



In, then out - A tribute to learning from the cat
Evander
Spring, 1996 - July 2, 2010

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Classical guitar at dinner time,
it seems there should be a fire -
a bit of fog,
but it has been near ninety.
I'm on the brink of
overcooking the mung beans,
talking back to the recipe,
which calls for a ridiculous
quantity of ghee.

I have a cat named Evander
with a nip in his ear.
He crosses the kitchen
to his dish,
and back again to sit at my feet.
He'd like me to do a bit more.
Everyone would.

11/4/97

A distant voice calls her dog.
Barnalby. Barn for short.
Out the window I see my cat's foot
on the roof's beam - and then
his head peaks over the edge.
He hesitates, waiting
for the ground to come near.
One. Two. Three
times he looks down,
then thunk, I hear him land
just as I turn away.
And in the distant silence,
(except for the whir of cars
on the highway),
Barnalby has come home.

1/22/99

I see my cat out hunting,
luckily, without his kill.
His wildness hangs on
despite the affectionate
burrowing in my lap.
He races through the house,
pouncing on his brother
just for the hell of it,
a ball of fur tumbling
across the carpet,
until my nerves are spent.
And then I notice
they have curled up
into a quotation mark
on the tapestry seat
of the rocking chair,
pretending they have
always been domesticated,
that house cats
is all they are.

2/3/99

I wish it could always
be this time of year.

The nesting oriole in the palm
pestering the cat on the railing below.

Bird songs fill the neighborhood.

Vasant means the joy of spring
in Sanskrit.

The potato bush feels it,
the poppies in bloom,
my new lemon grass just planted
and - pride of my heart -
gotu kola.

And, no doubt, the cat,
walking into the kitchen
with the rabbit
in his mouth.

5/23/99

I should have known
things had gone too far,
coming to tell you
the cat had an oriole
in his mouth.

I knew it when I heard you
stamp your foot at him.
He dropped the bird
and it flew, desperate,
back into its life.

Being squeamish,
I've made you responsible
to clean up the killing,
one of the few household chores
you will claim.

The cat has lurked beneath
the palm for weeks. Finally,
the orioles moved their nest
to a higher frond.

I could see it was a male
when he flew away,
with a certainty of how
to save his life
that I have lost.

7/6/99

The cats are grooming,
one of them on the sofa,
the other in a sunny spot
on the floor.

I hear their slobbery noises,
see the fur flying.

A little head scratching,
tongue between paws.

When they are finished
I will sweep the cat hair up,
roll the lint remover over the sofa.

Later, I'll rub my body down
with lavender oil,
between my fingers, my toes,
maybe a little head scratching,
let the fur fly.

11/11/99

Hard to have morning serenity
with other life forms about the place.
The cat licks his paws after
devouring a gopher outside the door.
Bits and parts left on the mat.
Other people praise this killing,
a zero tolerance for anything
that undermines their real estate.
Our yard is built on the lacy
remains where gophers have been.
One day it will collapse, the house
crumbling down to who knows where.
They say the small things rule the earth.
Gophers are mocking the folly of my life
with its shaky foundation,
an over-priced mortgage on a house
with too many things I don't know how
to operate.
The gopher's blood dries on the deck,
it does nothing to make me feel
more secure.

4/3/00

It's drizzling and the errant
cat wants back in,
the one who leaves home
for weeks at a time.

I never know when he goes out
if he'll ever be back.

But here he is, bathing on the sofa,
your father's birthday early in May.

The bougainvillea at the edge
of the deck has finally bloomed,
and the Texas privet beneath
the bedroom window.

I hear the faint cry of a small animal
and look out to see our other cat
chasing a rabbit, the back legs
of last night's prey in the driveway
will probably keep me home all day.

5/8/00

This morning we brought Alexander
home to bury him beneath the oaks.
After first digging him up where
the neighbor had buried him
three days before.
You said we would never know
if it was him or not.
I had thought digging him up
would tell. But it did not.
I covered him over in the hole
you had dug, made a monument
with pieces of lake driftwood,
securing it with stones from the path.
We added an egret feather,
a bunch of faded caspia.
The prodigal cat who ate all over
the neighborhood, bowls of milk
put out to his demanding meow,
rabbits that were easy picking
where they came to munch
the horse's hay.
I kept thinking he would yet come back,

and before we finished breakfast
he had.

8/1/00

My theory is that Alexander's
self-esteem requires that he roam.
Something I can well comprehend.
At home he is docile, except
for his persistent demand for love.
His brother has always been the
alpha cat, the hunter.

Al wandered and when he came home
a week later he had learned
to be annoyingly vociferous.
Aggressively arranging
your hand on his head to pet him.
I worried that he had been abused somewhere,
locked up against his will,
as he was caged in his youth
with a broken leg.
He lagged behind after that,
uncertain of his place in the scheme
of things, lacking confidence.

Down the road in the neighbor's yard,

he is a hunter extraordinaire,
fearless and vocal, a different cat
altogether.

I have stopped begrudging him
his need for that.

8/3/00

I have no patience
for cats on the bed,
vibrating it as they bathe,
muddy paws on the white duvet.
They rattle and shake, then settle
in to the prime real estate
where you have been homesteading
warmth.

And we know who wins.
A human never wins against a cat,
we aren't dogged enough.
Which is why I lock the cat
out of the bedroom at night,
and if I hear him meowing
at the door at 2 a.m.,
I pull the covers up tight
and fight the guilt
until I win.

11/7/00

Evander rolls over
and stretches his feet
up in the air.

I have disturbed
his dream.

It's what we all
do to each other.

Cats are better
than most
at preventing it.

1/28/01

Opening the kitchen window
I startle the cat, looking sheepish
with a gopher in his mouth,
its feet kicking in hopes of freedom,
dirt and oak leaves stuck in its fur.
The cat looks into my eyes,
I attribute a sense of guilt
to the glance,
an adolescent sort of guilt,
no remorse over the act,
but sorry to have been
caught.

3/19/02

Cat says what chance
to get a bird
when you can't even fly,
what chance have I?
Jealous of the hawk
flying from the oak,
feathers falling -
practically on his head,
the cat's that is,
where he sits in the dirt
driveway. Nonplused,
if ever anyone was.
Nonplused.

6/9/03

Rain.

Cat is crazier than usual.

I'm too tired to be amused.

Too tired for a lot of things,
the door repairman who is due,
construction that is pending,
the chaos my home has become.

Too tired for late December,
the year's journals
marked with post-its,
all the same old patterns
emerging.

A year that was to be
a success, a litany
of disappointments instead.

Cut through with petty
disasters and battles
with the insurance company.

This week the tsunami in Indonesia,
bodies line the beach
on orange plastic.

Uncovered.

Waiting to be claimed.

No privacy for their
death.

A necessary insult,
but disturbing to observe.

I dare not complain
about my paltry
little problems,
dare not exhibit
such poor taste.

12/29/04

We awake early allowing me
to meditate at dawn, windows open
so I can hear the birds.

Grebes on the lake,
crows in the neighbor's yard.

The cat pushes the door open,
leaving it ajar.

I want to train him to close it,
but what are my odds?

He has an extra claw
and can sometimes turn knobs.

I am repeatedly started by his entries.

One night I called the cops when I was alone
and he pushed against the living room door.

I pushed back, my heart racing,
not knowing what else to do.

Later I felt foolish, of course,
as two men searched the perimeter
of the house,

before we realized it was the cat.

I'm old enough now for such mistakes
to be tolerated.

It's one of the few advantages of age.

3/12/05

The cat comes in and
leaves again, reluctantly.
My foot against his butt,
I am eager to close the door
on the chilly morning.
He is undecided as to a plan,
weighing his food bowl
against wild life in the yard,
no doubt.
It's good to have options,
I'll agree.
And tolerate the draft
as long as I can,
which is not enough
for him.

1/8/06

He says all poems are about time,
I have no answer for this, as usual.
It doesn't seem true right off.
What about poems about the cat?
Of course, cats are the master
of time, long time.
The kind of time meditation teaches.
I tried to write about time once,
I forget now what I wanted to say.
It's never that I know something
to tell,
but that I'm trying to find out.
I have the notes somewhere,
with all the other notes
I thought I didn't have time
to finish.

6/15/06

6:43 a.m., the cat meows
and rubs his head against my hand,
pushing the pen from the paper.

Love or food,
I'm never sure of his request,
until I hear him crunching quietly
over his bowl.

Outside the open door
the crows are just as demanding.
Who knows what they want.

8/10/06

The cat scratches on the white rug,
the one I put down when it rained
to keep his muddy tracks
off the floor.

He's turned it into a luxury,
a cat specialty it seems -
to luxuriate.

Luxuriate in the sun's warmth
whenever they can find it.

Luxuriate in licking the food
they've just eaten
from their lips.

Luxuriate in scratching,
dust filtering down
on the clean floors.

Luxuriate in bathing,
wiping the face
with a paw.

Luxuriate in a favorite spot,
a day-long nap when it rains.

Luxuriate in being a cat,
in being alive.

In being.

2/4/07

I watch the cat drinking
from the flower pot tray,
filled to the rim with rain water.

He bores as quickly with that
as all his pursuits -
or merely satisfies his thirst.

Women used to collect rain water
to shampoo their hair.

Do they still do that?

I spent the night once
with a girl from school,
whose beauty trick was to soap the face,
then go outside in the crisp morning
air for it to dry.

Three daughters, the older one a friend
of my sister's named Barbara,
lined up on the back porch,
giggling, expectant.

2/13/07

Cat.

Husband.

Monday morning trash.

Comic strips. Oatmeal.

I try to have my tea and write.

Cat fusses, wants in, then out.

Husband has comics to share.

I put on oatmeal to cook.

Take out the last of the recycling.

Thin the withered blooms

from the bouquet,

and clip the ends of what remains.

Checking galvanized vases

to see which one leaks.

Gathering waste baskets to empty.

Monday morning trash.

Husband.

Cat.

2/26/07

The cat sits outside
the French door,
waiting.

In the mean time,
he bathes.

Not one to be accused
of failing to use
time wisely.

3/25/07

After the fires:

Evander lounges on the new settee
which, of course, is not ours.

I take photos to document
that life is fine.

Is it?

Function has not returned.

But this morning I am able to sit,
the new pillow that's too plump
for sleep making the landlord's chair
almost comfortable.

Sunday morning. I sip my tea,
you rattle your paper,
the cat settles in.

11/18/07

Evander surveys life in the new house
from his private place behind
the Christmas tree,
cornered by windows.

Who knows if it's an especially good
spot because of shelter and view,
or just because it's new.

But he has quite a bit to say about it,
talking to the birds which are there -
at least in his mind.

12/19/07

The church bells chime, 7 a.m.

You read the Sunday paper
on the porch.

I tell you that we can tell by the cat,
and how we treat the cat,
how things are.

All winter long we kept him inside,
thinking perhaps, that's how
his life would be from now on.

Sleeping on this cushion
or that,

rousing at mid-day to stare
at a bird through glass.

But his freedom has returned.

He howls to go out, and
remembers where he lives
to come back.

Waiting on the roof at the back door
if he has gone out the front.

I can't see him and know
as I could at the old house.

He is patient as he trains me.

You can't have everything in your life change
and not have a few things be different,
I think, standing at the sink.
The cat seems to know that.

4/13/08

Eight birds in the peach tree
until the cat gets one,
and then they flee.

It's frustrating that the birds never
return to the same fruit twice.

I've had to pick too early,
in order to salvage any.

It seems all wrong that fruit ripens
in summer,
when it's too hot to can or bake.

I remember my mother sweating over jam,
I tried it once and failed.

I make freezer jam instead,
it has a prettier color
though it takes a lot of sugar.

I have a policy against baking,
a personal rule.

But here I am breaking my rules,
as usual. My pies do not turn out
that great, which does nothing
to slow our consumption.

Today I will harvest again,

I like that part.
Stainless bowls in the grass,
so lovely I stop to photograph them.
Picking. Eating.
That's all I need.
The waiting cat beneath the tree
agrees.

7/19/08

932 photos, you tell me,
in the camera since the fire,
starting at the Disaster Center.
I look at them all.
A brief history of our life,
seeing it re-grow,
like the branch of a tree.
A man named Art at Red Cross,
telling me to let you talk,
not realizing you won't.
The burned-out lot,
piles of rusted appliances,
file cabinets, and pans.

Ceramic plates
that looked whole,
but crumbled
to your touch.
Like items clustered
in piles, as though
it mattered, as though
order could be imposed
on what is now termed
debris. Which was a
few days ago your life.

Photos of this house when
we first came, the furniture
the landlord left, because
as she put it,
"You have nothing."
You and the cat on
the very green settee.
Fire kitty recovering
from his burns,
claiming every object
that came in as his own.

The wicker desk, he
liked to hide behind,
the \$3 wicker chaise.
Sofa, ottoman, rocker.
All his.

The photos don't tell
everything, of course.
Of how things grew up,
a bed from L.L. Bean,
nightstands too.
Certainly, not
the effort it took.
Time elapsed, it
looks fast - it was
- and easy - relatively,
still, not so much.
Now the house is full,
though some categories
remain undeveloped,
like books and music.
And daily rhythm,
the way I used

to live my life,
an oil massage
before my shower.

These days I usually bathe
and skip the massage,
fearing clogged drains,
among other things.

4/17/09

A week after Evander dies
I sweep the last of his fur
from the plank floors.
Dark, difficult floors that
are a challenge to keep clean,
with or without a cat.

Death keeps company
with our worst memories,
the way he crawled behind
the toilet, the sink.
Sticking his head beneath
the baker's rack and finally,
resting in front of the screen door,
as though waiting to leave.

Until we fell asleep,
giving him peace,
you on the kitchen floor a few feet
from where he lay,
me in the next room on the couch.

An hour later, 1:20 a.m.,

and then we wrapped him
in his favorite green towel
that matched his eyes.

In the morning we buried him
in the wild corner of the yard,
outside the window that's over my desk,
where the bird bath sits,
the only thing we brought
from the house that burned,
except Evander.

7/10/10