

What a Piece of Work Is a Cat

The animal whose territory largely overlaps our house we call our pet. Before today, I might have said, "Our pet lives with us," or something of the sort; but since then I've seen that he is quite an independent creature—as much as you or me. We're not bound to our houses, to our rooms, to our beds, and neither is a cat. I say a cat; for though dogs often defend their territory ferociously, and claim too much, they still admit it belongs to their human. Not so the cat. The cat tolerates, but would never submit to, the human. The cat thinks of you as an animal it has to live with, as you might think of a flock of birds that come and peck at your lawn now and then; or even as he might think of that same flock of birds on a day when the sun is too hot, and he's too lazy, to kill one.

We have kept this wild beast for some thirteen years, at the start of which he barely weighed anything. What a piece of work is a cat! Not even as big as the mugs my father took everywhere, filled with coffee and other drinks I was too young for, left to collect in great quantities in the back seat of the car. I distinctly remember this kitten crawling into one such mug, a big blue one, with no room to turn around, and too young and stupid to figure out walking backwards. We pitied it. We freed it. In return, we received the wounds he felt appropriate punishment for our acts.

Not that these were our first stripes, not that this was our first cat. Two years prior, for Dad's birthday, we had also adopted a kitten. The first one was meant to be ours forever. It was a vicious thing and attacked a car with verve, in what were of course the last seconds of its life. His name was either Jack or Jake, depending on whether you ask a male or female member of our family, and he is buried not quite six feet deep, under our old garden, in a shoebox, along with some of us children's dear trinkets. The second cat was meant to be ours forever. It was vapid and sleepy. The poor girl, named Sahara for the Sahara Desert, never did anything besides sleep, eat, and move from bed to bed. When the basement door was unlocked, you would wake up in your bed with disturbingly warm feet, and no apparent cause; but if you leaned over quick enough you'd see her trotting out of the room to lie on some other dreamer's appendages. She was that sort of cat. One day she was sleeping, as the story goes, in the road; and we wasted no ultra soft Kleenex on her remains but only hosed down the asphalt. Our dad dug up the old shoebox in the garden, and added the corpse of our latest victim; he did it so the children would not see the shoebox held only bones and trinkets.

The third year, the third cat. Now, as for this one!—It was meant to be ours forever.

Actually, he easily proved himself the better of cars. I have journals from twelve

years ago that detail his intelligence, his ability to “look both ways”, and his healthy love of life. Though in fact I don’t recall him ever crossing the road, a strategy that has worked well, at any rate. There is an old story among us children that he once saved his mortal enemy (“The Orange Cat”, from down the road) when the latter was in danger of being run over; he leapt at the imbecilic creature and pushed it out of the way. Later the story seemed implausible, and we decided that the real reason for the move had been to attack The Orange Cat, and his salvation was only indirect. Nowadays the story only bears a kind of nostalgia, the nostalgia of a time when we believed and acted as if such things were true. It glows faintly with the inviolability of childhood, but it is quite dead.

Nevertheless, this third cat, whose name is Butterscotch, has survived quite a lot in his thirteen years. There were the two weeks during which we could not even guess his sex and Steve Ballmer, who shared a name with the Microsoft executive, and built model castles, and eventually married a woman he met while playing an online game: Steve examined the sexless kitten and declared it to be male, and suggested a clinic to get him neutered. There was the time he climbed over the cement wall in our crawlspace and disappeared for two days, at the end of which he finally reduced himself to begging, and his meowing freed him. There was the time he disappeared for an entire winter and we discovered he had been living with an old woman down the street and only returned to us when she consulted someone who said Butterscotch was not a stray. There was the time he came home with a limp and a huge wound in his side, the size of Jack. There was the time he stayed at our cousins’ house and learned how much he hated their three cats and the cousins clipped his claws without asking us. There was the ride home, graced by his foul-smelling puke. There was the time he was very, very sick and we wept that we might have to put him down.

There was the week in which our monster obliterated birds wherever he found them, leaving in the grass orgiastic trails of organs, blood, and guts spilled on a living lawn. The heart was always eaten: one understands the sacrifice rituals of primitive civilizations only when one has a cat. And one feels to disown the cat. But the neighbours complained bitterly about the birds on their yards, too, and we thought it a bit unfair: the cat did nothing but divorce himself from our ownership, whereas the weight of his crimes fell on us. This is maybe how God felt. There was the first bird, that we buried, like a pet, under the trampoline. There was the last bird, which deserves explanation.

We were downstairs and the ground-level windows to the backyard suddenly released a great cawing, a raucous death-knell, and a glance revealed the trees were full of crows. We of course rushed outside, we children. And on the lawn there was our cat, and a feeble, whimpering bird, two feet from it, petrified. The predator moved

closer and closer to the flight-deprived morsel, whose hundred comrades in the sky screamed “Guilty! We find him guilty!” till we could bear it no longer and we jumped out to frighten the cat. We did frighten him and the bird, after all that, just up and flew off anyway. The cat gave us a resentful nod before slinking away beneath the shed.

He killed other things, too, of course. I remember when he was a kitten and, like so many kittens do, he deposited a dead rodent at our door, gazing up at our astonished eyes. I remember we flung it into the trash. I imagine that if cats have hearts, his broke at that moment; and then resented.

Of course there was the time just last week or so when we went out on some affair because the day had bloomed an unexpected sun. The cat, looking to absorb it, ascended the staircase of the shed in the backyard, and crawled upstairs, but the door closed behind him. When we got back, we hardly noticed his absence. Sometime the next afternoon, my father went out to the shed in the rain to get a tool and happened to glance upward; the cat was perched on a table, mewling, his little humanoid face pressed against the window, looking out. A pathetic sight.

I suppose dogs really are the only true pets. Dogs and birds. Cats fall in on the opposite side with lizards and fish and hamsters, who all exist in a separate world belonging to them alone, a world which only overlaps with ours when they get hungry. Our neighbour’s cat once destroyed his computer by pissing in its open case. Its extraordinary value meant nothing to him. And our cousins put down two of their three cats. Those cats came into the world with their eyes closed and they went out blind; they saw for a while in the middle, but didn’t care much for what they saw. That’s the way it is with cats. The only thing from our world that means anything to them is that which they can use. And if they can help it they will change nothing during their life.

This morning I heard a horrible hissing from those same ground-level windows, and I ran out to see. My brother did, too. Behind the glass screen door we saw the goings-on: Butterscotch stood on the deck, hair raised, tail three times its normal size, arching his back and hissing as he might have done ten years ago. Before him stood The Orange Cat in similar battle pose. Perhaps a mutual desire to go away unwounded held them back, perhaps a very old friendship formed when the one saved the other from a gruesome death. Either way, Butterscotch happened to glance up and he saw our faces pressed against the glass, looking out, and his manner instantly relaxed. He slowly, oh, so slowly, turned his side to The Orange Cat, taunting, tempting. We later thought that maybe he knew we would come to his aid. The Orange Cat whined and shuffled his feet; Butterscotch made his way onto the picnic table, — a ghostlike, ethereal being! — and paused. There was silence, and then it broke. Our champion whipped his head around ninety degrees to face The Orange

Cat. The latter felt the spectre of death, howled, and leapt terrified off the deck.

This territory belongs to Butterscotch. It is not ours, his home, and ours is not his. That was not the defence of a loyal dog. That was the triumph of the monarch. We once called him "pet."

But there stands in our garden an old stone lion, perhaps only the size of Butterscotch. This lion's mouth is open, roaring silently. He sits beneath foliage, and the scattered sunset at the end of the day illuminates him horizontally through the brush; otherwise he is invisible. Lately I have seen Butterscotch sitting and staring at the lion, the king of his kind, as immobile as the statue itself. I think that is how a cat wants to be. During his life he will stand on a pedestal, and, if challenged, defend it—with force if necessary. But from his birth to his death he wishes he could be altogether stone, and so remain in the world from which he comes into ours, and to which he goes again. That is where Butterscotch will be when he lies with Jack (or Jake) and Sahara in the shoebox.