



# CAT POEMS

BY THE WORLD'S GREATEST POETS



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This book is dedicated to Agnes, Lola, Toby, Inka, Pudge, Fudge, Maisie, Bellatrix Lestranger, Rosie, Tessy, Crumble, Mitzy, Minnie & Bruce, Solly & Lily, Spike, Coco & Minnie, Stan (honorary cat), in memory of Willow, and to all the other cats we have known and loved.

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WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

## Poem

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of

the jamcloset  
first the right  
forefoot

carefully  
then the hind  
stepped down

into the pit of  
the empty  
flowerpot

DENISE LEVERTOV

## The Cat as Cat

The cat on my bosom  
sleeping and purring  
– fur-petalled chrysanthemum,  
squirrel-killer –

is a metaphor only if I  
force him to be one,  
looking too long in his pale, fond,  
dilating, contracting eyes

that reject mirrors, refuse  
to observe what bides  
stockstill.

Likewise

flex and reflex of claws  
gently pricking through sweater to skin  
gently sustains their own tune,  
not mine. I-Thou, cat, I-Thou.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

## Cats (LXIX)

Feverish lovers, scholars in their lofts,  
Both come in their due time to love the cat;  
Gentle but powerful, king of the parlour mat,  
Lazy, like them, and sensitive to draughts.

Your cat, now, linked to learning and to love,  
Exhibits a taste for silences and gloom –  
Would make a splendid messenger for doom  
If his fierce pride would condescend to serve.

Lost in his day-dream, he assumes the pose  
Of sphinxes in the desert, languidly  
Fixed in a reverie that has no end.

His loins are lit with the fires of alchemy,  
And bits of gold, small as the finest sand,  
Fleck, here and there, the mystery of his eyes.

*translated from the French by Anthony Hecht*



AMY LOWELL

## To Winky

Cat, Cat,

What are you?

Son, through a thousand generations, of the  
black leopards

Padding among the sprigs of young bamboo;  
Descendant of many removals from the  
white panthers

Who crouch by night under the loquat-trees?

You crouch under the orange begonias,

And your eyes are green

With the violence of murder,

Or half-closed and stealthy

Like your sheathed claws.

Slowly, slowly,

You rise and stretch

In a glossiness of beautiful curves,

Of muscles fluctuating under black, glazed hair.

Cat,  
You are a strange creature.  
You sit on your haunches  
And yawn,  
But when you leap  
I can almost hear the whine  
Of a released string,  
And I look to see its flaccid shaking  
In the place whence you sprang.

You carry your tail as a banner,  
Slowly it passes my chair,  
But when I look for you, you are on the table  
Moving easily among the most delicate porcelains.  
Your food is a matter of importance  
And you are insistent on having  
Your wants attended to,  
And yet you will eat a bird and its feathers  
Apparently without injury.

In the night, I hear you crying,  
But if I try to find you  
There are only the shadows of rhododendron leaves  
Brushing the ground.

When you come in out of the rain,  
All wet and with your tail full of burrs,  
You fawn upon me in coils and subtleties;  
But once you are dry  
You leave me with a gesture of inconceivable  
impudence,  
Conveyed by the vanishing quirk of your tail  
As you slide through the open door.

You walk as a king scorning his subjects;  
You flirt with me as a concubine in robes of silk.

Cat,  
I am afraid of your poisonous beauty,  
I have seen you torturing a mouse.  
Yet when you lie purring in my lap  
I forget everything but how soft you are,  
And it is only when I feel your claws open upon  
    my hand  
That I remember –  
Remember a puma lying out on a branch above  
    my head  
Years ago.

Shall I choke you, Cat,  
Or kiss you?  
Really I do not know.

STEVIE SMITH

## My Cat Major

Major is a fine cat  
What is he at?  
He hunts birds in the hydrangea  
And in the tree  
Major was ever a ranger  
He ranges where no one can see.

Sometimes he goes up to the attic  
With a hooped back  
His paws hit the iron rungs  
Of the ladder in a quick kick  
How can this be done?  
It is a knack.

Oh Major is a fine cat  
He walks cleverly  
And what is he at, my fine cat?  
No one can see.

RYSZARD KRYNICKI

## Frail Manuscripts

The old poet's frail manuscripts  
bear traces of ash, countless cigarette  
holes, coffee stains, less often,  
red wine, and now and then  
the almost unintelligible prints  
of cat paws, vanishing

into spacetime.

*translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh*