

Cat Power



Melbourne
at home
on May 21, 2014.

that the kitten was mine in all ways. “You’re gonna feed it. If it has to have a litter box, you’re gonna empty it. I’m not gonna help.”

All that consternation (“You know I don’t like cats”), all that conviction (“I had that housemate at A&M and I hated his cat”), all that stony gruffness (“My sister’s allergic to them. *You’re* allergic to them”) was no match, however, for the power of a hay-colored kitten. Melbourne, although sick and malnourished, held his tail high and marched up to Michael, climbed on his lap, and curled into a sweet ball.

“How can such a tiny thing be so confident, so friendly?” Michael wondered. The kitten bunted its head against Michael’s hand as he rubbed its cheeks and chin.

And that was that.

In his fifteen years with us, through moves and arguments and parties and dol-drums, Melbourne has been a constant. If you’re feeling lonely, you can holler for him out the door and he’ll come trotting through the grass, looking like a little camouflaged lion amid the yellowed grama. Address him by name and he answers with a bright chirp. He’s curious about new people and seeks out guests. Our son, Huck, who is thirteen, has never known life without him. When Huck drifts to sleep at night, Melbourne is there, overseeing bedtime from his spot next to the pillow like a purring, meditative yogi. He is the king of cats.

We have had working cats as well. Michael needed barn cats at his woodshop on the edge of Marfa to control mice. The Humane Society gladly handed over two large, wild Maine coons whose depthless hatred of people shone keenly from the discs of their golden eyes. We named them Otto and Mr. Carp and kept them in the shop for several weeks so they could acclimate to their new home, and then Michael sawed a cat-size opening into the back door. Months passed and we did not see them, which was fine with Michael, as he wanted no attachment to these animals. Things happen to barn cats. They fight, get

My marriage to Michael began cat-free. After all, Michael didn’t like cats. He’d tell you so outright: *Cats are standoffish. They don’t have a personality. Cats aren’t fun. No cats.* ¶ One very hot August afternoon, during a dump run early in our never-ending house renovation, I lured Michael beyond the dump’s brush pile to the sad tin shed that served as Marfa’s animal shelter at the time. Inside the shack was a cage with two small kittens. They were ribby. Their heads were too large for their bodies. Each of them had an eye that was cemented shut with crusted gunk. Their coats were shellacked with their own filth. It was more than 100 degrees inside, and something had recently died nearby. As we leaned closer to the cage in the dim shed, one kitten scrambled backward and hissed. The other kitten, the yellow one, stepped forward, fixed his open eye directly on mine, and placed a paw on the bars of his cage. “Oh,” I breathed. “Oh.” ¶ I don’t think we talked about taking him. I remember opening the cage, cradling the kitten, and feeling his skeleton beneath his shit-matted coat. Under that fur, under that fragile skin and his little birdy-bones, the kitten purred. ¶ Twenty minutes later, as we bathed the cat in the bathroom sink, gently picking the gunk from his eye, Michael sternly warned me

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO,
MY HUSBAND RELUCTANTLY
AGREED TO ADOPT A CAT.
TODAY, NONE OF US
COULD IMAGINE LIFE IN THE
COUNTRY WITHOUT
MELBOURNE (AND MONKEY,
AND OTTO, AND MR. CARP).

BY STERRY BUTCHER

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eaten, or wander. Sometimes they return, sometimes they don't. Other than the cat food that vanished each night, there was zero sign of any cat at the place. Nor was there a sign of any mice. One afternoon, a sudden commotion behind a stack of lumber drew Michael to investigate. There were the Maine coons, who had successfully tag-teamed a three-foot rattlesnake into a corner. They were considering, in tandem, how to kill it, one swatting and dodging from the front while the other worked its way across lumber and shelving to get at the furiously rattling snake from above. Michael deftly slung the snake onto the end of a hoe and flung the thing outside. The cats looked at him with an expression that seemed to ask why the hell he'd done that. "I'm sorry," he told them. "I was worried about you."



After their bravado with the rattler, Michael promoted Otto and Mr. Carp to wet cat food. This had a mind-altering effect. The barn cats, who had spent the previous months quite consciously avoiding us, perversely became our best friends. They mewled upon our arrival, wove themselves around and between our shins, and sat blinking on the toolbox while Michael milled wood.

Several years into our arrangement with them, Michael arrived at the shop to find Mr. Carp, the fluffier of the two, mangled in the middle of the dirt road. The cat yowled with hurt. It tried to crawl away from his approach, but its back was broken and its hind legs were useless. These injuries were disturbing and catastrophic. With no other weapon around, Michael took a shovel, gritted his teeth, and whacked the cat hard on the head. To his dismay, the cat staggered on its front legs, zombielike, and spat at him. Freaked, Michael swung again, a couple of times, to get the job done. Certain at last that the cat was dead, he looked up and realized our neighbor had stopped his truck in the road to watch. The neighbor gave Michael a long, dry look. "More than one way to skin a cat?" he asked.

Michael buried the poor creature and came home at lunch dispirited and unsettled. Three or four weeks later, he burst into Ray's Bar, his face coated with sawdust except for the raccoon mask where his respirator had covered his eyes and nose. "I killed someone else's cat!" he shouted to me gleefully. "It was someone else's cat! Mr. Carp came home!" The cat, our cat, had cruised into the shop that day and nonchalantly leapt to the food dish as though it were any other Tuesday, as though he hadn't been hit by a car and beaten to death with a shovel. Because he hadn't been. Some other fluffy tabby cat had, though, and perhaps someone, somewhere on the edge of Marfa, is wondering whatever happened to that big stripy barn cat that used

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to be around. Now they know.

We live just outside the city limits. To the east and north of us is rangeland, unbroken except by barbed-wire fences. Pronghorn glide through our pastures. Jackrabbits pause, ears up, when we walk the fence lines. These pastures were overgrazed before we lived here, and so for ten months of the year we keep our horses and donkeys off that land to allow the grass to slowly seed and re-cover the areas of bare earth. There is some grass at our place, which provides cover for the mice, quail, whiptail lizards, and other small things that inhabit these acres. These creatures are breakfast, lunch, and dinner for snakes, and while I'm happy and interested to see a snake from a certain distance, a snake close to the house sorely tests my general live-and-let-live sensibilities.

This is why I'm glad Monkey is on the job. Last year, just before Mother's Day, some elementary school children alerted their teachers that a feral cat was keeping her kittens in a large, woody bush in the schoolyard. Animal control was alerted and mama cat was taken away. A teacher said she'd adopt two of the three kittens. Michael had an idea for the last kitten. He raced into the house and danced from foot to foot. "It's almost Mother's Day," he said. "You're a mother. This kitten needs a mother."

The cat came home with us, of course. When she arrived, her impish antics puzzled Melbourne; we humans were entranced. Monkey looks like the sort of animal you'd want to do things with—run your hand across her soft gray stripes, perhaps, or settle with her on your lap as you read a novel. It turns out she is not that kind of cat. Go to pet her, and she's likely to shrink or duck to avoid the touch. Monkey does nothing that is not Monkey's idea, a trait that is alternately charming and frustrating. She dances with falling cottonwood leaves. She stretches on the bed with the luxury of a princess.

But such beauty disguises the bloodlust within. Monkey, despite her six-pound flyweight status, may be the most efficient killer in all of Marfa. Oh, the carnage she has wreaked! A headless warbler on the bathroom floor. A field mouse, flayed open on the threshold like a foreign delicacy. A large grasshopper, with most of its legs, centered on my pillow. It is a good thing that she's not the size of, say, a German shepherd, for then we'd all be in peril. In the deepest hours of the night, Monkey occasionally manages to wrangle live kangaroo rats through the cat door, and we awake to a crashing, careering rodeo. Upheaval ensues: cat chasing rat; other cat chasing cat and rat; our Russell terrier, Argus, chasing cat, cat, and rat; and

pajama-ed, sleepy-eyed mother, father, and child chasing terrier, cat, cat, and rat. Even so, it's hard to stay mad at Monkey.

Thanks largely to our cats, I can report that thus far we've seen no snakes close to the house and no mice or rats, except for those Monkey drags in. But while I appreciate their hunting skills, it's our cats' choice to live companionably among us that wows me, those moments when life with them seesaws between displays of sweet domesticity and unchecked wildness. Here's Melbourne on the porch, washing his face with a curled fist. Monkey pips a greeting from the step and then, possessed by an inner tornado, tears

off to the cottonwood, bounds five feet up the trunk, and winds, winds, winds around to the tallest, lightest of limbs, until the flock of yellow-headed blackbirds breaks from its roost, circles the treetop, and flies away.

The cats don't have to stay, but they do. In whatever silent bargain we've got with these animals, the relationship endures. Cats aren't people, and I don't know whether they experience emotions like we do. But I suspect that Melbourne settles nightly onto Huck's bed and that Monkey left a lizard on the kitchen floor because a profound, odd love wells in a cat's heart. Not always, for everyone, but sometimes, yes. ♣

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A black and white photograph of two young boys sitting on a wooden fence. Both boys are wearing cowboy hats and plaid shirts. The boy on the left is smiling at the camera, while the boy on the right is looking towards him. A Texas state flag is visible in the background behind the fence.



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