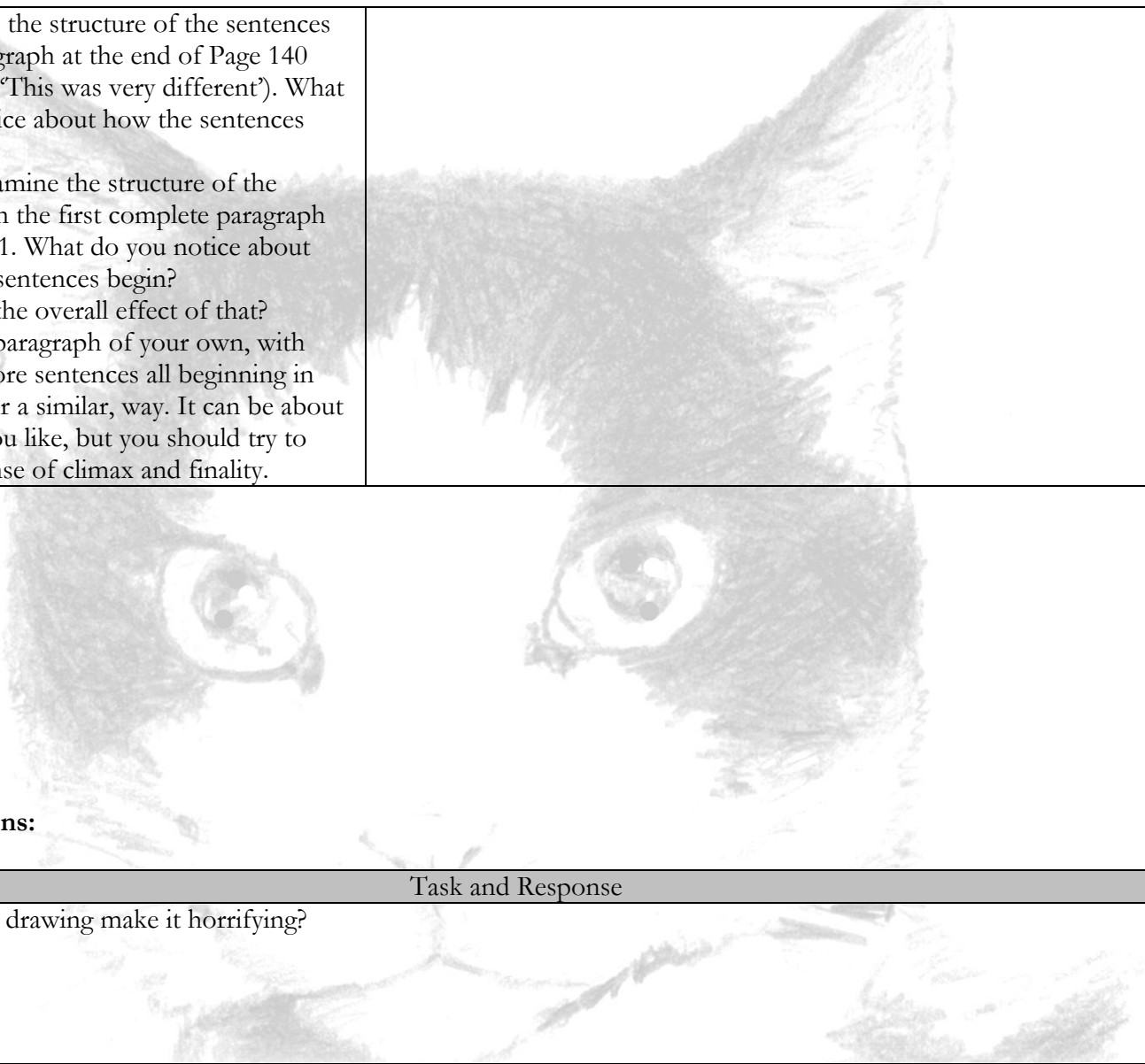
a) Make a list of the words and phrases that tell us she is being stopped from moving.

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The comparative length of the two lists might suggest which side is likely to win in the end.

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Task and Response

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