

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.

LXXXIII

"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.