

# The Cat is Dead: A Poem in One Act

And

Infection     o o o     ooo

By

*Kathryn Shuff*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... I have no idea what Kathryn Shuff is writing about, but I just love how she expresses it. She submitted just four hours before this issue closed: Evincing instinctive inclinations of irritation, asperations of exasperation exacerbating. But wait, they abated, ebbed as I read, I felt myself melting. See if you agree, I give you 'The Cat is Dead: A Poem in One Act' and 'Infection' Until next time...(spacing is poet's own.) HS*

**The Cat is Dead: A Poem in One Act**  
**Kathryn Shuff**

**SCENE:** I sit with my mother[MOM],  
sipping coffee, biting into a gateau.

Gateau: a cake

rich with layers of mouse  
and cream. This one is whipped  
with caramel and hazelnuts,  
molded with the perfection  
of years of culinary school,

only to be smashed under  
the tiny fist of a six-month-old.  
Everyone's a critic when it comes to art.

**SCENE:** BILL sends a text,  
Letting me know he's on his way home.  
Text: a letter sent digitally that lacks postage  
and the physical joy of opening the mail.

"I'll make sure Zelda has food," BILL writes.  
BILL then exits left to get in his car and drive home  
to feed the cat and start supper.

**SCENE:** I text BILL back a picture of  
The fat cat from that morning, her belly  
splayed out shamelessly for all the world.  
Splayed: *adj.*, meaning "out and apart."  
Her gray stripes bulge with her girth.  
Horizontal stripes are a bad look for her.  
I tell MOM about the joys of pet ownership,  
and we commiserate over our love of felines.

**SCENE:** (*Flashback, two weeks prior*) I am  
In bed, feverish, crying, guilty,  
having snuck out of a teacher  
workshop early.

(The character of "I" often  
feels guilty about things she has no control over.)  
I hear purring as a lump arises on  
The bed in the crook of my knee. My hand rests  
Awkwardly against her paws. After additional crying,  
I fall asleep, finally at ease.

**SCENE:** (*present*) BILL arrives in the driveway. It is dark.  
In this scene, dark dictates both the time of day  
and the mood.

The carport is dark.  
I forgot to turn on the auto-sensors.

The cul-de-sac is dark.  
The street lights have been out for weeks.

The 4-Runner's headlights cast a low beam onto the splayed  
form of Zelda on a shelf in the garage.

**SCENE:** The baby is draining another 8-oz bottle.  
I drain my cold coffee and eat  
the last of my gateau.  
MOM says she'll have to go soon.

**SCENE:** BILL approaches Zelda,  
shaking uneasily.

Add beads of sweat for dramatic effect.

**SCENE:** MOM and I begin packing up.  
MOM is going to have dinner with a friend that night.

**SCENE:** A fly lands on Zelda.

**SCENE:** MOM gets another baby hug.

**SCENE:** BILL makes a phone call.

**SCENE:** I receive a phone call.  
The stage should be split.  
Half carport, half cafe,  
in a glowing blue light  
emanating from one cell phone  
connecting to the next.  
That sickly, blue light glow  
that holds I's attention,  
So that even when I want to look away,  
I can't.

## **Infection**

Heels scratch against  
1200 thread count sheets.

Like a sad adult opposite book.

Rough.  
Soft.

The scratch is magnified by  
A growing crack, spidering  
across the inside curve of  
Your left heel.

You felt the sting days ago,  
said nothing. Left untreated,  
it splinters around the edge,  
slowed by bandaids and creams.

But it expands, like a  
Crepe myrtle stump,  
A map of pain across your  
heel that Achilles wouldn't trade for.

The red drops on white sheets ignored,  
You slip on cushioned socks and Dr. Scholls,  
ignoring the crevices forming within you.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *Most of my poetry is inspired by life experiences. For “The Cat is Dead...”, my husband, Bill, did actually find our cat dead in the garage while I was blissfully having a cup of coffee with my mom and firstborn. It was a very surreal experience to have left the house knowing I had a cat and then to get a phone call and be told I no longer had one. I really loved writing the perverse dramatic irony of this poem, since the reader knows from the start what this poem is about, but “I” and “BILL” still have to go through the motions to get to the discovery of the dead cat.*

*“Infection” was inspired by my gross pregnant feet. I would love to say it’s more complicated than that, and to a certain extent, it is when you consider the sometimes unwanted or unexpected feelings that come with pregnancy. The initial idea came to me during a midnight feeding session with my newborn where I felt like I could feel my feet splitting open. It was painful and*

*frustrating, and in the dark, I could imagine the cracks splitting over my foot the way ice cracks in cartoons.*

*For me, writing poetry is a breath of fresh air. When I write, the initial idea comes quickly, and when it's finished, it's like an exhale on a crisp fall day. I like to get my first drafts done in one sitting, then come back to them at leisure to edit and refine.*

*I read a lot of what I consider "accessible poetry." Some of that comes from teaching 8th graders. I read to find poetry that's fun for me to teach and also fun for them to read and understand. I like annotating and mulling as much as the next person, but it is nice to be clued in as to what's going on in some way. Billy Collins and Ted Kooser are favorites of mine to read and teach, and I would definitely mark Collins as an influence on my work.*

*Some of my personal favorites outside of my classroom are Jimmy Santiago Baca and T.S. Eliot. I'm also a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow fan due to my mother waking me up for most of my childhood and adolescence by loudly reciting "A Psalm of Life," a tradition I look forward to inflicting upon my own children when they are older.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** A graphic designer turned middle school English teacher, when she's not studying for grad school, planning lessons, grading papers, writing poetry, researching on JSTOR, annotating novels, caring for her small children, shopping at Target, or using parallel structure, she can be found playing video games with her husband, who has worked steadfastly to support and maintain their combined sanity. Her work is slated to appear this year in the University of Louisiana Monroe's literary magazine, *The Helicon*, while her appearance in *Fleas on the Dog* marks her published debut.