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Maryam Al-Balushi feeds her pets in her home Oman's capital Muscat.

Mus-cats: Omani woman juggles 500 felines



Maryam Al-Balushi feeds her pets in her home.



Maryam Al-Balushi fondles one of her cats at her home.



Maryam Al-Balushi feeds her pets in her home Oman's capital Muscat. — AFP photos

More than a dozen cats and dogs vie for Maryam Al-Balushi's attention as she hands out treats on a bed in her home in Oman's capital Muscat. Despite complaints from neighbors and mounting expense, she has accumulated 480 cats and 12 dogs, describing her pets as a mood-lifter and better companions than her fellow humans. "I find that animals, especially cats and dogs, are more faithful than humans," she said as cats jumped on and off a nearby scratching pole.



Maryam Al-Balushi feeds her pets in her home.

Orphaned at a young age, Balushi has grown her menagerie over the past decade, identifying with her furry friends, many of which were rescued from hard lives on the street. Oman has seen an upswing in stray and abandoned animals in recent years, local media report, despite penalties of \$25 for dumping a pet. Animal welfare activists have advocated a program of

"trap, neuter, release" to bring down the number of strays. Balushi spends about \$7,800 monthly to care for the creatures, 17 of which are blind, diligently feeding and cleaning them as well as taking them to the veterinarian for medical attention. Her home is now full of cages, with Balushi letting them out to exercise and play in rotation.

'Lifeline'

"It all began in 2008 when my son bought a small Persian cat," said Balushi, 51, a retired civil servant, wearing a dusky pink abaya and immaculate makeup. "Like many mothers, I refused to look after it as I did not like animals and my son did not pay it much attention or look after its hygiene." But two years later Balushi found herself looking after another cat and her approach was transformed. "I found myself totally immersed. I took care of her entirely, feeding her, bathing her and spending a lot of time with her," she said.

Word spread about Balushi's newfound love of animals and departing expatriates would leave their pets on her doorstep while animal shelters would re-settle their charges with her. After buying her own home in 2014 following complaints about her growing collection, she was able to take on more animals. Balushi was inspired by a former neighbor who used to feed strays with household scraps. She says her impressive collection of cats and dogs has helped her stave off depression-as well as earning her an impressive following on Instagram. "I was in a dark place and they were the lifeline that rescued me," she said. — AFP

KAMBUZIA PARTOVI, IRANIAN FILM WRITER-DIRECTOR, DIES OF CORONAVIRUS

Movie director Kambuzia Partovi, who scripted the only Iranian film to win a Golden Lion in Venice, died on Tuesday of the novel coronavirus, the Islamic republic's film body said. Partovi, one of the "most influential filmmakers of Iranian children's cinema", died in Tehran's Dey hospital aged 64, the Farabi Foundation said in a message of condolence on its website. Born in Rasht in northern Iran, Partovi began his directing career in the 1980s with "Mahi" ("The Fish") and quickly became an important figure in Iranian children's cinema-but he did not limit himself to the genre.



In this file photo Iranian director Kambuzia Partovi holds his Silver Bear for Best Script award he received in place of Jafar Panahi (not pictured) for the movie "Parde" ("Closed Curtain") during a press conference following the 63rd Berlinale awards ceremony in Berlin. — AFP

As a scriptwriter, Partovi worked with several well-known Iranian filmmakers, including Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and Majid Majidi. He won four scriptwriting awards from Tehran's Fajr Festival, the most among his peers. He also co-wrote the script for Majidi's 2015 epic "Muhammad", the most expensive film in the history of Iranian cinema. The biopic, which portrays the childhood of the Muslim prophet, was slammed as a "hostile act" and a "distortion of Islam" by the top cleric in Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival. In 2000, Partovi co-wrote "The Circle", which tackles difficulties facing Iranian women. It was the first and so far only Iranian film to win the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Partovi's later film "Cafe Transit", which tells the story of a widow who decides to run her late husband's truck-stop restaurant, was selected to represent Iran at the Oscars in 2007. In 2013, Panahi and Partovi won the Silver Bear for best screenplay at the Berlin film festival for "Parde" ("Closed Curtain"), made secretly in defiance of a ban by the Tehran authorities. —AFP

HUNGARY IN 'SOROS' SPAT WITH GEORGE CLOONEY

Hungary accused Hollywood star George Clooney of "limited" knowledge of politics Tuesday after the actor cited Prime Minister Viktor Orban as an example of "hate and anger" in the world. "We like George Clooney as an actor... (but his) knowledge of history and politics seems to be somewhat limited," said Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto on his official Facebook page. Earlier, government officials accused Clooney of being a puppet of US billionaire George Soros, a beto-nore of Orban's due to the financier's alleged pro-immigration lobbying. "Soros uses every opportunity to attack the Hungarian government. It is rather frustrating that there are actors, even non-political actors, who carry out such political intent for Soros," said Ors Farkas, a government spokesman.

Several pro-Orban media outlets showed a photo of the actor alongside Soros's son Alexander. The spat was sparked by a video interview Clooney gave to GQ magazine last week, in which he spoke about his newest film, The Midnight Sky. He cited Orban and Hungary as a current example of "hate and anger". "We weren't in the middle of a pandemic when (the film shooting) happened, but there were still all these other elements, these elements of how much hate and anger all of us are experiencing at this moment of history, all over the world - go to Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Orban in Hungary, look around, lots of anger and hate," he said.—AFP



George Clooney

Mysterious obelisk in US desert draws wild theories

A mysterious metal obelisk found buried in the remote western United States desert has inflamed the imaginations of UFO spotters, conspiracy theorists and Stanley Kubrick fans around the world. The shiny, triangular pillar-which protrudes approximately 12 feet from the red rocks of southern Utah was spotted last Wednesday by baffled local officials counting bighorn sheep from the air. After landing their helicopter to investigate, Utah Department of Public Safety crew members found "a metal monolith installed in the ground" but "no obvious indication of who might have put the monolith there." "It is illegal to install structures or art without authorization on federally managed public lands, no

matter what planet you're from," warned the agency in a tongue-in-cheek press release Monday.

News of the discovery quickly went viral online, with many noting the object's similarity with strange alien monoliths that trigger huge leaps in human progress in Kubrick's classic sci-fi film "2001: A Space Odyssey." Others remarked on its discovery during a turbulent year that has seen the world gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic, and optimistically speculated it could have a different function entirely. "This is the 'reset' button for 2020. Can someone please press it quickly?" joked one

Instagram user. "Up close it reads: 'Covid vaccine inside'" wrote another.

Although officials have refused to disclose the object's location out of fear that hordes of curious sightseers would flock to the remote wilderness, a Reddit user said they had managed to geolocate the obelisk using surrounding rock formations. Sharing the Google Earth location-where a small structure can be seen, roughly six miles from the nearest road-the user said the structure was first photographed by Google in 2016. Bret Hutchings, the pilot who happened to fly over the obelisk, speculated that it had been planted by "some

new wave artist." Some observers pointed out the object's resemblance to the avant-garde work of John McCracken, a US artist who lived for a time in nearby New Mexico, and died in 2011.

On Tuesday a spokeswoman for his representative David Zwirner said it was not one of McCracken's works, but possibly by a fellow artist paying homage. However later in the day Zwirner gave another statement in which he suggested the piece was indeed by McCracken, meaning it had lain undiscovered in the desert for nearly a decade. "The gallery is divided on this," Zwirner said. "I believe this is definitely by John." He added: "Who would have known that 2020 had yet another surprise for us. Just when we thought we had seen it all. Let's go see it."

Either way, Hutchings admitted it was "about the strangest thing I've come across out there, in all my years of flying." "We were kind of joking around that if one of us suddenly disappears, then the rest of us make a run for it," he told local news channel KSLTV. — AFP



This video grab image shows a mysterious metal monolith that was discovered in Utah after public safety officers spotted the object while conducting a routine wildlife mission. — AFP