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 laced out the food, purr failed to start, and his head went down to the floor. He shared a common language of trust, respect, and love, made visible by touching and aural for our private mutterings in one another. But, as it should be, the language of caring is a language of expression 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 I wish I had understood 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 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?

Surely, though, notions of dignity and suffering must be common to all that lives, whether it be rivers or butterflies or those with a light laugh and hold your hand as you walk in the woods; so, gathering myself as best I could, I drove slowly through a red zone, and hunkered down to you in autumn grass. By going, I mean that I could tell someone that something was amiss, that it was almost over. And the initial diagnosis was a kidney problem, which is not unusual in older animals.

After a few days, we brought him home. He was terribly weak and could scarcely walk. I laid him on a wool poncho, where he stayed the entire night.

In the morning, I carried him to his litter box in the basement and set him down by the sliding glass door. I nodded to Wayne and put my face next to his. Wayne Endres is a kind and patient man, but I could see he was working at the edge of his technology.

The following day, a Wednesday, Wayne called with his report. If it had only been a stroke, we might have worked our way out of it, even though cats don't recover from such things easily. But clearly, the tumor was large and it was little that would be done. It was up to me, of course. But Wayne's quiet voice carried the overtones of dignity and the language of the forest and the plains to tell him, once and finally, of my gratitude for his simply having been present.

And I wondered, as did S. H. Hay, "How could this small body hold so immense a thing as death?"

Eventually, his head lowered, and it was done. Georgia and I carried him home in a blanket and buried him in the woods along one of the trails where he earned his living. For some days after, I wore I would never go through that again. If it came to euthanasia, I would refuse to be present. I have changed my mind. You owe that much to good companions who have asked for little and who have traveled far and faithfully by your side.

Roadcat didn't just live with us. He was a spirited participant in the affairs of our place. He was kind to us, and we to him. I remember, when I came home in the evening, how the standard was a deadline to go home and start something for Kali. I would hunker down to you, and we would talk for a moment while he rolled over on his back and looked at me, blinking.

Georgia and I put the shovel away, walked back into the darkness, and stood by the little grave. By way of a farewell, she said, "He was a good guy." Unable to speak, I nodded and thought she had said it perfectly. He was, indeed, a good guy. And a true friend and colleague who rode the great ar­ row with me for a time, helping me turn the pages in some old book while the woods outside tumbled by, wet and wizing through the winter mornings of Iowa.

Robert James Waller, professor of manage­ ment at the University of Northern Iowa, is a writer, photographer, and musician whose work deals 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.


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 "lit­ ter-ate," we urge you to pass along this ar­ ticle to someone who could benefit from it; if you are not, we urge you to take heed.

Cindy forgets that the apartment repairman was coming to fix her 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 side under a pine tree. "Thank goodness you're okay," she sighed. A week or so later, the kitten is putting on weight. She is pregnant. What a disappoint­ ment, Cindy thinks. She had been wait­ ing for Kali to go through one heat cycle before she had her spayed—she'd always heard that was best. But Cindy wasn't wor­ ried about finding homes for the kittens. She will just take them into the clothing store where she works and put them in the window.

Cats have surpassed dogs as the most popular pets in the United States, with 306 million households owning cats. As a result of this surge in interest, pets that would otherwise be in state shelters are being modestly increased. Given the rate at which cats reproduce, it becomes clear there are so many homeless cats for example, Cindy's cat were allowed to breed at all, it could 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 4 find good homes in one week. Cindy decides to get her cat spayed; she's in no hurry. After all, Kali never

By Kate

Rindy

And

Honda

Lucas Donald

JUST ONE LITTER
Many of the people seeking to give away litters of puppies and kittens... think the hook is closed once the last puppy or kitten leaves with its new owner.

The median. The family discovers their dead pet, and the parents tell their crying children that these things happen and that they'll get another cat. In his short life, this cat fathers 8 litters—50 kittens.

The young woman who took the black female kitten lives in a no-pets apartment. When her landlord discovers the cat, he orders her to get rid of her pet or be evicted. Unable to move and unable to find anyone to take a mostly grown cat, she takes the animal to the outskirts of town and abandons her. In the year and a half before this cat dies of cancer, she takes the pet overpopulation. The cycle must stop before it starts—before that one litter.

In reality, the average "backyard" breeder may sell only half of the litter and end up giving away the rest. If the breeder has pro-

viding proper veterinary care to all of the ani-

mals, his or her profit margin is usually slim or nonexistent. There may be a dog or cat, even a purebred, for every home in Amer-

ica, but there is not a home for every avail-

able dog and cat.

One day, Susie is walking Bear in a park when they encounter a large male shepherd. Bear lunges, breaking his lead, and attacks the other dog. Susie tries to separate the dogs and is bitten by Bear. The police finally stop the fight. Each dog has cats and bite wounds but is otherwise okay.

Jack decides to have Bear neutered. He is astonished at how much better behaved Bear becomes and how much happier the dog is. Unfortunately, Bear manages to father 6 litters of puppies before his surgery.

The female dogs Bear impregnated have 34 puppies among them. Some of these puppies inherit their father's aggressiveness and pose problems to people in the neighborhood. One man, tired of the dogs coming into his yard, manages to shoot one of them. Two more die when they eat rat poison. Four are killed by cars. Animal-control officers capture 7 more of these nuisance animals and must euthanize them because they are ill or unadoptable. One of the dog owners recognizes the size and strength of the puppies and sells his 4 to a dogfighter. One pet owner takes his dog's 4 puppies to the animal shelter and then has his dog spayed. Of the 34 puppies Bear fathered, 22 feline or give birth to 156 more puppies.

Pet overpopulation is not a new issue to most people. Since the 1960s, groups such as The HSUS have worked to inform peo-

dle of the problem of too many pets and not enough homes and to encourage education, sterilization, and legislation to protect animals and address pet overpopulation.

But "pet overpopulation" may seem abstract to the average person who just has one litter on his hands. One—or even a handful—of animals from one person does not seem like an insurmountable problem. With a human population already saturated with pets and ten or twenty people bringing litters into each animal shelter daily, the picture becomes clearer.

Pet overpopulation comes from many sources. It comes from people who breed animals intentionally for profit or hobby. While it is true that there will always be a market for purebred animals, that market should be filled by conscientious breeders who are committed to improving their animals' breed in terms of genetics, behavior, and temperament, as well as desirable color, size, and shape. Pet overpopula-

tion comes from puppy mills, those cruel, often horrendous-breeding farms of pet-store animals. Pet overpopulation comes from the animals abandoned and left to fend for themselves, reproducing litter after litter.

Pet overpopulation comes from animal shelters that do not en-

sure that the pets they offer for adoption are spayed or neutered. These shelters are re-

selling doors for pets and their offspring. Pet overpopulation, or at least attitudes that perpetuate the problem, even come from advertisements for pet products. Happy children are the lure of pets. Pet owners who allow their unaltered pets to breed, however, are not doing their pets any favors. Low-quality genes are passed on, and the puppies are often sick. Those are but a few examples of the many problems that result from pet overpopulation.

Finally, pet overpopulation comes from pet owners who allow their unaltered pets outside, where they do not get the care they need. Many pet owners are not aware of the problems that result from pet overpopulation. It is necessary to educate pet owners about the importance of spaying and neutering their pets, of providing proper veterinary care, and of making sure that their pets are spayed or neutered. In most cases, before they make the deci-

sion to get a pet in the first place. Talk to your neighbor, your city council, your local media. With a single litter, a single animal, we can make a difference.

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