

PARDON MY PARODY

Dar Williams' "When I Was a Boy" Never Leaves a Dry Eye

by Carol Harper



Reverb

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Manuscripts should be submitted as follows: two
hard copies, double spaced, plus two computer disks
(any PC or Mac word processing or pagelayout soft-
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What makes Dar Williams' songs so
damn much fun to parody?

Certainly many of her songs have
a playful if not downright comical bent, but
it's the somber, poignant ones that seem
irresistible targets for her fans' sometimes-
dangerous pens. Maybe it's the intensity of
the lyrics that brings on parody fever.

• I am guilty myself, and I would have to
say that the poetry of Dar's words has a way
of eating into one's heart and making it
yearn to dance. So moving are her lyrics
(and we're not even getting to her incredi-
bly complex arrangements or the musical
hooks that penetrate deep and don't let go)
that I find myself wanting to acquire them,
to own them, to become them.

• And so it was that on a snowy January
night, surrounded by my three cats, I came
up with this terribly irreverent parody of
"When I Was a Boy," perhaps Dar's most
universally moving piece. Indeed, "When I
Was a Boy" is many times Dar's final
encore, and there is nary a dry eye in the
house before she finishes the first bar.

• I attended one of Dar's concerts about a
year ago and sent my piece, "When I Was a
Dog," backstage. I was half afraid Dar
would be offended, the original being such
a serious and meaningful song. But imagine
my shock, and the thrill, of Dar calling my
name from the stage at the end of the
show—during the second encore—saying,
"There's a famous writer in our midst
who's had her song about three fluffy cats
published on the internet. Thank you! And
now I'm going to do my version." Well,
needless to say, Dar fan that I am, this was
the high point of my writing career and my
Dar fandom, and as she began the familiar
strands of "When I Was a Boy," the tears
started to roll.

When I Was a Boy by Dar Williams

I won't forget when Peter Pan came to my
house, took my hand: I said I was a boy, I'm
glad he didn't check. I learned to fly, I
learned to fight, I lived a whole life in one
night. We saved each other's lives out on the
pirate's deck. And I remember that night
when I'm leaving a late night with some
friends, and I hear somebody tell me it's
not safe, someone should help me. I need
to find a nice man to walk me home. When
I was a boy, I scared the pants off of my
mom, climbed what I could climb upon.
And I don't know how I survived, I guess I
knew the tricks that all boys knew. And you
can walk me home, but I was a boy, too.

• I was a kid that you would like, just a
small boy on her bike, riding topless, yeah,
I never cared who saw. My neighbor came
outside to say, "Get your shirt!" I said, "No
way. It's the last time, I'm not breaking any
law." And now I'm in a clothing store, and
the sign says Less is More: more that's tight
means more to see, more for them, not
more for me. That can't help me climb a
tree in ten seconds flat. When I was a boy,
see that picture? That was me, grass-stained
shirt and dusty knees. And I know things
have gotta change, they got pills to sell,
they've got implants to put in, they've got
implants to remove. But I am not forget-
ting, that I was a boy too.

• And like the woods where I would creep,
it's a secret I can keep, except when I'm
tired, except when I'm being caught off
guard. I've had a lonesome awful day, the
conversation finds its way to catching fire-
flies out in the backyard. And I tell the man
I'm with about the other life I lived. And I
say now you're top gun, I have lost and you
have won. And he says, "Oh no, no, can't
you see? When I was a girl, my mom and I
we always talked, and I picked flowers
everywhere that I walked. And I could
always cry, now even when I'm alone I sel-
dom do. And I have lost some kindness. But
I was a girl too. And you were just like me,
and I was just like you."

When I Was a Dog by Carol Harper

I won't forget the night my mom rescued
Biscuit, me, and Tom: I said I was a dog,
I'm glad she didn't check. I learned to bark,
I learned to heel, I wet the floor at every
meal. We saved each other's lives—she
needed us cats too. And I remember that
night (really) I'm leaving a late night in the
alley, and I hear some top cat tell me it's not
safe, someone should help me. I need to
find a nice canine to walk me home. When
I was a dog, I scared the postman every
day, chewed the rug and learned to sit and
lay. And I know that I got some ticks, but I
proved any dog can learn new tricks. And
you can chase me home, but I was a dog
too.

• I was a pet who fit your mood, just a cat
who liked dog food, chasing big sticks, yeah,
I never played with mice. Mom's neighbor
said "You are a cat! Why can't you purr, sit
on my lap?" She only likes me when I'm
being soft and nice. And now I'm in this big
pet store, and the sign says Dogs are More:
more to love means you can fetch, and a
Frisbee you can catch. That can't help me
climb a tree in ten seconds flat. When I was
a dog, see that picture? That was me, drool-
ing tongue and lots of fleas. And I know
things have gotta change, they got IAMS to
sell, I've got long fur to lick clean, I've got
hairballs to cough up. But I am not forget-
ting, that I was a dog too.

• Across the sofa I would pad, wondering
who the heck's my dad. My mom's my
mom, I know, though she walks on two feet.
I ate alone and slept all day, Tom's at the
vet so we can't play. I know if he were here
my day would be complete. Our dog takes a
great big yawn—he's been out rolling on
the lawn. I say, "Yeah, I did that too, now
all the fun's left up to you." And he says,
"Ruff, ruff, ruff, can't you see? When I was
a cat, our mom and I we'd cuddle close,
and I just knew inside she loved me the
most. And I would sleep with her in bed,
now even when she's alone I seldom do.
And I have lost some softness. But I was a
cat too. And you were just like me, and I
was just like you."

