

Throwing the Racetrack Cats  
at Saratoga · *David Ray*

Such cats are useful to calm the horses,  
to purr and move among their horny hooves.  
In fact a cat will fit precisely there  
under the fetlock, bandaged half the time.  
Thus they're gathered up in arms, from alleys

of cities, and brought to Saratoga.  
When some horse named Herod or Whiskers wins  
some low and humble cat has done his share.  
But then great vans are backed against the stalls:  
It's time to wend down South, to Long Island

or Kentucky. In long trailers for nine  
horses we find no feline room at all.  
Hence this ritual called the throwing of cats.  
Both black and white men stand and toss them high,  
cats of every color, every lineage.

Over the fence of steel they sail, claws spread.  
They brush the pines and land beneath a bough.  
Each looks about then like old Balboa,  
finding himself quite lost, with dark coming.  
His way is blocked back to his friend the horse

who at times had nudged him like a true friend.  
Neighing, he too seems to be dissolving  
into the greenish air. The oat smell's gone  
and the boys with buckets and whistling men  
who sang of loves lost in dark river towns.

These exiled cats do not confer, but start  
in silence padding through the rustling leaves.  
Behind them, sailing in parabolas,  
their brothers fly like mewling cannonballs  
or Roman candles spewing on the Fourth.

To die because you are of use no more  
may also happen to a groom who throws.  
But now he does not choose to think of that.  
He merely finds a choice one, throws him high,  
lofting toward a pine or the moon he spots

emerging like a silver dollar bright  
and clean. First the cats and then the hosing  
of stalls, the boarding up of all the doors,  
that long dull trip to town, to one Skid Row  
or another, where next year's alley cats,

pale kittens, stalk the legs of drunks for love.  
As for these stumblers through the shadowed trees,  
I've chosen one who lifts his paw just like  
a horse he looks about to find, as I  
absurdly seek and trust to find you still.