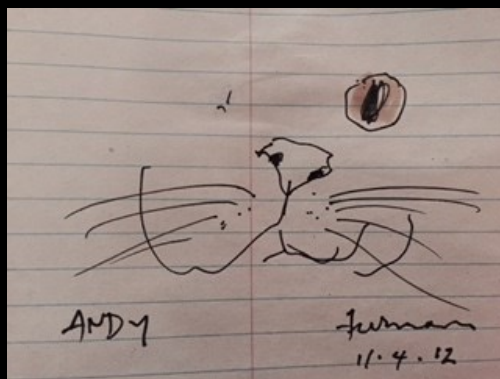


# ANDY



GREGORY J. FURMAN

## ANDY

His boogey men: vacuum cleaners, garbage trucks, the sound of aluminum foil  
new-torn from the roll.

In the end, the real boogey man,  
so I mistakenly thought,  
was his love of dried hydrangea flowers  
that were his doing in of him.

Like those pastel-colored (pale-pink, lime, lemon,  
orange or tangerine) shrimp-flavored , deep-fried, puffy, (air-inflated ?) bar  
snacks  
served in fancy hotels in Tokyo. Or so, anthropomorphizing, I imagined they  
tasted  
to him.

In his ardor for the dried blossoms,  
in the heat of his gourmand joy,  
I thought he gobbled a twig made sharp  
as he severed it with his incisors,  
lodged first in the back of his throat  
then with his every yacking try to expel it, each futile heave driving it further  
down,  
it riding down his throat deeper and deeper.

That was my theory as I woke to the sounds  
of his trying to vomit out the punishing invader. Three a.m. a week before  
Christmas eve.  
So loud and so beyond any hair ball retching the sound of him retching pulled me  
from deepest sleep to a darker dread.

Thinking, still half-awake,  
this thing would make him soon dead, I feared for him. Slowly past the esopha-  
gus  
into the intestine  
the sharp thing perforating many times down,  
causing the stomach acids to poison his blood,  
his bleeding system leaving him already dull-eyed, listless. It was his love of dry  
hydrangea flowers, I thought,  
that was his real boogey man.

Three a.m. Three a.m. I still relive it.  
Like an evil, reoccurring dream.  
From my sleep I heard what for him was the last  
of a series of heaves that left him shaking  
his palpitating chest cavity exhausted.  
No hairball-retch deeper, louder, more pathetic.  
I woke with this vision of him dead,  
went to the bathroom, saw him in the hall. There,

But his chest rising and falling breath by breath said, "Alive." I lifted his paw.  
He had huge paws even as a kitten.  
No resistance at all, falling back pressed,  
distressed with a heavy, soft thump to the floor.

Whatever IT was, the spell of it  
had ripped some core and vital thing out of him.  
His usual searchlight-yellow eyes mere slits.  
Oddly, exhausted, not seeming to be in pain.  
Or, perhaps, just quietly enduring, accepting the pain like one  
drained by a great physical stress -  
a marathon or extremely hard and sapping toil,

a slave whipped, drained from hard and unjust labor. I petted him. What normal-  
ly  
would have evoked  
a soft, rumble purr was a timid wheeze.  
Droopily he struggled to his feet. Listlessly, slowly he followed me into the bed-  
room

where he drank like a creature possessed  
from a porcelain bowl of fresh water.  
A desperate survivor of a desert crossing.  
Massive gulps. Each as vital as his every next breath. Deep draughts. Deeply  
lapping.  
Seeing him drink

I falsely hoped, "Food poisoning from a can of cat food that was off. It will  
pass.  
First thing, well get him to the vets.  
They'll bring him back."

Knowing sleep was out I got back into bed.  
He finished drinking. Clawed up to join me.  
Strong enough for that. Rested his cabbage head  
on my shoulder, heart side, as he would many early mornings. This time,  
though,  
something in him limp, listless,  
failing, feeling final. In denial, I was playing make-believe, repeating a mantra-  
like  
series of thoughts, prayers even,  
that everything was going to be all right.  
Everything was going to be fine.  
The vet would give him something. He'd be fine.

But while thinking this, I knew otherwise.  
Not with the kind of knowing that you can say,  
even to your self, you know. Not with kind of knowing that makes you get up,  
get dressed drive breakneck at 3:30 a.m. 80 mph

## LOOKING BACK I

The first sight of this starving black kitten led to love. He was a silhouette, a palm-in-the-hand-full, all night-black, negative space with blazing gold-to-copper, moon-yellow eyes, always, as if by some good fate, great destiny; round lasers beaming out from his dark body - as a flashlight from deep within a stack of cordwood in the woodshed or from a stone wall at dusk or dawn at the far end of the lawn or from the tall field grass late at night peering through in the crescent moon light. He was eyes, all eyes,

only eyes.

Beacons or headlights and he, the shy owner of them. If you really looked hard, even

through binoculars, you would see the cutout of the scrawniest aspiration of a cat you could imagine. Take a Minton (circa 1798) china bone white saucer, put him on it and he had room for a saucer mate. He was even smaller than he appeared. An illusion created by a great deal of hair. Somewhere, way back when, there was a happy mingling of Persian, Angora or Maine Coon ancestry. If he was a pound and a quarter, which he was at eight weeks, shaved he would have lost a quarter pound. The cat part, the skin and bones part, came to a pound soaking wet. The fur part wet one fourth of him.

His chest looked like it had been lightly dusted with cinnamon and his belly and rump and the underside of his tail like he'd sat in a burned out campfire, all ash gray. He was mostly black. But "black" doesn't really do his pallet of blacks justice. He was a blend of coal, ebony black, dark mahogany and chestnut just before it goes to dark-stained oak, pitch, tar or deepest night.

This had the mystifying effect of making him mostly invisible day or night. He was totally un-photogenic, near impossible to capture.

Looking at a photo of him, you had to already know it was a cat because he was a phantom, as a kitten all eyes, skin and bones. All negative.

Someone had to say to you, "What do you think of that cat?"

And then you would say, "Oh, yes, it's a cat."

No matter the backdrop, every photo revealed a tiny black silhouette and this blazing dominance of two transcendent, burning eyes.

Even as a starveling, when it was questionable as to whether he and his bony band of refugees had been weaned, he had, despite his lack of size, a frame that promised, with proper care and grub, the makings of a massive cat.

His paws as a kitten large as many full-grown cats'.

Panther-like, his nose was black as a tiny, patent leather Chanel alligator purse. In the very brightest of lights it was impossible to discern even the hint of an expression, his face being the closest to true black. His aura

was not a tiny cat's, but a tiny, baby gorilla's. He moved with that same slow sweetness of gorillas in the mist in those Jane Goodall documentaries.

Beneath his coat of thick angora fur, his skin hung on his scrawny frame like a bad suit on a once-large man gone suddenly sick and thin. His lower lip on his right side was nearly hairless giving his face a one-sided look. He seemed to be just slightly smirking, not arrogantly, just humbly, bullied by but ok with life's absurdities, or, as if he was always amazed at whatever was occurring around him, his mouth comically mouthing a silent,

“Oh, OK. Oh, OK.”

Reading his epic eyes was another story. Their degree of dilation was the true clue to what he might be feeling. Wider for relaxed. Narrow and harder for scared or scrutinizing. He was by nature so calm that his placidity might be mistaken for stupor, or worse,

a mild, pre-catatonic state. He was mainly unperturbed, unflappable, rightly slow to get too worked up about anything. but also quietly undaunted and intensely curious.

Of the original four he was the bravest, the most able to trust, the most interested in and the least threatened by anything new. He was always the leader, always the first. When they migrated from the open fields to an abandoned woodchuck den to the nooks and crannies an old stone wall, he was the one who lead them. He was the one to stand watch; courageous, even as a kitten, the last to take cover.

He was the first to rush to food or to respond to a friendly call. He dominated the food plate. The other two – the fourth, sadly, never returning – deferred to him and quietly waited until he began to eat, then joined him before it was all gone. He was such a fast eater that the best comparison for his speed and efficiency of ingestion was a midget industrial vacuum cleaner, the kind that lifts bowling balls sucks up lug nuts like dust bunnies.

His enthusiasm for food was limitless. There was nothing from kitty kibble to chicken soup gristle that he would reject.

## **LOOKING BACK II**

How we met: As a kitten he was leading a motley crew of four lollygaggers out of the wilderness to our field, to us. A gray and white one, two with white-bibs, white socks, rugby-striped legs, and, as the Irish say, 'HIMSELF.' Andy. Hard to say who was most startled. When they saw me, like marines on Iwo Jima next to a live grenade, seeing me, they exploded, scattered instantly into the tall grass.

Later that day they regrouped. All but one. The gray and white one - never to be seen again. Lead by Andy, they took up residence in an abandoned woodchuck den at the base of an old maple not far from our house and three barns. Two female tabbies and Andy. Their heads popping up from the den at dawn and dusk like prairie dogs. They were beyond shy and cautious. We'd leave cat food at the den entrance and come back to find the ground licked clean looking like a well-polished riding boot. We kept feeding them.

When they outgrew the den, they moved to a cave-like space in the stone wall out back near what was once a chicken coop behind which ran a small stream within sight of our house. Half a football field away. When they outgrew the crevices in the stone wall, they found shelter in to our woodshed, part of an old hayloft and tractor barn, no more than thirty feet from our screened porch and our kitchen where we could watch their comings and goings from our window. There they'd ball up for warmth against the early spring

cold in the spaces between the cut wood. At first light he'd be the first out to take kibble or canned food at edge of shed.

He was the first to be coaxed onto our screened porch. We'd leave the door to the vestibule open and the door to the porch open and move his food deeper into the porch every day. Finally, knowing the doors were open, escape assured, he'd eat, then nap, then sleep on the porch, then

let us touch him. Then, at last, all doors closed, he moved in, a resident.

Much more timid, the other two kittens stayed in the woodshed only coming out to eat and drink. at dusk or dawn when the light was low and they less visible

Tutu and her never-named sister, were twins: snow white chests, paws white as ballet slippers, long snake-like tails, a daintiness, a quick-to-scare wariness that bordered on paranoia about anything new, unknown or unfamiliar, extreme timidity and faces, especially in the early weeks when their bodies had not yet caught up with their heads. They were bat-like or lemur-like. They had huge and comical ears. Cat Dumbos. They looked like they could fly with their ears. Tutu's ears were the closest to "normal." As if in compensation for her ears, she had an elegant Egyptian profile like those the ancient Egyptians worshipped like those carved life-size in basalt or in the hieroglyphs in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian wing.

Tutu was an exotic beauty. There was something Bengal, Burmese, Siamese, Abyssinian about her. She was part tabby of a rich mahogany brown-to-black, stripes of rusts and calico-orange on her flanks, tips of each paw snow white, and chest like a nun's bib.

Her front legs were striped brown, mahogany, tan, orderly as stripes on a rugby shirt. Her tail was banded like a Madagascar bandicoot with a tuft at the base. Her belly cloud white.

She had a pretty and intelligent face. She was “an easy read.” Her expressions were as legible as the subtitles in foreign films. A strange sound and her subtitle face said. “Very worried.”

Her eyes against her fur coat were perfectly matched as if planned by some sophisticated Parisian couturier. They were the most exquisite shade of foam green. A gemologist might say, “Opaline.”

Everything about her was quick and nimble and feisty. Her expressions precisely calibrated to what was going on around her. Her ears were radar dishes collecting and deciphering a hostile world. When sorting out two conflicting, possibility threatening sounds at the same time, particularly comic. Then one ear would go back so far it looked like it might leave her head; the other doing the same but in the opposite direction. She’d get this funny look on her face, a cross between puzzled and short-circuited, as if stymied by the effort of sorting out which sound posed the greater threat to life and limb. In that moment of not knowing she’d look paralyzed, flummoxed, stunned, even goofy, the

caption of her face reading, “Now what?”

For a while Tutu and her sister, would sit together at the top of the wood pile in the woodshed. Fifteen or twenty feet was their threshold. Get any closer and they’d disappear like two miniature woodchucks into the labyrinth of nooks and crannies created by the random stacking of four rows of split and cut cord wood, chest high on a tall man, in the shed. A week after they had migrated to the woodshed for safety, Tutu’s sister broke her right leg just above the paw. It looked as if she had another joint so severe was the break

We knew she was badly injured. The woodpile her nemesis. She must have dislodged a heavy piece of cordwood which broke her leg. She held the injured limb up, limped about, the paw dangling down pathetically. She made a brave effort to keep on. But her fear of being captured by alien beings - us - was greater than her will to survive. Every time we tried to coax her out, however gently, she’d run back into what she thought was home and sanctuary that had, in fact, betrayed her. Then she disappeared.

Days later one of the lawn guys came to the door to tell us they had found a kitten’s stiff, emaciated body in the grass. A raging infection killed her.

With the death of her sister, Tutu went from alert to hyper-alert, from already scared to paranoid scared, much more dependent on Andy, even more wary of everything. Now more than ever she was dependent on him. The minute he was out of sight investigating a cricket or exploring, she would become so visibly distraught that her piercing mews could be heard inside the house even with the doors and windows shut.

With Andy inside, so alone was she that she put her fear aside, held vigil for him outside the screened porch when the light was low early and late in the day. There, inconsolable, she would cry for him. We’d leave both doors open for her and place food just inside

each, but she was too frightened to come inside. If we tried to approach her, she'd flee, sprint like a creature possessed for the wood shed. A sanctuary of dubious safety given the fate of her littermate.

We'd let Andy out to see her. Then it was old home week. A lick and head bumping festival of great and frenzied joy. Like long lost friends, they'd sprint, chase, leap and scamper themselves to exhaustion. And, tired out, lie side by side in the grass and sleep in the warm sun together.

At the end of each visitation it was clear that Andy had come to understand the comforts of home, good food and human company. No persuasion needed.

Weeks went by. Tutu outside still. Andy inside. And then it was like someone turned the 'I'm terrified' switch off in Tutu's timid cat brain.

One fine day, there she was – to our astonishment - on the recliner sleeping snug against Andy. After that she feared the outside more than she did being in. Tutu, named after her

graceful, very feminine, ballerina-like daintiness in her demeanor and movement, joined us.

Toward summer's end Andy suddenly couldn't hold his food down. The vet said it was a blockage, a genetic deformation of the esophagus that manifests as some cats grow. The vet said we should put him down. We refused. Time and Andy proved us right. Whatever it was, the condition went away. Or he outgrew it.

After this there was no stopping him. Days, months, years flew by. He came into his own as a lion-pawed, cabbage-headed giant. The ailment did leave one scar. It affected his voice. He'd open his mouth to meow. Pause. Nothing would come out. Then the smallest, somewhat pathetic sound approximating in range and tone something between a peep and a squeak; the very best he could muster. Comical because the sound was so disproportionate to his size. Not unlike being in the presence of Mike Tyson. Then hearing him speak.

Only when he was going to the vets or preface to ridding himself of a hairball would Andy muster some volume. Then he'd open his mouth, lion like, great ivory canines, curled tongue pink as a peony and out would explode this plaintive, mournful belly yowl as if there was something deep inside him clawing its way out without the benefit to him of anesthetic.

Andy was dog-like. Most un-cat-like, he'd fetch and return until exhausted. He was particularly fond of little, tightly-rolled aluminum foil balls or slick magazine paper balls (never newspaper stock).



When Wanda and I were at either end of our kitchen table, he'd announce his entrance with his trademark squeak; do what we called the 'shaky tail.' We thought this was a sign of happy excitement. Then jump up on the table and visit Wanda. Then visit me. Then visit Wanda. Then jump down. Roll around like a black-robed Pulcinello. Clown rolling for our amusement, we were sure. Then jump up again. This time in his return visit repeating the same game with a funny nuance. He'd flip upside down and look at us upside down.

When Wanda got up to make a coffee or some toast, he'd immediately commandeer her chair and refuse to budge (the dead-weight technique) so that most times she'd wind up sharing her chair. He always took the part of the chair closest to the window where he'd watch the birds and the squirrels at the birdfeeder or the wind in the trees or falling rain or snow.

Andy was fascinated by all bathroom doings and when you were in the bathroom you'd hear the soft thump of his big paws coming to visit and savor the exotic olfactory goings on.

### **REALITY**

We were both drifting in the early morning light.

Andy isn't dying, spoke HOPE.

Counter to fearful me and my dull 'knowing.'

Petting him, his wheeze gave rise in me not action

but some powerful paralyzing waiting and hoping, fueled by unjust sadness and

not knowing. And what.... The way one feels when a loved one is going to die

and there's nothing you can do, nothing to be done

but hope that the worse will not come.

But knowing it will.

He seemed relaxed. If not asleep, not in pain. In the morning, to the vets, the vets, the vets. I watched the dark outside grow lighter in the cold December room. Restless, dreaming I saw him gathering strength.

My hopeful dreaming woke me but he woke first. Yacking.

No way to sleep. Showered. Brewed coffee.

He followed me downstairs. Then to office.

No choking now. No hacking. No retching. No obvious pain. Would take no

food. Drank again with a vengeance.

I hoped his thirst and drinking were good signs.

Forgot I had to be on the early train for the city.

The car picking me up at 7.a.m.

Meetings scheduled all day back to back.

No cancellations possible. Left Wanda a note.

“Andy’s really sick. Serious. Needs vet soonest.  
Love. Me.”

Andy, dog-like, my premonitions aside, slowly followed me upstairs to my office, plopped down at my feet and facing me sitting at the computer, kept looking, did not sleep, kept me company

‘till the car arrived.

Wanda was at the vets by 10 a.m. Vet said he was dehydrated. They would keep him hydrated, give him antibiotics and, when he stabilized, take x-rays. Turns out he didn’t perk up x-rays taken anyway.

That day was a blur that meant nothing.

All I could think about was Andy.

Nothing to do. Nothing to be done. Worry. Wait.

Late that afternoon Wanda called to say that the x-rays showed something lodged in his upper intestinal track and that he would need an operation. They had to be sure he was strong enough for surgery.

Next morning for me was all meetings, at every break checking voice and emails. Early afternoon in a taxi on my way uptown, I saw Wanda called. Called her back, missed her, left message, called back and finally connected. SILENCE. I knew, even as we were on the silent line, that he was gone. Wanda’s silence confirmed it. ‘He’s gone, isn’t he,’ I said. She couldn’t speak. Then, “Yes. The obstruction.”

Not surprised. But still shocked and, strangely, had even foreseen it. Stricken, I believe Andy knew too. That his staying with me as the dawn broke and near me in my office was his mute goodbye. Simply eloquent, knowing in some animal way that he was going back

Home to that place we all come from never to return.

I loved that cat. Andy. Andy. That child’s voice in all of us before we come to know our mother and father and we will die, are mortal, can die, will die. That child’s voice saying, “Please, no! Mommy! Daddy!” That child’s voice in me was the voice I was hearing.

It knocked the wind out of me. Deprived me of air. Like being kicked hard in the chest. Heart pierced by a javelin of grief. Thinking how strange, the power of it, knowing he’s just a cat. Thinking, in the scheme of things, he’s insignificant.

Next to nothing even. Yet understanding that grief can kill.

We figured him for twelve years old when he died. Quietly, before the operation was needed, the vets said. Early morning the day after Wanda brought him in.

I wanted to see him one last time.

They put him in in a plastic bag which was then wrapped in a white towel, then in a long Fedex box, the kind that might contain long-stemmed roses. Unwrapped and stretched out he looked like he just decided to take a nap in a Fedex box. He was freezer cold, his mouth oddly askew, one part of his left paw shaved. Still, it was still somehow Andy.

Petting him was like petting a cold fur throw covering a taxidermist's plaster cast of what Andy used to be.

Seeing him, eyes shut, still cold from the freezer where he had been kept, reminded me of Julie, my mother's cockatiel, who we buried at the base of our old pear tree which blossomed white every spring out front of our country home

Julie died one Thanksgiving day in my hands. Cockatiels' beaks need to be trimmed. Hers was threatening to pierce her chest and prevent her from eating. The vet said it was just like clipping a cat's claws as long as you don't get too close to the part that shows the blood line

which was easy to see just past the curve of her beak.

I had her in my hand ready for what the vets said should be routine. She shuddered.

Her head fell back and she was gone. My mother laughed. Actually laughed! To this day I can't understand her laughing. Her inability to comprehend love of and passion for animals. For her, love was reserved for humans only.

That was that. For her, overly sentimental attachment to pets was spoiled, self-indulgent, eccentric, inappropriate, silly.

Wanda and I talked about the merits of showing Andy's body to Tutu, Tippy and Squeaky. Two friends, great lovers of animals, had different views. One said elephants morn their dead So why not cats. Another told the story of two golden retrievers whose owners, after the male died, decided to show the female his body. Next day the female died. No medical cause. Grief.

Before taking Andy back to the vets we kept him on the screened porch overnight. As soon as we put him outside, our three cats came out, surprisingly together, sniffed the air, looked at birds and squirrels by the bird feeder, went to litter box, back inside, ignored Andy completely. And, twice more. Once that evening. Once in next morning.

No reaction. Only time I've ever seen cats not intrigued by contents of a box. As if nothing was there.

In the days that followed our cats didn't behave differently No more or less  
yowling at night. No searching hidden corners. No skipping of meals  
or losing sleep. What did I expect? Animal grief?

So Andy had his final sleep over. Then back to the vets for cremation (\$192). I  
wondered if they guarantee it's your cat's ashes you get back. (They do.) But  
how could you prove it? I had this vision, before we decided on cremation, of  
digging his grave under the old pear tree next to Julie's grave with our three cats  
watching to the chorus of local chickadees, jays, wrens, white-throated sparrow,  
crows and juncos all bearing winged witness to the proceedings.

After Andy died, it would hit me. In exactly the same way, days and years later,  
remembering my father (62) and mother (89), it still hits me. Manifest as a hard  
clutch in the chest, inability to breathe, inability to weep. Inability to block tears  
in private or public. Surprised at the unpredictable force and uncontrollable big-  
wave nature of it.

Word chains: *imprisoned, implacable, walled-in, smothered, in tomb, cruel,*  
*blocked, paralyzed, enraged, mystified, suffocating, hurt bad, trapped.* Pointing  
to what? Another form of life? Eternal peace? Oblivion?

How not to look for some consolation, then?

From Coleridge's *Intimations of Mortality*:

Then sing, ye birds, sing, sing a joyous song! And let the young lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound

We in thought will join your throng

Ye that pipe and ye that play,

Ye that through your hearts today

Feel the gladness of the May!

What though the radiance which was once so bright Be now forever taken from  
my sight,

Though nothing can bring back the hour

Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;

We will grieve not, rather find

Strength in what remains behind;

In the primal sympathy

Which having been must ever be;

In the soothing thoughts that spring

Out of human suffering;

In the faith that looks through death,

In the years that bring the philosophic mind.

And O ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves, Forebode not any severing of  
our loves!

Yet in my heart of hearts, I feel your might;  
I only have relinquished one delight

To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
I love the brooks which down their channels fret, Even more than when I  
tripped lightly as they; The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
Is lovely yet;  
The clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober coloring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality; Another race hath been, and other  
palms are won. Thanks to the human heart by which we live, Thanks to its ten-  
derness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too  
deep for tears.

**OR**

In a more challenging and contemporary vein. Damien Hirst and his *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991)*

His \$12 million tiger shark in vitrine preserved in formaldehyde.

**OR**

Philip Larkin's *Aubade*

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night. Waking at four to soundless dark, I  
stare. In time the curtain-edges will grow light. Till then I see what's really al-  
ways there: Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, Making all thought im-  
possible but how And where and when I shall myself die. Arid interrogation:  
yet the dread

Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse —The good not done, the love not  
given, time Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb

Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never; But at the total emptiness for  
ever,

The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here, Not to be anywhere,

And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid No trick dispels. Religion used to try, That  
vast moth-eaten musical brocade Created to pretend we never die,

And specious stuff that says *No rational being Can fear a thing it will not feel,*  
not seeing  
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound, No touch or taste or smell, nothing  
to think with, Nothing to love or link with,

The anesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will, And realization of it rages out

In furnace-fear when we are caught without People or drink. Courage is no good:

It means not scaring others. Being brave Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape. It stands plain as a wardrobe,  
what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape, Yet can't accept. One side  
will have to go. Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring In locked-up  
offices, and all the uncaring

Intricate rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay, with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

**OR**

Yeats's *The Wheel*

Through winter-time we call on spring, And through the spring on summer  
call, And when abounding hedges ring Declare that winter's best of all;

And after that there's nothing good Because the spring-time has not come -  
Nor know that what disturbs our blood Is but its longing for the tomb.

**OR**

The great Mexican tradition of the day of the dead, *Día de Muertos*.  
I see them in my dreams, the dancing MANY in their parade of death,  
death on the way to death, among the billions of billions of human and animal  
souls that have crossed the River Styx. All, once dancing here  
on earth, and, who knows where, dancing now, on this all souls day,  
when all eat death, drink death, breath death, look death in the face in his most  
baroque adornments stare at his many masques, sing and love and dance and  
laugh and smile outside. While, deep inside, all men and women weep.

Of all the skeletons in the parade, past and present, there was one who now stands out among the stripped-down, flesh-less, lurching bone bags, harlots, harlequins, kings, queens, villains and heroes. This one, I imagined joins the litany of those we prayed for on our knees, as children at bedside, was a recent pilgrim, black as coal, perhaps now, leading the parade, opening wide his cat skeleton mouth and emitting only the tiniest of greetings, celebrations or protests.

Andy. His eyes, those great yellow headlights, lighting the way for all those long gone, lighting the way for those too-soon to be soon gone.

The cause of Andy's death was not, in the end, his love of hydrangea flowers. Or a hydrangea branch bit sharp and swallowed. The X-ray showed some kind of a curvy, chewy plastic thing deep down in him. What? WHAT?? It was a twist-off from a celebratory bottle of Martinelli Gold Medal sparkling cider. Not even alcoholic.

“No!” Says the child's voice.

Silly we, we had many names and nicknames for him: Andrew, Andoozer, Andrewster, Drewster, Droopsie, Doobie, Andy Boy, Andy Spandrew, Android. All uttered with idiotic, child-like joy in him. And, finally, just Andy.

Many nights deep of night I wake and wish I could throw it all in reverse. Wish I had seen the killer plastic twist on the floor. His absence, his not being here is still a vile dream. Like the absence of everyone ever loved. That unstoppable, careening, heart-breaking parade

for which there is no brake. He was here. They were here. Now they simply are not.

All the souls of the faithful departed. Their disappearance the one great unexplained thing. The mystery, the unanswered question that makes us soul sick knowing our only choice is to ignore it or get over it. So many to get over. All buried or cremated or ‘disassembled’ and left on mountain top or roadside or under ground as repast for worms or carrion birds. All but dim reflections now, reminders of the impossibility of those living to conceive of their own extinction.

Is it their animal innocence, their unconditional love, their sense of mischief, humor even, that makes them as or more loveable than the people we love most? They never intend us hurt. Their love is uncomplicated. Few barriers. Just right touch, right voice. No need to forgive. They accept all. Admit no barriers. Just feel and follow instinct.

Andy had this way, especially if he knew you and was fond of you, as you were entering a room of flopping down – like one suddenly shot. His way of allowing a belly rub. Our other cats learned and imitated this technique. As all cat lovers know, only if they really trust you, do they ever invite and permit a gentle rubbing of their softer belly parts. Simplest of gifts. No words required. The deepest well of well wishing.

I remember most, after all this time, his eyes, those sweet eyes. larger than life itself. And his darkness: all mahogany black and chocolate browns. He was the least photogenic cat of all. Think of a panther on a moonless night, licorice in a dark room or a modernist black-on-black canvas. He redefined dark and light. The recollection of his eyes still a consolation.

I conjure him looking up at me with his curious, gentle blend of transcendent samurai and bodhisattva animal joy: shy expression, shining-yellow, true alchemist's gold. On the movie screen of my mind I project his beautiful eyes. I can see them now, whenever I choose, looking up at me. And, I call out, will always call out to him. My friend, companion and, strangely, absurdly pretty-to-think-so, my small angel and guardian. Andy.



**Epilogue:** Someone wise, certainly compassionate, on learning about Andy and my grief and my feeling sheepish but not apologetic for feeling so stricken by the death of a mere cat, said grief is grief eternal, no matter for what or whom. Grief has no limits, respects no species, admits no boundaries. Loss of father, mother, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, friends, colleagues, sons, daughters, friends, lovers, rabbits, horses, goldfish, dogs, gerbils, hamsters, mice, rats or cats... Grief extracts the same exacting toll. There is no portioning out, no measuring, no discriminating. Mornings follow nights. Nights follow mornings. Grief felt and returning reaches out to all. None escape Grief's bony grasp.

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