

Street in Packingtown

Willa Sibert Cather

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IN the gray dust before a frail gray shed,
By a board fence obscenely chalked in red,
A gray creek willow, left from country days,
Flickers pallid in the haze.

Beside the gutter of the unpaved street,
Tin cans and broken glass about his feet,
And a brown whisky bottle, singled out
For play from prosier crockery strewn about,
Twisting a shoestring noose, a Polack's brat
Joylessly torments a cat.

His dress, some sister's cast-off wear,
Is rolled to leave his stomach bare.
His arms and legs with scratches bleed;
He twists the cat and pays no heed.
He mauls her neither less nor more
Because her claws have raked him sore.
His eyes, faint-blue and moody, stare
From under a pale shock of hair.
Neither resentment nor surprise
Lights the desert of those eyes --
To hurt and to be hurt; he knows
All he will know on earth, or need to know.

But there, beneath his willow-tree,
His tribal, tutelary tree,
The tortured cat across his knee,
With hate, perhaps, a threat, maybe,
Lithuania looks at me.