

Cats: That Other White Meat

Dogs aren't the problem in retaking control of Catville

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Cats are vain, cloying, exploitive creatures, prone to working their charisma on the lonely, childless and softhearted. Given enough Whiskas, they will colonize your porch, eat your garden lizards for sport, barf fur and otherwise lounge all day like opium princes. That is why I shoot them.

But I'm not the average cat sniper. As a child, I had cats that were more friends than pets -- Kitty Whiskers, Socks, Frisky, Fluffy and Meowzer; as a college student, I was a card-carrying member of PETA.

My cat-blasting regimen is less a pleasure hobby than a necessity. Two years ago, my girlfriend and I looked at a charming 1920s-era duplex apartment for rent in the Heights. The neighbors, on their side of the porch, were sitting on rocking chairs in their designer pajamas, sipping coyly from latte bowls. They were youngish, one was European, and they both asked if we liked cats. And we did like cats.

Yet our cat love was quickly put to the test. The night we moved in, we awoke to the sound of a whacked-out air-raid siren, which caromed between guttural whines and high shrieks. The ululations of dueling tomcats are probably not far from the screeches of the world coming to an end -- and almost as dependable as the 3 a.m. train.

Mornings brought other cat surprises. Breakfast on the sun-dappled porch felt like eating at a sidewalk cafe in Paris, where all the Frenchmen were felines. There were the reeling carousers, the goth witch cats, the gaunt waifs and the fat purebreds from town homes down the block. They all dined from one bowl, which the neighbors filled day and night from a 50-pound bag.

Living in Catville could be quaint. We fed scraps to some of the friendlier squatters. But sometimes we felt ourselves being stalked. Cat eyes were always upon us, and cat fur clung to our breakfast table and doormat. Little cat paths were worn into the grass and across the porch in mud. When one ragged, feral creature gave birth to kittens, it pushed the population past 20 -- all centered upon the small space outside the duplex's front doors.

The porch rarely stayed clean for more than a few days. The cats dragged up maimed creatures and left them to spill guts and blood, often beneath our table. I stepped on a gecko that was skinned but still alive. The bottomless cat-chow bowl spawned a battalion of cockroaches. And the traps I set did nothing but scatter the porch with twitching, six-legged carcasses. The roaches came back in waves, providing endless fun for the kittens.

Sharing the yard with so many cats made some outdoor projects nearly impossible. Our freshly seeded flowerbeds were pawed into latrines. We tried overlaying the seedlings with swaths of chicken wire, but our feline friends wormed underneath and defiantly pooped in the moist loam. We fared even worse with potted plants, which the cats batted off stoops and shattered like clay pigeons.

The neighbors presumptuously deputized us as cat feeders one summer weekend before they left town for a week. We filled the bowls until Tuesday, then stopped. As some of the cats galloped off to beg elsewhere, the respite left us longing to get out of the zoo. Yet the neighbors, like long-lost aunts, cooed over even the most scraggly porch denizens. We doubted they would curtail the feeding frenzy.

We swallowed our cynicism and appealed to the city. It turned out a strange law requires outdoor cats to be leashed. A cat catcher reportedly was dispatched to round up our porch's untethered felines. Yet to our knowledge, he never showed, and none of the cats disappeared. So we got smart. Or maybe like Cruella DeVil, we cracked.

I went to Wal-Mart and plopped down \$30 for a Daisy Buck BB gun. It was single-cock-action and surprisingly accurate. When the 3 a.m. howling match kicked off, I put on my glasses, stepped outside and shot one of the fuckers in the ribs. It jumped straight up like a misdirected rabbit, let out an airborne hiss and ran off. I've never slept better.

Over the next few weeks, I capped felines whenever they stepped in the yard. I was doing them a favor. If I had pestered Animal Control, they might have actually picked them up. And then they would have gassed them.

Sometimes cowboy justice really is better. And skeptics who say you can't herd cats are mistaken; they've obviously never shot them. The 4.5-millimeter peas from my gun bounce off their thick fur. But there are fewer turds on the porch, and the lawn's piss smell is fading. In the mornings we open the door, see a few cat tails whipping around the corners and sit down for a peaceful breakfast. We're even starting to like cats again.

***Mouse is a staff writer who is afraid to reveal his name.**