

I

He was  
the King of Cats  
and they followed him,  
the strays,  
many cats not  
knowing  
the way  
without him,  
bringing  
them to places  
they couldn't go,  
would never see  
on their own.

II

Who was he?

They wondered how  
he tempted them along  
and they pondered  
over him.

Was he better?

Something had  
to explain  
his allure  
since it was  
unknown,  
and yet it gave  
him mythic fame.

III

Hard to break  
themselves free--

I speak of "them"  
but mean "we".

We were smitten by him  
and always known  
as a "them"--

"There he goes with  
*them* once more."

*I want to go my own way,*  
I thought many times,  
yet stayed in an  
obedient pack.

IV

What is a cat:

rough tongue,

small nose,

sharp claws,

silent step,

a way to pounce,

fear of dogs?

What, though, of his

cape of hair,

long and bleached by sun,

mane cascading on his back,

down broad

shoulders that bulged?

V

Size of a beast,  
the King could be quick  
like light moves in wind.  
He settled disputes  
among querulous cats  
who argued about  
where we would  
eat at night.  
Mewls turned to a  
collective pule,  
when a stentorian  
shout did silence  
us all right then.

VI

"Be quiet now."

We became soundless  
as the dead.

"What is wrong with you all?"

Then a long pause,  
a stare.

"You follow me around

no concern for  
your own minds--

expect me to lead when

I don't know what's ahead.

I am bigger, yes,

but I'm one of you."

VII

He stopped, looked  
at us, waited for  
one to speak,  
be brave. It was day  
and the clear light  
hurt our eyes since the sun  
was blinding then,  
right behind him.  
He seemed disgusted when  
he turned and waved a paw  
at us to say,  
*You're nothing,*  
*sheep not cats.*

VIII

Hundreds of us,  
male and female,  
had no idea  
where to go.  
When night came  
we were hungry,  
from weeks of no food.  
It was dark soon and  
some rain fell  
soft on our fur,  
making us wet,  
wet right  
down to the skin.



IX

One of us was sick.  
The King of Cats,  
come back, please.  
He seemed to know  
living, leading,  
but he was gone,  
so we dragged ourselves  
to the forest  
where we nursed  
our sick one  
on soft needles of pine.  
But the woods are  
always dark.

X

We stayed in the night

He didn't come.

Sick grew sicker,

then others sicker

still. Sadness

spread through

us all like a

blade cuts into

skin. I stayed awake,

tried to protect

my friends

and the long

night passed.

XI

Fear made  
us sick  
as I watched  
my kin,  
their empty eyes.  
Just one main cat  
that no one knew,  
he had dismissed us  
to show us that  
good is fleeting:  
we were bad off  
before  
he came.

XII

There is no ruth  
dying under the sun--  
death is for evening,  
the dark, when  
none can see.

One by one I  
sadly watched  
my friends  
all disappear,  
no one  
went fast  
our moans became  
a plaintive sound.

XIII

The pack was gone  
and I alone,  
carcasses  
around me  
across the field.  
I scanned bodies,  
swollen, aswarm  
with flies  
the terrible sun  
warming them  
baking  
their skin  
into their fur.

XIV

For many days I tried  
to move, on my side.  
I was injured  
yet determined  
to keep open eyes.  
The long massacre  
was filled  
with brutal rain--  
my friends washed away,  
a river of themselves,  
land turning to water now,  
grave of cats  
floating past me.

XV

There is a myth  
that cats don't pray,  
too smart we are,  
purring content . . .  
I don't know.

In that water  
with my stomach  
bleeding, I saw pain  
near me,  
as furied water  
drove my  
small body  
into dying others.

XVI

My friends, good cats,  
floated on by,  
as I crawled and I bled,  
prayed to  
live more,  
asking how  
I had survived.  
Blood seeped  
from my stomach  
into a river of friends.  
My prayers seeped  
on with them,  
my eyes closed.



XVII

Fur red with blood.

I licked it off to

pass the time,

but the stains

stayed as

my blood

drained.

Rest, boy,

for a moment,

do not relent,

you are here still,

keep courage in

your weak gut.

XVIII

Cats have one life,  
like the rest, and  
my eyes could not  
remain open much more.  
Soon, those bodies were gone,  
red river of blood  
pursuing the dead,  
while the rain turned  
into a warm, humid  
day. And alone I lay,  
my head on wet mud that  
changed to dry dirt  
in just hours.

XIX

I had known  
them all my life  
yet only came to this,  
left alone,  
feeling stings,  
like wasps landing on me,  
circling vespiaries  
descending. Flies, though,  
like bitter wasps,  
a thousand eyes  
scintillated  
small ocular mirrors  
flashing at me.

XX

Cilia legs landed  
on my stomach,  
tickle of feet  
hundreds of legs,  
thousands of eyes,  
I couldn't move,  
just listened to  
the buzzing dread.  
"Mother," one small one said,  
"when will he die?"  
She noticed me,  
eyed me.  
"Today."

XXI

*Today?* I thought.

Crawling flies.

I needed to tear  
myself from under

these swarms

that wanted me gone.

So I bared my teeth to hiss  
with all my voice.

Those lounging flies  
then spread, for the mist  
of spit I sprayed  
at them dispersed them  
as they scattered.

XXII

I shook them so hard  
that they flung yards  
into the air, while one  
split into eight,  
wings ripped off,  
legs severed, eyes bled  
and those flies went blind.  
For the first time  
in days I stood.  
No flies were on me now.  
I shook again, looked around  
then down, and on my  
stomach was dried blood.

XXIII

I left the lonely fields  
to come to a bridge  
where I stayed  
underneath, river fish  
feeding me each day.  
The King of Cats--  
would he be back?  
Fish filled  
my belly,  
healed me to  
what I was.  
I missed my friends,  
and her of course.

XXIV

It was known  
that our King  
read human poems,  
reciting lines.  
I think I heard him once  
repeat the words of a  
famous man,  
how feeling  
could be the sweet and  
great and grand  
in you, so I listened  
as the poem found  
something in me.



XXV

But it's hard to recall  
his words because  
that was when  
she stared at me.  
His talk drew  
a purring crowd  
and she looked  
back again  
glance coy, kind.  
The King's words  
I do not recall  
at all, but they  
made me feel her there.

XXVI

It was she  
I remembered  
as I waited,  
healing, afraid.  
I lay awake  
and stared  
at the dead  
in my mind,  
curling into bed,  
with thoughts  
of limbs  
flooding me  
with no end.

XXVII

Drum, drum,  
cars overhead  
denying slumber,  
human twaddle  
derisive fishermen  
yelling down at me,  
flinging their hooks  
to dismiss  
the useless cat,  
flinging sharp  
hooks at my back.  
*Do not do this,  
leave me alone.*

XXVIII

I sprinted away  
finding a dirt road  
then slowing when  
men's harsh words  
could no longer be heard.  
The sweet river  
made a hushed sound  
while the quietness  
of the road seemed  
endless and loud.  
Easy to end up alone,  
with only your  
silent steps.

XXIX

Too often do I walk  
with no reason,  
stepping with paw  
prints as proof  
I am here, pretending to go  
somewhere, knowing  
my direction is luck,  
for I could turn and go  
the other way, the road  
to somewhere else,  
again to hide,  
to walk some more and  
end up with myself.

XXX

Alone with  
old thoughts,  
I moved ahead.  
Panic surged in me.  
I sang at times,  
no one could hear,  
so I wailed  
as loud as I wanted.  
I looked  
for food,  
and the water  
I drank from puddles  
tasted of mud.

XXXI

Time spent alone  
passes so slow,  
days lost  
wandering, waiting.  
I kept walking,  
lost many claws.  
I stopped, rested,  
lapping water where  
I stared into  
the loss in my face,  
Suddenly, a mouse  
passed rather fast,  
so I ran and *pounced*.

XXXII

Chase gave life to me--  
I sprang with back legs,  
skinny mouse  
turning back in fear  
my mouth opening  
wide to tear  
his neck, delicate  
mouse frailer than I.  
Teeth were sunken  
into what I thought was  
his skin, yet nothing  
but air passed  
over my empty tongue.



XXXIII

Feet away he looked at me.

"Wait!" He held up  
tiny feet, begged me  
not to eat him,  
cowering near a bush.

I thought a moment  
when a very strange  
thing happened:  
my stomach flashed  
in pain again,  
sent me to my side  
in a scream  
with gasping.

XXXIV

Small mouse approached  
to ask if I was okay.  
I waved him off,  
but he made a  
bed of leaves for my  
head to rest,  
skin seeping where  
my stomach bled once more.  
He pressed leaves on my body  
to hold in the blood.  
Throughout the night  
my new friend  
did this to help me live.

XXXV

I could not kill him,  
I thought as I awoke,  
for he had stayed with me.  
I needed rest,  
could not walk well.  
Wild dogs lurked  
in a clearing--  
we both heard them.  
Mouse thought for a bit,  
put up a toe, said,  
"I have it!"  
He darted to leave,  
scurrying fast.

XXXVI

Six curs did appear:

*Dogs we are,  
we'll gnash you.*

I hissed hard at them.

Six long pink tongues  
flapped like cow udders,  
and saliva dripped,  
flew right out like milk.

*You are only a cat!*

Teeth were near at my head  
when a strange twitter,  
stopped them. I had never  
seen so many mice.

XXXVII

They nipped and gnawed  
at the curs' paws--  
the whimpering dogs were gone.  
My little friend with  
his courageous kin  
stared at me in awe.  
"The King of Cats!"  
they whispered all,  
murmuring who they thought  
I was, but not.  
I was not the King,  
although they assumed  
that I was he.

XXXVIII

Across a field  
littered with  
decayed cats,  
they carried me.  
I found myself  
under the ground  
inside earth,  
labyrinth  
home of these mice  
so myriad lifting me  
through a maze,  
chanting,  
*The King of Cats.*

XXXIX

The little friend  
who saved me visited  
my room, bringing  
shy mice to show respects.

"Why do they praise a cat?"

I asked him.

"We know of your kindness  
to all of us, what you  
did during the flood,  
helping the mice.

We saw it from the trees.

The water could have  
drowned many of us."

XL

I slept for weeks,  
lived as the one  
that they thought  
they loved.

I prayed to heal,  
but they fed  
me so kindly

I felt I should stay.  
One night in sleep I  
had a dream to flee,  
to burrow out of there,  
but the real King  
called to me.



XLI

He spoke in my reverie,  
as if he were there.

What can I do?

I wondered.

I was in a tired daze--

his speech was

not too clear,

but I listened.

Where had he been?

I felt I said this to him.

I dreamed words,

words from him,

it seemed:

XLII

*A journey's middle part  
is the most difficult.  
You are seen off  
when you start--  
and back home in the end  
they greet you again.  
But the middle  
is a forgotten place,  
lost paths,  
where  
you become  
something  
you were not.*

XLIII

After this dream,  
I had to leave,  
so I spoke to my friend  
that night,  
thanked him once more.  
"I have to go," I said.  
"It's time," he replied.  
He sighed.  
"I am glad you stayed here  
and that you healed."  
I stood with  
my weakened legs  
trembling under me.

XLIV

"Take care,"  
the head mouse said,  
as I left underground,  
found myself above them  
in the silence.  
Air reeked from rotting,  
but it was so  
quiet out there.  
I walked a bit,  
but then turned to hear  
all the mice  
cheering for me.  
"King of Cats! Travel well!"

XLV

I walked miles,  
paws tender  
on piles of jagged rocks.  
Now off the road,  
I scaled a mountain of  
trash, stood at the top,  
looked in the distance  
to see buildings touch sky!  
Thousands of them, massive city,  
night sun red as poppies  
fading behind them in a breeze,  
windows on buildings  
filled with lights.

XLVI

I'll go to the city  
soon, I said, and see  
the King of Cats,  
then I trotted  
down the mass of trash  
to find a cleaner place.  
In a quiet nook  
I rubbed my front paw  
on the side of my face,  
a few strokes, each side,  
licking with my rough tongue  
when out of nowhere,  
some emaciated strays appeared.

XLVII

The starving mean three  
hissed at me in unison.  
I took a look, felt pity.  
Derelicts, yes, but  
from the flood.  
I wondered if I could  
talk to them first or if  
they would attack.  
We waited there at dusk.  
I was stronger with my rest,  
but they were  
a nasty trio,  
so I flashed my claws!

XLVIII

The four of us  
stared, teeth bared,  
tiny fangs, fierce night.  
Why do we hiss  
as kin?  
Hunger makes enemies.  
We stayed in  
this tableau,  
four cats above  
their night shadows.  
My stare scared them,  
yet they did remain,  
and the red sun sank.



XLIX

"Tee, hee, hee," said the three,  
"we are the cat brothers McCree."

All together they spoke  
each word, one mind,  
three heads that joked,  
"In our junkyard,  
you are not free,  
what should we do--  
ah yes, go far,  
stay away from here,  
please flee, yes, yes,  
this is what we three see.  
Leave us for that human city."

L

They giggled, started again  
and wiggled, vitriol in  
nasty screeches as they sang,  
"We will claw you up  
with scratches  
for your green eyes,  
so don't mock us!"  
But talk they were, just words,  
small cowards. I leaned my face  
quite close to them.  
"Goodness!" they cried.  
"It is *you*, beg pardon,  
oh, beg pardon."

LI

"We knew you when you were  
called Prince, we ran together,  
were the same,  
you have forgotten us,  
for who are we, three nobodies,  
yet we were friends one time--  
do you not recall?  
But you came back,  
and now you are home,  
bless you for coming,  
long life to the King of Cats!"  
I looked at them with  
perplexity, then I said:

LII

"I'm ordinary  
like you, not great  
by any means. I knew  
him, but I am not he."  
The three stared right at me.  
"Ha!" they cried fast.  
"We knew it, see.  
You are not he at all!  
Or, or maybe you really are.  
We share one mind and delve  
into conjecture,  
which is fractious,  
to be sure!"

LIII

They turned to each other  
bumping heads  
mindlessly,  
scratching their eyes.  
I skulked away, furtive  
as a thief to hide in a stove,  
away from the fools,  
slept amid their catcalls.  
By morning I peeked out  
from the oven,  
yet again heard their shouts,  
for they had not stopped once  
and argued further still!

LIV

I made an attempt  
to avoid more contempt,  
but they still saw me:  
"It's the liar who thinks  
he's the King of Cats,  
once our Prince. Get him!"  
My legs sprinted,  
eyes on the city,  
and when I looked behind me  
to see the three bloody cats,  
their faces were mangled,  
fur ripping from  
skinned, hungry bodies.

LV

When would running stop,  
and who were these small beasts  
who were no longer cats?

I stopped abruptly  
in the dust,  
turning to face them.

They stopped too  
but would come no closer,  
absurd musketeers.

"I forgive you," I yelled,  
"yet you call yourselves cats.  
Disgraces perhaps.  
Look at your faces."

LVI

They were a bloody with  
wounds covered in dust.  
"You cannot speak to us  
thus. We were abandoned here  
inside this trash, forever poor,  
no chance to be better,  
seen as lower than what we are,  
held down by perception  
reviled for our looks and undone  
by hunger, fear, to live  
like rats, no one ever to save  
us from the endless stench  
on our bodies."



LVII

I listened  
to this plea  
watching them  
closely.

"Your past does not excuse  
how you treat me now."

The three thought  
well on this,  
nodded and concurred.

We approached  
each other,  
laughing, underfed.

"We are the same," one said.

LVIII

"Come now with us and  
we'll take you somewhere."  
We trotted away from  
the trash and the grime.  
It was their secret place.  
"Here it is," they said,  
pointing in the distance,  
a lovely green field before me,  
catnip spread everywhere,  
and I smelled it as I ran there.  
Plush and ripe,  
it tasted sweet,  
made us intoxicated.

LIX

We giggled like old friends,  
biting delicious leaf ends,  
some relief finally,  
as the brothers danced around me.  
"We are not so bad,  
but we guard this place,  
keep strangers out.  
Many cats were lost  
in the flood--  
you are the first we've seen  
but tell us, what is your name?"  
I couldn't, though,  
for I had no memory then.

LX

Did I even have a name?  
They waited for my answer,  
but mine never came to mind.  
"We'll give you one, my friend."  
So they had a meeting to  
choose my appellation:  
"Leo," they said,  
"who watches over cats,  
one to whom we pray as  
we hope for better times."  
I thanked them for the name,  
these strange, silly three  
pawing me playfully.

LXI

It was hot that morning--  
soon I set out,  
told them my plan  
to live in the city and find  
our missing, needed King.  
They walked with me, the trio gang,  
showed me the right path to take.  
At the edge of the junk,  
the sun showed me their tears,  
for they were sad that I might weary  
of the callous, filthy city.  
"Strong legs, my friend.  
Be careful of the junkyard dogs."

LXII

I had to cross a bridge  
after traversing a long ridge,  
and I could still hear them  
speaking in the distance:

"Tee hee hee, we have  
a new brother McCree  
who goes to the human city  
without us three,  
reminding us to remain kind.  
It is wrong to thrash  
at some who come near,  
goodbye brother,  
stay as you are!"

LXIII

Soon I was amid  
busy streets, people's legs  
around my head, stomping  
fast, ignoring sleeping  
men with cups of money  
in front of them.

In an alley I jumped  
on a trash can  
to watch this frenzied swarm.  
I stared at these humans long  
but had no plan.

At night the loud people  
seemed go inside.

LXIV

I avoided the streets,  
the yellow cars--  
weaved through sidewalks,  
gnawing leftovers.

Urban clamors,  
sibilant flourishes,  
rushing, tripping,  
shameless, dirty.

Men in conformist suits,  
women falling  
over their shoes,  
other ragged felines  
who never met my eyes.



LXV

I was scratched in two fights,  
heavy tom cats with grudges.  
Under a silver trash can,  
I slept but not well,  
woke to someone  
pulling my tail, held upside-down  
by a boy who swung me around  
flinging me--brutal child  
who looked very poor.  
I landed on a yellow car,  
which drove me for  
a block until I  
jumped off when we stopped.

LXVI

But the boy ran and  
caught me again.

When I bit him, he yanked  
my front leg, bent it  
until it cracked.

I scratched cuts  
on his arms,  
lunged away from him  
and, with my crippled leg,  
ran up the streets.

He chased me but stopped  
out of breath  
in a childish fit.

LXVII

It was a cleaner part  
of the city, finer  
homes, fresher trash.  
Poodles pranced on leashes,  
morning came  
with the lovely sun.  
He had crushed my leg,  
and I needed to rest,  
but I simply shut my eyes,  
fell on the sidewalk, passers-by  
stepping over my head  
as I lay on my concrete bed.  
No one stepped on me.

LXVIII

I woke up to a man  
who did caress me  
in his arm and  
walked me to a place where  
people in white did grimace  
at my mangled limb.  
They took me from  
his hands to numb  
me with a sharp metal  
point that scared me until  
I felt how good it was.  
I slept with peaceful  
dreams, dozing well.

LXIX

I did not wake to find  
the man who rescued me,  
nor did I see people  
in white who helped me heal.  
No, I was in a cage  
amid other cages,  
hundreds containing  
cat upon cat, moaning,  
trapped and wet, wailing.  
My leg was in a bandage.  
The corner had stale water  
that I lapped down my throat  
and then I chewed my dry food.

LXX

Trapped and alone I lay,  
metal under my body,  
crisscrossed wires pressed  
into my hide. A young girl  
filled my water bowl and food.  
Hollow sound of mewing  
cats filled the room  
with an agony of  
echoes in this paralysis.  
The light, too bright,  
made my eyes ache.  
Enough, I thought, just sleep,  
so I rested my sore paws.

LXXI

My neighbor spoke to me,  
a behemoth tom cat,  
strong, fierce, sturdy.  
His face was distorted,  
four times my size,  
red eyes, bloodied forehead,  
whiskers ripped right  
out from his head.  
I asked him to leave me be.  
"Don't you recognize me?"  
he begged. I stood  
and stepped closer,  
but then halted.

LXXII

How did you end up here,  
body of slashed flesh,  
coming to this?

"At last," he said.

"You have made it,  
survived  
your gambit."

His moan was from  
deep in him.

"I can't move,  
and pain  
devours me,  
my friend."



LXXIII

"Do you remember me?"

I asked, not believing he knew.

He grinned with gloomy eyes,

let out a long, sad breath.

"You took my place--

you were certain to do so."

He panted fast, closing

his mouth, cries around us

like bats screeching in caves.

"What did they do

to make you end up here?

What has happened to

you this year?"

LXXIV

"You wonder why I left you  
with the flood before us.

I became weak  
at the wrong time,  
knew massacre awaited,  
and could not  
watch it anymore.

I wanted to save your lives,  
but instead I ran. I'm tired  
of packs of cats who have tried  
to make me what I'm not.

So I did not intend  
to be their king again."

LXXV

His words  
were weak--  
fragile, former King  
who lacked  
his spirit now,  
simulacrum of himself,  
ghostly cat,  
deadened by fear.  
"I failed all of you,"  
he continued.  
"And I am shamed by my fall.  
I am lower here, yes,  
but feel free."

LXXVI

"What else happened to you?"

I begged him to tell me that too.

"Cats that panted

after my every move,

and I wanted to be alone,

but only shortly after I left,

with guilt I ran back to see

if you were all still there,

heard the screams

inside the woods where

I knew that I should be--

and yet ran off again,

no longer King."

LXXVII

"Freed from my reign,  
I followed you,  
keeping watch at a distance,  
even spreading the word  
that a new king was coming.  
That is why they mistook  
you for me."

The room listened,  
stared at us.

"I am no longer  
the King of Cats.  
The best kings leave  
when their time ends."

LXXVIII

Calm room of stares,  
then he was quiet  
as he waited for me  
to speak to them.  
Circling my cage,  
I paced with my head down  
in anxious fretting.  
Then I said:  
"You have been caged  
here, but this place  
will kill you soon."  
Gasps buzzed the room,  
whispering of doom.

LXXIX

I stopped to face him  
at his cage, but he was  
not moving anymore.

He had been dead  
before his death  
yet soon would  
die some more.

And when they came  
to his cage,  
opening the door  
we killed him even  
in his death, thinking  
he would still lead.

LXXX

The young girl  
emptied his cage,  
held his massive body  
as we watched.

But as she walked  
the stagnant aisles,  
the King of Cats  
flashed his  
jagged claws  
mangling her  
with his paws.

And so he leapt from her  
and ran to us.



LXXXI

Sly pretense, feigning death  
then taking her keys.

He came to my cage,  
opening mine first,  
then we freed our peers

who rushed  
from empty cages  
to the exit door.

The King of Cats could use  
the human keys to unlock it,  
and all gazed  
at him as the packs  
rushed by us.

LXXXII

Each one bowed  
to us both,  
having been  
here for so long,  
lives passed  
inside metal boxes  
locked inside bars.  
They were grateful  
to be free--  
and I watched them fill  
the streets but separate,  
not speaking to  
each other as it rained.

LXXXVIII

"They seem alone," I said.

He said it was true,

led me outside for a walk,

and we talked some more.

It was getting dark

in the quiet, sweet rain,

the drizzle almost a mist,

my leg still in the bandage.

Beside me the silent King

was considering something:

"Born as a prince,

you had been

my only kitten."

LXXXIV

"I shirked this too--  
until now.

I was there  
to watch you grow,  
but failed  
you many times.

I am beaten by  
my own lies,  
stupid fights  
with other cats,  
a squandered life.

But it was I who named you  
*Prince*, sweet boy."

LXXXV

He slowly bended  
his front legs  
on the ground  
and he asked me to wait  
as he laid himself down.

"It's late,"

he whispered,

"and I have to

tell you what I can  
before I feel worse."

That moment in jail,

he said, was his final surge.

"I prayed you would come to me."

LXXXVI

"Prince is my name?" I asked.

He assured me yes,  
as rain washed  
his long, long mane,  
soaking him.

"Do not leave  
your reign  
like I have done,  
please stay  
and help them,  
even when you stray  
from your path  
for selfish things."

LXXXVII

He closed his bloodshot eyes.  
"Don't worry about me, son."  
To the end I stayed with him,  
watched him perish calmly.  
I dug with my claws,  
making his grave, nudging  
his body into it, scraping  
back the moist dirt on top.  
I lay near his new grave,  
the rain coming more--  
couldn't leave until I stayed  
with him one last night.  
He'd have done the same.

LXXXVIII

My eyes  
opened to sun--  
I licked myself clean.  
I wondered  
what would be next,  
as I limped  
from the grave.  
Even when he  
was not there,  
he remained  
in my mind  
as I walked  
alone again.



LXXXIX

A few weeks passed,  
my bandages gone,  
the city behind me when  
I came back to my home.  
No one was left there.  
I didn't know how much  
time had passed.  
I was king of what?  
My stomach had long healed,  
my leg too. During my long way  
home, cats had recognized  
who I was, yet no one walked  
along with me.

XC

I decided to nap,  
what cats do best,  
and found a heap  
of colored  
autumn leaves,  
where I slumbered  
for days,  
it seemed.

A gust of  
cool wind woke  
me. I did a  
stretch of my back--  
lifted my head.

XCI

In a field.

she was there,  
coming closer to me?

Where had she been  
all this time?

How had she survived?

Her nose was soon  
touching mine  
before I could speak.

I began to lose  
my nerve and sobbed,  
body trembling, aching,  
surprised she was alive.

XCII

"You came back,"  
she said. "It was a long time."  
I stared at her.  
"I am right here,"  
she purred.  
I admitted  
I didn't know  
what to do.  
So she lay  
beside me,  
our bodies touching--  
told our stories  
from the beginning.

XCIII

"I wanted  
to survive  
for you,"  
said she.

"Now you're alive."

I nodded.

Couldn't talk.

Stood to take  
a little walk.

She followed

beside me,

and I could

feel her step closer.

XCIV

Over time  
our kittens  
grew and  
strange new cats  
happened  
to come  
and stay.  
They knew  
who I was  
and wanted to be  
near her and me,  
for she was Queen  
of Cats, you see.

XCV

Reluctantly,

I ruled

and did as my

father asked.

I wanted to flee often,

to roam untamed,

but remained

even when I was doubtful.

I needed just to look

at her to make me

come right back

and try to be better,

a better King of Cats.