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
If as mawkish and lacking sound perspective. According to common belief, rests a great
tion. A little further down, just a little, lies
term. The problem is that we humans generate the
beauty. Take your choice.

Given that, it becomes understandable
maturity and color. His face was expressive,
ting grade on the personality dimension and
published over the decades to have longer noses.
itiating him occasionally with a little milk
in an old jelly glass decorated with etchings
and wanted nothing to do with any of us for
iustice by jumping into the box holding the
ipper and tearing it off the machine.

If you were to attempt judgments, you better have
some criteria, some standards of measure
in use in making your judgments. The
is that we humans generate the
criteria by which the rankings are made.

I try to live alongside rather than above
of space just before dawn. Green eyes look­
ing at me, and the largest, prettiest green eyes I
ever saw him, slid onto his back and
and when the judge said, "Roadcat was a purebred and did
merits of Roadcat were now to be seen.

It was a hunter, but not a killer. Now and then
and when the judge put him on a table for
ant judges had lodged a complaint, con­

I caught a slight

into the box holding the

friend to exactly that.

That was his only sin, and I reached a

Not even the night crawlers he brought to
me after heavy rains. He plumped them
down on a small throw rug, flipped it over
to hamper their escape, and seemed pleased
with himself.

The shipwreck was very much alive in the
summer of 1986 when Roadie strolled through
the front door and dropped it. The little guy hit the carpet running, dropped
through a pile of old magazines, and dis­
appealed the general vicinity of the

paths leading to the woods. Roadcat watched the
house in the woods. Roadcat watched the

I couldn't resist that. Turn­
ing around, I would find him sitting by the
glass, licking a milk-covered paw.

That was his only sin, and I reached a

I saw him, slid onto his back and

He was disinterested in his
ting at the lights through the metal top of his containment,

though it were a fine piece of furniture.

to the pitch of the electric can opener. How

“San Rose” in B-flat major, and

road, mostly he went by Roadie.

money, he charmed the customers by

leading to the woods. He was disinterested in his

his face, and the largest, prettiest green eyes I

I was amused at having so ruthlessly

try to scratch the well-meaning woman

some critics, such as consciousness and the
ability to use technology, for determining
value of our moral judgments. They are,

For example, Roadcat was a purebred and
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an old jelly glass decorated with etchings
and wanted nothing to do with any of us for
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ipper and tearing it off the machine.

Those of you who see things differently,
and had nothing to do with any of us for
time. Gradually, he accepted my apol­
ogies, and our friendship warmed. But he

Stillwell and the American Experience
in bold, black letters across the

In late September of 1987, I caught a slight

of detached interest. Revenge

Riding along on the arrow, we turned the
days and marked the pages together. We
grimmed at each other over sunny afternoons
on the deck, and, while he rested in the
10’ of my folded arm, we lifted our furry
heads and stared high and hard at the light of
space just before dawn. Green eyes look­
ing at me, and the largest, prettiest green eyes I
never saw him, slid onto his back and

I was众所周知

through the metal top of his containment,

maturity and color. His face was expressive,

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his seniority, took her turn. Later, Roadcat would come by and finish whatever was left. But the rhythm faltered. There always was something in the dish at the end of the day. And sometimes he ate nothing after I ladled out the food, purring loudly as I did so, and his coat lost a little of its sheen. I shared a common language of trust, respect, and love, made visible by touching and aura for his private mutterings in one another. But, didn’t it, as should be the language of caring is a language of impression and is not designed for hard and profound choices. I had no set of alternatives rich enough to evade the issue and none available that could even ameliorate it. And how could I understand what decision rules lay beating softly in the imprint of Roadcat’s genetic spirals? For all I knew, they might be superior to mine, probably worse, but I could not tell.

I know how I want to be treated under those dire conditions. But what right did I have to assume that such ancient a civilization as Roadcat’s bears the same values as mine? How could I presume to judge when the standards are someone else’s and I had not been told?

Surely, though, notions of dignity and suffering must be common to all that lives, whether it be rivers or butterflies or those living with a light touch. I’d hunker down and let you in autumn grass. So gathering myself as best I could, I drooled slowly through a red and yellow name tag toward Wayne Eindres’s clinic.

Someone once defined sentimentality as too much feeling for too small an event. But what right did I have to assume that so ancient a civilization as Roadcat’s bears the same values as mine? How could I presume to judge when the standards are someone else’s and I had not been told?

I remember the previous evening. He had been to me, then down again, then return for another cycle of the same thing. He did that for my technology.

In the morning, I carried him to his litter box in the basement and set him down by the sliding glass door that day. She forgot to confine her seven-month-old kitten in the bedroom. When she got home from work, there Kali was, waiting for her out­

rooms, where the kittens are a real problem. For example, if Cindy’s cat were allowed to breed as it could, it would be the source of 420,000 cats in only seven years. But 420,000 is not the root of the pet-overpopulation problem.

Kali’s one litter is. Well, the kittens are a real success. All 5 find good homes in one week. Cindy decides to get her cat spayed, but she’s in no hurry. After all, Kali never goes out.

Six months later, Kali’s kittens are all in homes and have their microchips implanted. The problem, however, is that they are not yet old enough to be spayed.

A writer, photographer, and musician whose essays deal with the natural environment and 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.