



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