

AROUND TOWN

The cat as yogi

Gato at twilight

A friend writes:

Gato was only one year old when she delivered her first—or was it second?—litter of kittens, on the night John Lennon was shot. That puts this Old West Side cat at twenty-one years of age, old enough to drink, drive, and vote if only she were interested, had the energy, and were not a cat.

Gato lives the simple, almost ascetic life of a yogi. After many years of utter feline ferocity (she was a brutal killer of rabbits in her early years on Stein Road, just north of town), and after the nocturnal roamings and catfights of her middle years on Brown Street, just a block from Michigan Stadium, Gato has settled into her sunset years, her many, many sunset years, on West Washington Street in an old white house with a green porch.

Her days have a pleasant regularity. Up at about 8:30 a.m., she moves from her bed to a particular corner of one of the living room rugs, where she remains until about 9. Then she moves into the hallway and begins her "call"—a shrieking, bleating plaint designed to rouse her owners into wakefulness, which would be pathetic were it not so frightening. Gato is deaf as a post, her ears wrinkled and bent, in the aftermath of a bilateral ear mite attack about six years ago. Surely if she could hear herself, she would adopt a more melodious communication.

Not just any human will do. She waits for her prince, the local blues musician who got her (though for the life of him he can no longer remember where) as a kitten. She continues her song as he dishes up the morning repast, half a can of senior style. The two other cats in the house, both eight years old and doomed to eternal relative adolescence, get a quarter can apiece. They often wait for her to finish before entering the kitchen.

Upon meeting Gato, people used to say, "My God, that is the fattest cat I've ever seen." She wasn't that fat, really. Well, she was pretty fat. But it wasn't always so. "Gato was skinny when she was young," says the musician. "She was a fighter. Then, when she got old, she got fat—and then just continued living." Though her extreme ancientness has caused her to drop a couple of pounds recently, her vet regularly pronounces her healthy. At a recent visit, Gato was X-rayed to investigate the reason she had coughing fits whenever she was petted. The vet commented, almost admiringly, "She looks fine, and she's full of food."

Now that summer is here, Gato's next appointment is with the front



porch. This is the single longest trip of the day, but she manages it with a bit of a spring in her step. Deeply swaybacked, tail dragging, claws clacking on the hardwood floors, she ambles arthritically to the front door and sits down to await egress. When the door is opened, she lumbers outside and spends a moment reacting to the temperature and planning her next move. The door is held ajar during what her owners take to be the following internal dialogue:

"Hmmm. I'm outside."

"It's kind of chilly."

"Is it too chilly?"

"Hmmm. Could be."

"But it might warm up."

"True."

At this point, like as not, she heads for a 1940s-era olive-green velvet sofa at the far (sigh) end of the porch.

Gato can still

jump up onto furniture, but it takes increased concentration and planning. She stands in front of the couch and looks up at the cushion calculating angles, thrust, force, and g-ratio for about fifteen seconds.

Then . . . crouch . . . hesitation . . . crouch . . . hesitation . . . crouch . . . and spring.

Throughout the day there is sleep, a deep, loud sleep filled with dreams and a near constant moaning that at certain times sounds for all the world like distant human laughter.

A few years ago, when the prince's stepson was a young boy but Gato was already very old, the boy became fascinated with doing "research" on her. Using deductive techniques drummed into him by the Ann Arbor Public Schools science program, he undertook to better comprehend Gato's sensory capabilities. Sometime later, a tattered data sheet was found under a sofa cushion with such revealing statistical tidbits as:

"yelled her name . . . did not notis"

"hit sofa cushion with baseball bat . . . did not notis"

"flashlight in front of eyes . . . notist"

"put canned food in front of nose . . . notist"

In the cool of the Ann Arbor night, her owners remember that she is still outside on the green sofa, listening to her memories of birdsong. Because it is late, she gets "a ride" back inside. During the ride she is kissed numerous times on her strange and wrinkled ears. She is told how beautiful she is, what a good cat, a good old lady. Inside, her nose twitches with the familiar smells of food and other cats and friendly humans. She stops at her water bowl and drinks and drinks. Over two decades of dainty cat-sipping her bladder has grown to be something of a wonder, capable of holding oceans of liquid. For good reason,

Gato's bed is in the downstairs bathroom right next to an unused shower stall, which houses the litter box.

If the night is young, she might settle in for a stint under the coffee table. If there happens to be a bare foot nearby,

Gato may be up for a session of Big Toe, in which she nuzzles said pedal digit until rapturous, guttural purrs drown out the TV and she is told (nicely) to get lost. If she makes it up onto the couch, there may be time for a round of Hut, in which the stepson builds a complete shelter of sofa cushions around her. There's also Demon Drop, which is not as bad as it sounds.

Sometimes Gato needs to be put to bed at the end of another long day of being very old. She is lured or carried into the downstairs bathroom and placed on a tattered velvet pillow that came from a long-ago summerhouse and just might still smell of the sea. She stands for a moment and then settles down into a peaceful curl of cat. Sleep comes. She does not resist. ■

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