

## WORLDWISE BY CATLIGHT

At the office doorway, I stopped to admire my colleague's new painting of a crouched Siamese, colorful silk scarf about its neck, closely watching a spider in retreat across a blank white floor. The scene is tensely quiet and has the attractive simplicity of Asian paintings, but this one is more realistic than stylized, 19th century Chinese, small red characters at the lower right. I told my colleague I was about to start an essay on cats. The cat in the painting was intensely focused, as I soon hoped to be. I joked about Yogi Berra and how you can observe a great deal by watching, for the painting had a wink about it and was vaguely humorous. My colleague told me he was the fond owner of a deaf cat many years ago and decided against another after it had been killed by a car. His interest in the subject was now chiefly aesthetic. This newly acquired painting, he believed, was about art and allegory, but he didn't have it all sorted out yet.

His observations about art made me consider the role of cats in my own work. But how? Certainly not in terms of allegory. Real, not allegorical, animals have always held a fascination for me—first the horses, pigs, chickens, and cows at my grandfather's farm (the subject of my first published poem in *The Southern Review*, 1970), then the rabbits, squirrels, and pheasants I hunted with the help of a dog. Growing up, I always had a dog and favored them exclusively as pets. Only in recent years have cats become for me a source of growing interest. And not just house cats. Four years ago when I was a visiting writer in Utah, a new friend and colleague there, a horseman and hunter, said he knew where I might get a glimpse of a mountain lion. "I'll tell you under one condition," he said. The condition was that I promise to take one of his guns: "You get way back in one of them narrow sandrock canyons and happen on a mother with kittens, you'll wish you'd never seen a cougar." He just happened to have an extra revolver in his desk (The Old West is still alive and well in Utah!).

Assured I'd only have to fire in the air to keep a cougar at bay, I accepted the loan of his .38 Smith & Wesson with custom Pachmayr grips, right there in his office, quickly hiding it under my jacket, what with students passing in the hallway only a few feet away. But after nearly a year of ransacking the high country and deserts, the closest I ever came to a big cat was tracks in an arroyo after a rain storm. Fresh, eerily fresh, the imprints were still filling with water. I did, however, have the pleasure of spying on mule deer, hawks, eagles, peregrine falcons, jackrabbits, coyotes, bear, moose, and elk. But no big cats. A great disappointment, yet merely looking for them—scanning sagebrush and rimrock with binoculars—had its own quiet rewards, and the blessing of quietude, among other things, is partly what cats are about, for me at least.

Still looking closely at the wonderful painting, I told my colleague it was the physical grace and freedom of the cat that I found so attractive. And the wildness. As I spoke, the cat in the painting seemed to screw its attention even tighter and helped me to snag from the black mouse hole of memory Méry's great line: "Dieu a fait le chat pour

donner à l'homme le plaisir de caresser un tigre" (God created the cat so that man might have the pleasure of stroking a tiger).

"You know," said Doug, my colleague, "I think you might have a start on this thing."

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"It is undoubtedly true that we receive stronger impressions through the senses than through the mind," Thomas Mann tells us in a story whose title would make a fine name for the right kind of cat: "Felix Krull." Surely it is the physicality and fearful Blakean symmetry of the cat more than some Platonic shadow of the mind that will remain with us, live in our visual and tactile memory when we ourselves are long in the tooth and wet about the chops. The silence of cats is always astonishing and it makes us fine tune our receptors for nuance and subtlety. Then everything presses upon the senses more vividly when cats appear like apparitions at the elbow, stare into space fathoms deep, or curl into the lap with that tiny throat-motor working like white sound, putting you into a helpless wakeful trance. Perhaps while you are in a trance, you wonder if it is possible that novelists, because their work requires society and their methods are expansive, have an affinity and preference for dogs who are also expansive in their affections and gestures, and that poets and short story writers favor cats for their habits of indirection, stealth, and economy?

Cats, of course, have the reputation of being loners, but Richard Selzer, in his wonderful collection of personal essays, *Taking the World in for Repairs* (Morrow, 1986), points to the possibility of mutuality between cat and human. His gentle critique of monastic self-denial and mortification in "Diary of an Infidel," an account of a six-week writing retreat at the Abbey of San Georgio Maggiore in Venice, describes encounters with a monastery cat, a cat perversely ignored by the monks, a poor creature without even a name:

Now that is real poverty. To own nothing, not even a name. Dom Cat, then. And what a dispirited thing he is. The cats I have known watch every leaf on its way down, hear the least click of a mouse's teeth upon a grain of rice. But this orange monk watches and hears nothing. He has renounced the world. I see that he is thin. Don't they feed him enough? I open the gate of the wire fence and step inside. The cat raises his head. In the depths of each slotted eye, a blazing yellow cross. I go for him; he arches, snarls and backs away. Again I try, this time from the rear. I long to hold even that ugly irritable creature in my lap, would risk every scratch and bite to feel for a few moments its hum upon my thighs, its rough tongue on my skin. Now I offer a hand. He reels, spits and rakes it with relish, offering three red stripes in return. The beginning, they say, is always painful. Never mind, I shall try again. I cannot let him live and die without knowing once the happiness of a human lap.

Few hours in life are more pleasurable than those of a winter evening with a good book and a real cat curled asleep in your lap. Ah, transhuman possibilities, feline connections! The happiness of the human lap which Selzer describes, of course, is a two-way proposition.

But it would be many years, alas, before I came to an appreciation of cats and the experience of laptop happiness. As a boy, I was never without Jonesy, a highly

intelligent and affectionate fox terrier with one floppy ear, who waited for the school bus at the end of the lane, slept at the foot of my bed, and died shortly after I left for college. Most of my boyhood friends had dogs. Cats were a rarity in our rural neighborhood (now surrounded by plazas and shopping centers) where dogs in those days ran free. I almost forgot there *were* any neighborhood cats until reading the following by Eugene Field:

The gingham dog went "bow-wow-wow!"  
 And the calico cat replied "Mee-ow!"  
 The air was littered, an hour or so,  
 With bits of gingham and calico.

This rhyme put me in mind of a hot summer day and Puggy, my friend Dickie's flatulent black bull dog. Puggy was catlike only in that he spent most of his life asleep in a dirt bunker under the porch. He occasionally emerged to chase the odd car, eat, or leave a clump of turds on Mrs. Busybody's manicured lawn, which made us laugh and love him all the more. One day he came awake and chased a cat into the bushes. The bushes shook wildly and from them escaped terrible growls and screams for several minutes, or so it seemed. We couldn't see a thing until they burst forth, the cat riding on Puggy's back in excellent imitation of a cowboy on a rodeo bronc. When the cat finally retracted its claws, it was big Puggy, bleeding from the back and snout, who turned tail for his bunker under the porch. For some reason, I was on Puggy's side—probably because Dickie was my friend, and because the cat struck me as a sneaky, dirty fighter. Anyway, the incident gave me and my friends permission to clean up the neighborhood, and Dodge City in general; to make the streets safe for women, children, and dogs by taking potshots at cats with our BB guns.

Closer to the headwaters of memory, I vaguely recall cats at my grandfather's farm. Probably because there were other, more impressive animals, I paid little attention to a scruffy black male in white boots along with several other gaunt, yellow-eyed shadows that haunted the barn and sheds. I remember that my cousins and I were not allowed to feed them. No explanations were given by my stern, Polish-speaking grandfather, but it occurs to me now that they were kept around only to be useful as mousers and snakers, and if hungry, they would stay keen on the job.

I had long fallen out of love with the guns I first learned to use at the farm but still had no affection for cats when, as a last resort, I got one to keep down the mice in our field-stranded house in West Virginia. Unfortunately, this neutered gray was killed by a car before it had a chance to soften me, or before I noticed anything admirable beyond the same mousing skills that my no-nonsense grandfather valued. It is amusing to me now to wonder what my practical father and unsentimental grandfather might say to the notion of cat as monk, the notion that a cat is valuable because it is useless in the best Eastern sense of the word. For me, the cat is a gentle reminder of grace, quietude, and the possibility of animal happiness. In an essay on the importance of animals in the fiction and poetry of Welsh writer Leslie Norris, I wrote that "animals, even domestic animals, are mysteriously beautiful and beg to be observed. They are not important simply because

they provide us with useful metaphors but because through them we are briefly reconnected with innocence, are nourished by their quiet proximity" (*An Open World*, Camden, 1993). Perhaps we secretly envy cats and other animals because they, unlike us, were never expelled from the Garden and do not suffer the same consequences of kingdom-loss, do not desire BMWs, jet skis, snowmobiles, or expensive Caribbean vacations. They have nothing to prove beyond managing a small piece of turf and are usually at peace with themselves. I say "usually" because they do fight and sometimes even kill, but not in the way that humans do. In his essay, "Words and Behavior," Aldous Huxley best describes them:

Hatred itself is not so strong that animals will not forget it, if distracted, even in the presence of the enemy. Watch a pair of cats, crouching on the brink of a fight. Balefully the eyes glare; from far down in the throat of each come bursts of a strange, strangled noise of defiance; as though animated by a life of their own, the tails twitch and tremble. With aimed intensity of loathing! Another moment and surely there must be an explosion. But no; all of a sudden one of the two creatures turns away, hoists a hind leg in more than fascist salute and, with the same focussed attention as it had given a moment before to its enemy, begins to make a lingual toilet. Animal love is as much at the mercy of distractions as animal hatred. The dumb creation lives a life made up of discrete and mutually irrelevant episodes (*Collected Essays*, Harper & Row, 1938).

Huxley says that words "form the thread on which we string our experiences." Therefore humans both love and hate with far greater continuity and consistency.

Both as reader and writer, I find that books of fiction without animals are barely living books, and in my own stories, I can't resist the occasional impulse to make animals a small part of the human drama. The way people relate or fail to relate to animals often tells you something about them, about what they see or fail to see, do or fail to do. At the end of my story "Persistence" (*The Yale Review*, 1984), I have the narrator, emotionally brittle from the recent death of a parent, express grudging respect for the courage of a battered old tom who seems to be always battling with neighborhood cats and dogs. The narrator's friend has trapped the tom, transported it to a wooded area almost twenty miles away, and released it. Then, several days later:

Everyone's gone to bed. I hear a sound that is like a child crying—a soft but insistent cry that strikes deeply and momentarily freezes me. I go to the back door and hit the driveway floodlight and there is my calico, ears flat, back arched, fluffed up and aimed at an unseen enemy on the other side of my car. I open the door and the cat streaks in, glad for the chance to escape. After a few moments the yellow tom with that huge head and fat raccoon tail moves from behind the car. I laugh in spite of myself and step out onto the back porch, but he doesn't scare. Not even when I descend the stairs. He simply pauses in the middle of the yard, licks his paw once or twice, and gives me a disdainful glance. I think of running for the slingshot, but something else in me just wants to watch him measure the fence, flow with incredible grace to the 2 x 4 at its top. He looks at me once again. For some reason the name Monk comes to my lips. I call him that. Perhaps because Thelonious has recently died. A real bad cat, as they say. Stay out there, Monk, make difficult love, wild unregenerate sounds.

After my son insisted on having a cat, I was resigned to give it a try, but still not sold. Only a few days after we brought it home, as if to test me, this young calico

climbed a tall mulberry tree in our side yard. As it got dark, my wife and son began to urge me to get her down from the top branches. I tried to explain that she was born with all the right equipment for climbing—I wasn't—and would come down when she was good and ready. Pressure for me to go up increased as darkness came down. Of course she raked me on the forearms when I pried her loose from the limb where she was doing her best to look pathetic. Absolutely no sense of gratitude.

After the treetop episode, she, for her part, probably sensed my negative electronic field or the like and remained aloof. Fine, I thought. Besides, she was my son's cat and received all manner of TLC from him, my wife, or the occasional felinophile visitor. My son at this time was young and sometimes handled her roughly. I was always worried that either he or the cat would be hurt, but to my surprise she allowed the rough stuff with only a disgusted look on her face. And whenever she had her fill of tough love, she would easily extricate herself and streak off to hide in a highly unlikely place as only cats can. Anyway, small boy and small cat seemed to have some kind of understanding between them. This might have been the turning point. I was beginning to see cats differently, but it took a trauma to break the ice. My mother died in a February freeze, and Fanou exhibited an uncanny behavior upon my return to the house. "A Sense of the Other Side" (*The Sunken Lightship*, BOA Editions Ltd., 1990) is one of the very few poems I've ever written that arrived as completely, mysteriously, and fully as she did:

Back home at last  
 After seeing my mother  
 Lowered in the frozen earth,  
 I couldn't find sleep  
 With wine or even pills,  
 When our calico, as if  
 Called, came to the sofa  
 And did something  
 Never repeated since—

One soft paw at a time,  
 She climbed on my chest,  
 Looked through the blank  
 Lid of my face, made  
 The faintest cry, then  
 Curled over my heart  
 And slept, so that I could,  
 For three nights in a row—  
 Visitations like belief,  
 Unreal, against all odds.

The final phase of my changing attitude toward cats came some years ago while I was trying to get closer to Zen. In D. T. Suzuki's *Studies in Zen* (Delta Books, 1955), there is a passage about the "everyday mind" and what it means to be free from right and wrong, free from getting and spending, from nihilism and eternalism. The Master Nansen Fugwan, according to Suzuki, told a group of novice monks that when it comes to the everyday mind the cat "has better knowledge of it than all the Buddhas of the past,

present, and future." A young monk then asks the Master how that could be so. The Master replies: "You cannot suspect them."

This impossible *mondo* had me on the verge of voicing my very own first meow when frozen snow crystals ticked against the windowpane, and my everyday mind told me it was freezing winter, Fanou outside and likely wanting in. Such was the situation which produced the following, "Catlight," from *The Sunken Lightship*:

Cats won't perform  
     They make you perform  
 So here you are, playing  
     Master of the Back Door,  
 Powerless, feeling the winter  
     Freeze and the dark  
 That suggests—but just then  
     A touch of white.

From the dark depths  
     In no hurry, she comes,  
 Nonchalant across the lawn,  
     Under the car,  
 Stopping to scratch an ear,  
     Then sits and stares,  
 While you attend the door  
     And babytalk  
 To the backyard until she decides  
     It's time.  
 Nose still wet and cold, she  
     Presents herself  
 To your lap, the gift she knows  
     You know she is,  
 And takes you from trivia,  
     TV news, some article  
 You recall about cats  
     Spending two thirds  
 Of their lives asleep, or at rest.

Your fingers, drunk on her fur,  
     Forget that tabled wineglass  
 And slip over the patchwork of black,  
     White, and the rust  
 That turns to *café au lait* when you pet  
     Against the grain.

And the exquisite whiskers, her skull  
     Like a kneecap, that mouth,  
 Like a snake's when she yawns,  
     Which is often,  
 Then the tickling rasp of her tongue.

Drowsing, she purrs her one mantra  
     While her left ear  
 Independently tracks a kid  
     Peeling rubber in the street.  
 Her one cracked eye is a vote  
     For dynamic stillness.

Yes, you say, and mumble  
 About Eastern Thought, immobility,  
 Pascal and *divertissement*.

But like one of your students,  
 She yawns again  
 For you're such a slow learner—  
 She's so tired  
 Of teaching you stillness,  
 Nonchalance,  
 How to care while seeming not to,  
 Sleeping  
 So that you might,  
 As in rare moments like this,  
 Dream wide awake,  
 Making all things live  
 In vivid, unusual light, catlight.

Any cat worth its fur has both charm and screw-you-ity. Perhaps one of the reasons writers find cats so attractive is that they are self-reliant, lit from within, and don't need approval. They have reserve and dignity, and a Zen no-mind quality I find especially attractive. Responding to this once-verbalized observation, a good friend with a fine sense of humor, a surgeon, told me that cats have tiny brains, therefore it's not remarkable they have that no-mind quality I so admire. "Score one for humor," I said, "but we are talking about modes of perception, not scientific fact. Ways of seeing and being." Touché.

A few weeks ago, I noticed our cat was not eating dry food. This concerned me because dry food is important for a cat's good digestion as well as for keeping the tartar from its teeth. I pried open her mouth—teeth fine. I tried different varieties of dry food to no avail. Finally I phoned the vet who has been seeing to her shots and so forth since she was a kitten. He told me to mix the dry food with the soft—see if that worked. "Sometimes they just do that," he said. "She might go back to dry food on her own, but there's no telling with a cat. I don't know. I've pretty much given up trying to figure them out. They're impossible."

Impossible, yes. Difficult too, like life itself. Beautiful, mysterious, and graceful.

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