

# Roadkill

I'm making a series of ceramic roadkills. Squished animals that got run over by cars. I scrape them off the street and then I model them in clay. In between they go in the freezer, on a tray. Sculpting them takes a while and otherwise they smell.

The actual scraping-up is the worst part. They stink like buggery usually. Not to mention the maggots. Teeming, enough to make you retch. They tend to stick horribly to the asphalt too.

Still, once you're actually on the job you don't notice any of that any more, it becomes just about the looking, more than what you're actually seeing. It could just as easily be, for example, a bunch of flowers. Except that flowers don't interest me.

As far as sculpting them goes that is.

Anyhow. My mum lives in England and she has the kiln and the clay. I phone her up a week before Christmas – ask if she would please, please scrape up some animals for me if she finds any whilst out cycling.

And if she'd keep them in the freezer for me? Would she? I need them. Please mum...

Few days later an e-mail entitled: *Squish squash yuk!*

– *'So far.....one headless bird, could be an owl or a partridge, one dead cat, one rabbit. Still looking. Love Jo.'*

Thanks mum. Well done!

But she freezes them just shook down in the bottom of their plastic bags. Frozen lumps. Solid.

If I want them flat for sculpting then I'm going to have to un-freeze them.

It's Christmas and decomposing corpses aren't really welcome on the kitchen table. So I'm working in the shed. The shed is freezing cold, the creatures are not softening.

At the end of the workbench there's a redundant micro-wave on its way to the dump. Inadvertently the joke about the woman who tried to dry her poodle comes to mind.

But would it work? I have no idea how fur or feathers will react to microwaves, never mind a beak.

I choose the rabbit to go first, preferring to risk singed fur rather than melting feathers. The microwave is hulking and ancient, there is no defrost button.

Decide to go for 3 minutes at the lowest temperature.

Not wanting to be at close quarters for the explosion I pace around the garden, waiting until I hear the thing go beep (or boom?!)

Hah! nothing went wrong! Not even warm, but the frost has gone from the fur. Okay, same setting, quarter of an hour.

Still too frozen to unfold the body. Twice more twenty minutes and done. The fur feels warm and there's a slight, but not yet unpleasant odour coming off it. Lay it flat on an old tray, plastic-bag it, and back in the freezer it goes.

Sculpt it tomorrow.

The owl goes fine too. It's not even '*headless*' - its head, with a nicely squished and protruding eye, had disappeared under its armpit and emerges following the defrost.

The cat is a whole other kettle of fish. It is big, and improbably heavy. Only just fits in the microwave, turned on its side, diagonally, jammed corner to corner. The turntable scraping futile revolutions beneath it. After 5 times 20 minutes it's still just a massive lump of frozen meat.

At night I set the microwave to 3 hours, and go off to bed. The next day it *is* unfrozen, but still a totally uninteresting shape. Damage imperceptible, a sleeping pussy cat.

I bag it again and start on the others.

The owl's claws are a poignant puzzle of tiny pieces, fiddly but worth it. Part of the rabbit's back leg is bare bone. Modelling hell, but great to have something so spatial. (Trouble with flattened animals is that they're mostly so bloody flat.)

The results are enticing. Delicate details - sunken fur, fragile bones, flimsy feathers. Inviting closer inspection, despite the hideous reality of the tableau. That they're earthenware has something of a monument, an ode to the animal. And an awareness of the intense attention the corpses receive whilst they are modelled, the hours spent poring over a rotting cadaver, will intensify the confrontation with this painful beauty.

When I've finished I still don't know what to do with the cat. Other than its tongue which protrudes from its mouth in a kind of cartoonish parody of a death throe it just looks like a regular sleeping cat.

It needs more blood and guts.

Actually, it ought to be squashed more.

Run over it again?

Can I do that? It's dead anyway. What does it matter?

But that's a scary thought. Too irreverent. There would surely be punishment from some higher power, something bad would be bound to befall me.

Okay, so what if I sneak down to the road at night and lay it on the tarmac and wait until, in the dark, someone else drives over it.

No, that'd be worse than doing it myself, total disrespect, letting some stranger do the dirty work.

Oh, but I feel such a wimp unable to do it! Call myself an artist? Pathetic!

I lay the cat on its back, on its side. It's useless, it's just a sleeping cat, no good whatsoever.

Everyone else has gone out, I'm left alone with the dead cat but it's senseless to sculpt it.

Have to do *something* with it.

So what would the cat think about it? Wouldn't it be glad to be eternalised in a work of art? What if it were for medical research, would it be happy about it then? Now wait a minute! What's this about medicine being worth-while and art not? What's that about? Do I think medicine is more valuable than art? If that's the case then I might as well stop right now, throw in the towel, go train to be a nurse.

I decide to negotiate with the cat. Make a deal: I may drive over you, squash you some more so that you look good and squished and I can sculpt you in clay. And when I'm through with you, then I won't just chuck you in the bin, I'll dig a decent hole and bury you, okay?.....

With leaves in, and flowers too, okay?.....

*And* sing a song at the graveside. Is it okay?

We have a deal.

I have been delivered. Art is as worthwhile as medicine and the cat has given its permission to be squished.

No divine punishment.

I put the corpse in a rubbish-bag and haul it across the meadow to where the car is parked next to the church. Skittish and on the alert – this English village full of animal lovers – I lay the bag in front of a wheel and drive the car slowly forwards a yard. I take a look in the bag. The cat looks just as unblemished as before. Stupid tiny bloody useless car! I lay the bag back, this time behind the wheel, and put the car into reverse. It doesn't feel squishy, a slight bump that's all. Just to be sure, I drive forwards over the bump again.

But the cat is as intact as ever. Damnit, this wasn't what we agreed on!

I mustn't do it again though. I can tell. That I can sense. Our deal doesn't cover it. If I go on now my karma will be totally fucked. Cat got the last laugh.

I haul the bag back, dig a hole in the frozen earth of the vegetable patch and scour the garden for winter flowers and nice looking leaves which I sprinkle on the cat. Earth to earth.

I still have to sing, I promised.  
But I can't think of anything.

\*

Later I'm telling my mum what happened, that meantime she shouldn't dig too deep between the leeks and the carrots, that I had made a deal with the cat but that the extra squashing was to no avail. Flint's nine-year-old ears are wide open and he stares "*No, Jimi, did you really do that!*" so indignant and dismayed that I too am shocked. "*Course not,*" I fib, insincerely flippant, "*Just joking*".

He *does* know a song for the cat, and between the Brussels sprouts I join in, "*Husha-Bye Baby...*"

Perhaps, for now at least, my Karma has been salvaged.