

Catalysts & Catastrophes



Feline Poems

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**CATALYSTS &
CATASTROPHES
FELINE POEMS**

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*For Rachel
Rappa and Mara
Rapunzel
Sylvester and Heidi
Fritz and Rudi*

Catalysts

Old Black Cat

At seven in the morning
the old black cat
creeps behind the neighbours' front bushes,
folds into her shadowed, quiet place.
Damp red bricks and ground
hold her safe,
curled from heat, from light.
One yellowed eye watches. . . .

A young tom quivers on the lawn,
white and black,
muscled tight to spring
high as birch leaves twittering sparrows,
wide as a shaken, emptied branch.

The old cat yawns.
Beneath that tree she sees him crouch
hungrier each day,
as if birds drop into a waiting mouth.
Stalking—paws' slow-motion,
body tunnelling grass—
that's the way to hunt,
but flatfoot there just sits,
or flings himself, flailing,
and down a soft tail feather drifts
untasted.

She had her fill of birds.
Once, even dreams fluttered,
hopped on tiny cat-grumblings.
Now she lies cool,
thinned fur
tufting arthritic bone.

Stalking her,
death is not vicious,
only slow.
Tunnelling wet grass,
it folds her into darkness.
Each day's milk, she laps less and less,
at last just sips from puddled rain.
A redwing titters.
Ears prick up.
Young tom quivers,
tight beneath the tree.

The old cat's eye closes into dream.
One last time,
heart flailing,
can she fling her worn body,
and feather into sky?

Small Comforts

1. Sleeping with Sylvester

Feathers litter my dream.
Rolling over, I nudge him.

Uncurled from the pink blanket
rumpling my bed,
black fur stretches, long, lean,
tufts a white tummy outward
and purrs.

Robin? Cardinal?
He doesn't care.
Anything round, small, with a beak
—up he flies,
branches, sky flapping paws.
The leap he loves, not the catch.
Panting, he can let go of loss
and just sprawl.

I should learn from him
how to purr,
not snuggle under regrets,
but dart out of cover
after a fresh pair of wings. . . .

Warmed by slow stroking,
closer he wriggles,
flattens along my thigh.
Eyes' green slits sink heavy with sleep.
Big white paws flop, limp.
Pink dreams thicken
and fangs pull back
half-opened into a smile.

I too must breathe soft, deep,
let darkness drift toward dawn.
Black and white fur,
rumped pink blanket,
we stalk the same golden bird.

2. Chopin & Shadows

After supper, twilight softens the kitchen.
Day's greying edges set straight,
I unknot my apron,
pad to the basement stairs.
Below, hunched at the high black piano,
Grace rehearses Chopin.

I squat on the top step,
next to the cat's darkened bowl,
letting my thoughts run away with the music.
1-2-3, 1-2-3, dizzy *allegros*
lift away wall after wall, until sun
bursts, and old fields warble spring . . .

Mesto: piano chords slow.
Darkness drops along a valley. Birds still.
By an uprooted tree, I see my father
scan black water for a loose branch
to float shining comfort across to me.
Frank? What's in a name
when death washes between words and hearing?
Ashes to ashes, white hand
dug in my pocket, unable to wave,
I miss you,
eclipsed, immoveable moon. . . .

CRUNCH! chomps Rapunzel beside me,
eyes yellow crescents of greed.
Waddling the shadows between bowl and bed,
what does she care about Chopin, or crossings?
Birds? Fat illusions behind window panes.

Downstairs, Chopin closes up.
Walls dropped back into place
blaze against sharp kitchen light.

I plug the kettle in,
brew us a fresh cup of tea.
Between sips, Grace and I watch
a full moon rising
beyond, through black glass.

Haiku

Silence, morning mist.
Beside the hedge a black cat.
Fallen leaf quivers.

11:00 p.m.

Across the snow, night
pads the backyards.

In the Field

Waiting for the milkweed pods
to burst and fling wide
parachute seeds

and let their moist light
billow on the wind

behind slitted eyes
the black cat purrs
his soft white belly hidden.

Winter Song

Bird,
burst from the snow apple's core,

dust ice flakes off ripened skin
and light into whitening night.

High as the ice-moon's curve,
fly to its dark humming.

Silence will open, black fur, white paws,
tail looped around a crescent yawn.

Melt
on its rough red tongue.

Nine Lives

(for Sharon)

That old tomcat solitude
nuzzles harder with the years
and, growing tame, we reach for his
rough need to fill our lap.

Lying back, we smooth
trouble's matted fur, and gaze
out through yellow eyes,
dream of selves we may become
—still are.

Wearied, still we feel, as ours,
his belly's rise and fall,
the unrelenting, gritty purr.

His stretching shadow
lifts our darkness. Too
we, cat-like, will rise, pad soft
toward another door,
another moon.

Shared Passage

(for my daughter)

The other night
it softly passed
closer than a thought,
cat-black, nudging soundless
down a darkened hall.

Beyond? A blast of flowers
exploding in white light,
a little door half open . . .

One warm breath, a footfall,
the moments press and vanish:
tomorrow twelve, then twenty

—so many minutes
gone.

Nightfall

Pink, blue, gold,
a silk cocoon
wraps the evening garden.

Roses yawn.
Iris curls.

Centred in the lawn, the locust tree
bends around its nests.

Bird feeders close.

A last geranium
nods from its wired bowl.

The dream could float forever. . . .

Crouching in a corner
shadowed thick as grass,
the black and white cat
bares his fangs.

In Search of Words

In search of words, a tiger,
slung low, I shoulder through
thick grass. See my eyes burn.

I stalk over stones that cut.
White fur streaks, little red drops,
ladybugs climbing soft blades.

But when taut sinews spring
to silk rooms where my Lady
lies on her round satin bed

she circles my neck with a silver ring
and my great white paws
grow whole.

The Lady, my captor, my Muse,
enchains me in words,
and her rhythms

drift us through darkness
to moonlight
beyond the black ice lake.

On mist we float far into stars,
and my eyes burn in their cold white light,
her singing constellation.

Passing

(for Sylvester)

Cradling your head on my palm,
as I watch, the tension
filling your veins
solidifies, softens
and you fade
—eyes wide, hardening
to blue shields of light—
into a perfect stillness.

Where is the shiver of spirit
into some purer air?
No wisp? No flash?
—Nothing we speak of
in the dimension of “out there”.
Rather, as if
in three slow-motion seconds
whatever sparked this remnant body, spins
inward down through cell, gene, DNA,
to quark.

In the same way, an overblown stamen
shrivelling among petals and leaves
plummets its energy
back within a microcosmic ocean
whispering, promising
perennial seed.

So we, saying goodbye, from this moment
are not apart, not absent,
but simply unfamiliar
forms of each other.

In a Dream

You are the dream that stalks my sleep,
black and white,
shadows and moonlight
sinking thick paws into my breathing.

You are the dream that nudges my neck
and balancing on my shoulder
mews for my lips to open
a window into the night's perfume.

Catastrophes

Fast Exit

Old man Sturdwell
hated Gus like blisters.
Dang cat squatted down,
dropped his dark gift
always on the greenest patch of lawn,
like a mongrel, murdered prize begonias,
and ripped the ear near off Sandy,
Sturdwell's darlin' tiger.

Well, the old man stomped and yelled,
pitched a closetful of boots 'n shoes,
strung a dozen cans on Gus's tail,
even fired his shotgun illegal.
Nothin' scared that animal.
Gus come back, three times a week at least,
blacker 'n new gifts and crimes.

One night Sturdwell whooped awake, "I got it!"
Eyes agleam, he hacked up a hunka fresh liver
and under full moon, in orange striped pyjamas,
he crouched in the dirt, croakin', "Here, kitty, kitty."
When Gus snuck up, eager to nip his hand,
Sturdwell stuffed him in an onion sack.

Grinnin' like a crazy man, in raincoat and slippers
he hiked them half a mile to the CNR yards
and, when no one was lookin',
pitched sack and Gus hard
on a fast freight for Vancouver.

These days Sturdwell's got the greenest grass in town.
Begonias took second in Sunday's garden show.
Sandy sprawls in sunshine,

watchin' birds, washin' her silk ears,
and Sturdwell grins from sleep as
the 2:00 a.m. express whistles.

Cat Under Renovation

Willy turned tail
when the carpenters came.
Shocked to the basement
he shuddered alone:
buzz-sawing, hammering
drove him insane.

Once he was a tiger
burning bright as gold,
strutting fearful symmetry,
tail high,
nose cold.

Now he cries and crawls
under sofa cushions.
When the doorbell rings
he hits jet propulsion.

Fetch a cat psychiatrist.
Valium his milk.
Comb his kinky whiskers straight.
Smooth bristles into silk.

Once he was a tiger
burning bright and bold,
strutting fearful symmetry,
nose high,
tail curled.

Willy get well.
We love you too much
—besides, the sandblasters
are coming next month.

Poor Little Rich Cat

“Cats are so very convenient.”
Mrs. Llewelyn sparkled
to admiring guests sipping tea.
Black in her rose-coloured lap,
Rasputin extended five claws
over her silk-stockinged knee.

“I’m away a great deal. . . .”
Her hands fluttered.
“But he’s perfectly happy alone.
My maid feeds him liver and fish.
He sleeps on a white eiderdown.
No, he’s never let out
—too much traffic uptown
and a leash is a bother, you know.”

Rasputin resettled his rump,
careful to crease her rose linen.
Mrs. Llewelyn raked a fat diamond
across his bristling fur.
“He’s a purebred, of course, and a dear.
'Won a ribbon in this winter’s show.
Yes, under the rhinestone collar, right there.”
Rasputin’s black nostrils flared.

Mrs. Llewelyn took no notice,
but leaned over the marble table,
wedging black fur between bosom and knee.
She picked up the fat silver lighter.
Flicked. The hissing flame quivered
within an inch of his ear.
Rasputin moved nary a muscle.
How his yellow eyes glared!

Blowing smoke, Mrs. Llewelyn straightened.
“Nice kitty, he’s so civilized.
Nothing scares him, you know.
I can hostess a soirée for thirty.
All evening he hunkers stage centre,
a lump for my guests to trip over.”

Leaning back, she smiled and inhaled.
A tail swiped her cigarette end.
Sparks!—Three ugly brown circles
singed her cream chiffon blouse.
Mrs. Llewelyn choked, caught her breath,
mouthing sounds beyond telling.
Rasputin rolled over and smirked,
nonchalance baring plush belly.

“Do—“ Mrs. Llewelyn coughed,
“try my fine cognac. Yes, thanks.
I fly it directly. From France—
quaint abbey I stayed near last June.
That’s how Rasputin was named:
my joke to delight the good Brothers.
A black cat’s a devil, they claim.”

Rasputin, highly amused,
twisted and dug his hind claws
through Mrs. Llewelyn’s undies.
Gurgling, eyes wide, red lips tight,
she snatched up the cognac decanter.
A third glass shot down like white lightning.

Blonde hair swept back, she continued.
“A cat is convenient indeed.
I’d never have time for a dog:
too much fussing, and walking, and love.
Rasputin and I are such friends

because we each go separate ways.
Fine, independent—that's us.
Rasputin, my dear, you agree?"

Rasputin arched up, whiskers quivering,
leered through his fangs with slit eyes,
purred like a black cement mixer.
Mrs. Llewelyn stiffened, "Oh my!"
unsure how to see out her guests.
Rasputin hopped down, sleek tail high,
convenience revealing rose lap soaking wet.

Fussy Eater

Mara McCat
likes the personal touch.

She snuggles my leg
and meows till I bring her

mushed-up canned chicken
but still won't start lunch

until the muck's
stirred with my finger.

Cat on the Line

I'm plain wrung out and hung up to dry
when along comes this matched set of
"Baby-watcha-thinkin'?"
alley-cat eyes.

Thinkin'? Blinking's more like it.
The shutters in my mind just go flip-flap.
Even the mice are knocked right out:
"A cat!—In a state of collapse!"

Bowl a few ash cans with the rest of the toms
or miaoul the moon, if it's answers you want.
My private clothesline is a one-cat affair.
Go rub your whiskers on some other kitty's fur.

Cat Lib

Isn't that just like a tom!
I miaou my attraction.
He's shocked! Betrayed!
"Where do you get your cat-nip?"
(*Hiss!*)

Up-down the block
hide-and-seek in a flurry of fur,
darting, stalking,
then crouching tight for a spring,
leaping in with all claws

—and the moment of truth?

Yellow eye to eye,
cold nose to nose,
ears sharp, he growls
he don't like aggressive kittens!

Tough! I won't love NO cat
who can't take me whole
(purr, stiff back, or bared belly) in stride.
Go chase your whiskers! I
shall strut as I please
my own path,
careless without you—tail high . . .

And full-mooned Cheshire, I'll grin
while a chauvinist howls at the sky!

Catnip the Mystery Tomcat

Catnip the mystery tomcat
skids like a black motorbike.
Round corners, carpet fringe flying,
he brakes—claws down—at my feet.

What do you want, sir, propped on hind wheels,
motor a-rumble, eyes wide windshields?
Sardines for dinner? Chin tickled?
Ears rubbed?

Why are you twitching your whiskers
(like those eight other times before)?
You've come, I've seen, and we've sat here
tomcat to tom girl, nose-close on the floor!

Give me a hint: slide round my leg,
or lick my thumb, or meow.
DO SOMETHING to show what you want, please!
Right now!

A spin, a scratch, hind legs kicking up fringe,
a furry tail flashes from sight,
Catnip the mystery tomcat
off again like a black motorbike.

Rachel: a Feline Fable

Rachel always liked to slink
in a not quite empty sink.
Even when we pulled the stopper
still she crouched in hopes of water.

One sad morning we were startled
finding Rachel grown much smaller.
Now, alas, we search in vain
fearing she's slipped down the drain.

Has she flushed into the lake
slowly to evaporate
into growling clouds that rain
cats and dogs on window panes?

Let the moral simply be:
kitties, keep your four paws dry
or like Rachel you may shrink
steadily till indistinct
you dissolve in space and time
one more cat-a-logued in rhyme.

- FINIS -