A CANTICLE

I HAD A FRIEND... AND HIS NAME WAS ROADCAT. He was young when I was young and old when I was middle-aged. Still, our lives overlapped for a while, and I am grateful for that.

He was more than a friend, really. Friend and colleague is perhaps a better image. In fact, I sometimes introduced him to strangers as my research associate. We worked together on cold, gray afternoons, poring over books and papers, while the wood stove quietly crackled its way through another Iowa winter.

Sometimes he lay upon my lap and served as a round and honest book rest. He purred and occasionally reached out to turn pages for me, randomly and with a keen appreciation of the virtues surrounding leisurely scholarship. In the spring, as the days warmed, he moved to the desk, clearing a place for himself by pushing to the floor paper, pens, staplers, and other implements of a writer's trade.

He came from a field of long grass behind our house in Columbus, Ohio. Just a few inches in length, he walked along the cement of one of those smarmy subdivisions that make your teeth curl.

A neighbor's child abused him. He fought back, as any of us would, and the child's mother screamed something about rabid cats. My wife observed that the child deserved something more than he got and brought the kitten home for the customary saucer of milk.

I set him on my lap and said, "This is going to be a fine-looking cat." But we were on the move in those times and had already promised our daughter one of the kittens from a litter down the street. So the migrant was fed and sent along.

I sat down to read the paper, glanced up, and he had reappeared on the opposite side of the house at the patio screen door. He looked in at me, and I looked back. He coughed continuously and badly, tried to cry, but the effort was soundless. I picked him up, looked him over with a modest expertise gained from years of living around animals, and said I was taking him to the veterinarian's office.

The examination was lengthy. He had worms, ear mites, fleas, and a serious case of bronchitis. I asked the vet, "Is this a road cat?" The doctor smiled, "This is your genuine road cat."

We drove home together, he and I and, of course, four kinds of medicine in a brown paper bag. He sat on the car seat, small and uncomplaining, watching me, bright face hopeful. The nursery opened. Roadcat had come to stay.

And it is here, before going on, that I must deal with the issue of sentimentality.

BY ROBERT JAMES WALLER

FOR ROADCAT

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If you do not come to grips with that, you might dismiss the rest of what I have to say as mawkish and lacking sound perspective.

Humans have an arrogant manner of regarding life, as if some squinty hierarchy of existence were fact instead of ranking life, as if some squat, three-level find plants and animals. Maybe even rivers and mountains.

The problem is that we humans generate the squishy level of everything else. Here, we are going to attempt rankings, you better have beauty. Take your choice.

Roadcat's world was the forest, the warm place under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content with himself and required no conspicuous recognition to prove his worth. His colleague apparently did require it. My wife, my children, and I, and I wrote, and I wrote, and I wrote, and a compromise with him on the matter by turn purred his way through the pages. I would lift my eyes from the book, smile at him, and his wisdom and elegance, that was all he asked.

I violated that trust only once. I must take time to tell you about the light event of the year, and I mean the thin coat of housework dust that I missed on a sunny afternoon, and the dust that is mine.

Those of you who see things differently, as a matter of "better than" or "on a higher plane than," are to be pitied. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I know your view is only one-way, and that is down. As such, you must confront the weeding of wonderment that comes from looking out across an open sky, and aging together on Edginton's great arrow of time.

And so it was with my friend Roadcat.

Riding along on the arrow, we turned the days and marked the pages together. We grimied at each other over sunny afternoons on the deck, and, while he rested in the crook of my folded arm, we lifted our furry heads and stared hard and at high lights and hard at the light of space just before dawn. Green eyes looking. Blue eyes looking. Wondering about ourselves and the others out there looking back.

We did that for twelve years plus a month or so. And we came to care, and care deeply, one for the other. He clearly saw, and trusted, that I had not changed. And that our association announced a show limited to animals of something called pet quality, we could not resist.

So Roadcat was put into a wire cage and carried off to the show held as part of the Cattle Congress festivities in Waterloo. Along with the sheep and horses and cattle and hogs, the pet-quality cats would have their day in the ring. He was terrified and paralysed. He tried to jump through the crowds past the ferris wheel and midway barker, past Willie Nelson's tour bus.

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spends a great deal of time out the food. His face was thinning a bit, and sometimes he ate nothing after I ladled his seniority, took her turn. Later, Roadcat was in a chair in the back bedroom upstairs. I knelt down beside him, spoke softly, and after a few days, we brought him home. He was pleasant and affectionate, such a gesture was pleasant. Though he was always disoriented and stumbled. I could see he was working at the edge of his technology.

In the morning, I carried him to his litter box in the basement and set him down by the stove quietly crackled its way through the winter afternoons of Iowa. He raised his head, straight up came his ears, and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was filled with the smell of his green eyes dilated to the maximum. The rhythmful, his tail held high on his little stiff-legged trot, tail held high, he raised his head, straight up came his ears, and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was filled with the smell of his green eyes dilated to the maximum. The rhythmful, his tail held high on his little stiff-legged trot, tail held high, he raised his head, straight up came his ears, and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was filled with the smell of his green eyes dilated to the maximum. The rhythmful, his tail held high on his little stiff-legged trot, tail held high, he raised his head, straight up came his ears, and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was filled with the smell of his green eyes dilated to the maximum.

Robert James Willer, professor of manage­ment at the University of Northern Iowa, is a writer, photographer, and musician whose essays deal with the natural environment and other topics. His book of essays, Just Beyond the Firelight, was published by the Iowa State University Press in 1988 and is now in its second printing.


One litter

Many of us take for granted the facts of pet overpopulation, but others may not be completely aware of the devastating consequences of a single unplanned litter of puppies or kittens. If you are overpopulation "lit­ter-ate," we urge you to pass along this ar­ticle to someone who could benefit from it; if you are not, we urge you to take heed.