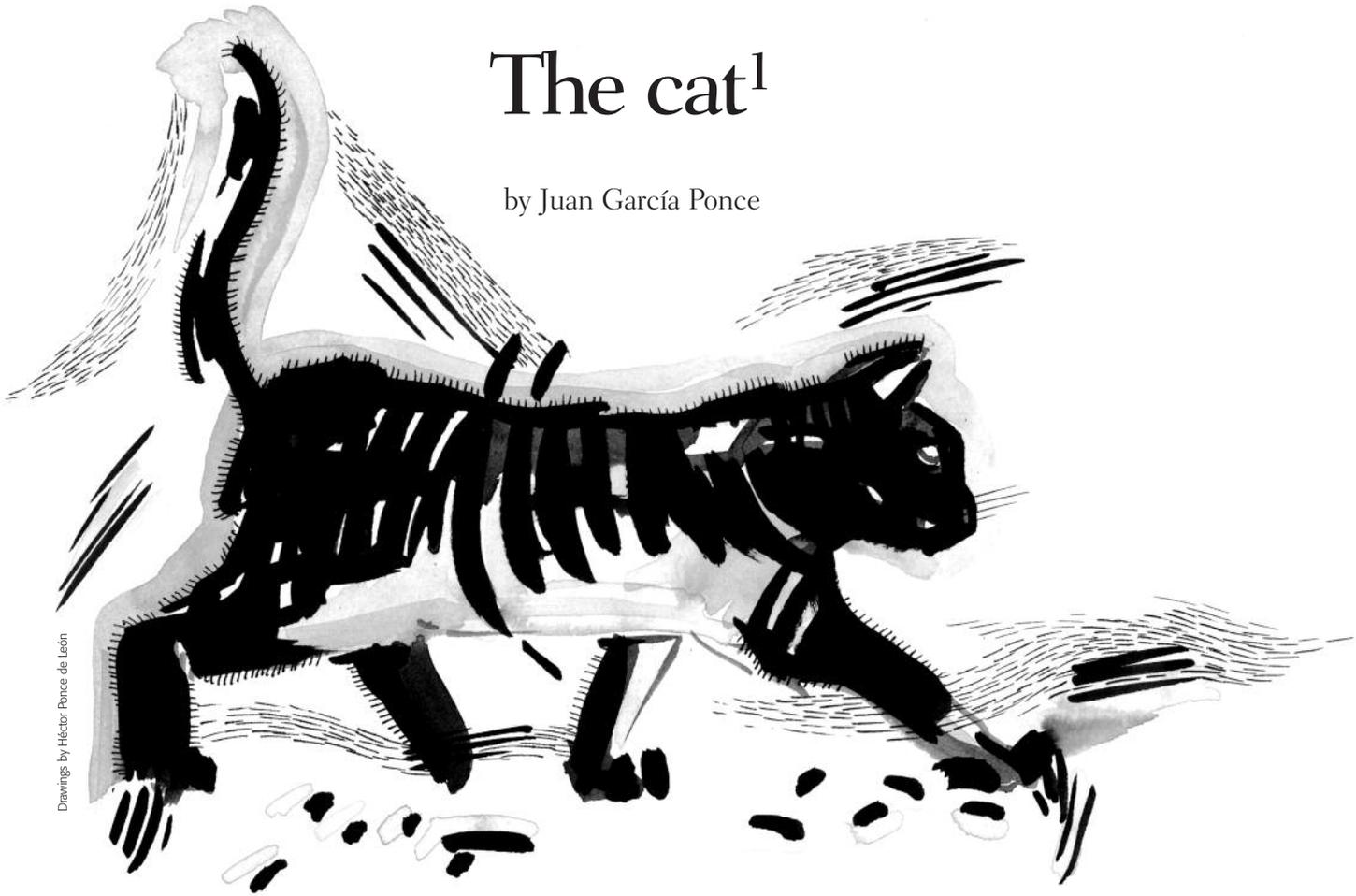


The cat¹

by Juan García Ponce



Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

The cat appeared one day and from then on was always there. It did not seem to belong to anyone in particular, to any of the apartments, but to the whole building. Even its attitude led one to suppose that it had not chosen the building, making it its own, but rather that the building had chosen it, so perfectly was its figure superimposed upon the general appearance of the hallways and stairs. That was how D started seeing it, in the late afternoon, as he left his apartment, or at night sometimes, as he returned to it: gray and small, stretched out on the mat outside the door of the apartment halfway down the hall on the second floor. When D, having climbed the first flight of stairs, turned to walk down the hallway, the cat, gray and small, a young cat still, turned its head round toward him, wanting him to look into its eyes, of an odd yellow, burning

amid its soft gray fur. Then it half closed them for a moment, till they became a thin slit of yellow light, and turned its head back round, ignoring the gaze of D, who went on looking at it nonetheless, touched by its lonely frailness and a little uncomfortable because of the disquieting weight of its presence. At other times, rather than in the second floor hallway, D would suddenly come across it curled up in one of the corners of the vast lobby or walking along slowly, its body hugging the wall, paying no heed to the warning of strange footsteps approaching. At other times still, it would appear on one of the flights of stairs, twined about the iron balusters, and then it would go down or up the stairs in front of D, starting off without turning round to look at him and getting out of his way just as he was about to overtake it, coiling about the balusters once again, shy and frightened,

though once he had gone past, D could feel its yellow gaze on his back.

The building D lived in was an old but well-preserved one, constructed with the sage architecture of 30 or 40 years ago which valued and reserved a place for accessory elements, the style of which had become anachronistic owing to its very character and yet had not lost its sober beauty. The downstairs lobby, the stairwell and the hallways occupied a vast space in the building and set their own solemn, antiquated stamp upon the entire edifice. A few days, perhaps a few weeks before the cat appeared, the unpredictable will of the doormen, as old and imperturbable as the building and all crammed in together with their children and grandchildren in the custodians' cubbyhole on the ground floor, keeping a mistrustful eye on the tenants as they came and went, had removed from the lobby the two heavy, threadbare velvet sofas and the small but solid wooden writing desk whose age-old presence accentuated the singularly conservative character of the building, untouched by the passage of time, and it seemed to D that the cat was now occupying

the place of the furniture. In some way or other, its inexplicable presence went well with the tone of the building and, significantly, D never saw it among the large round earthenware containers filled with broad-leaved tropical plants which the young couple in the apartment next to his had taken it upon themselves to place on the stair landings to liven up the hallway. The cat seemed to be averse to this remote reminiscence of a garden; the bare, spare elements of hallways and stairs were his territory. And so, in the same way that he had become accustomed to the two sofas and the writing desk that had filled the empty space of the lobby and now missed their presence, D became accustomed to coming across the cat all of a sudden and receiving its usual indifferent look and to seeing it go down or up the stairs in front of him without wondering who it belonged to.

D lived alone in his apartment and spent in it most of the time not taken up by his easy job, from which, in exchange for a few hours a day of methodical work, he received enough to live on; but his solitude was not total: a girlfriend visited him almost every day and stayed in the apartment every weekend. The two of them got along well together, and it might even be said, if it is of any importance, that they loved each other, although on a plane conditioned and determined by their bodies, which to the two of them, at least, appeared to be satisfactory enough. A pleasure D never tired of was to look, from almost every angle of the little apartment, in the idle hours that stretched out before them on Sunday mornings, at the naked body of his friend lying indolently on the bed, shifting from one attractive position to yet another that unfailingly accentuated even further a nakedness, which, owing to the awareness on her part that



he was admiring her and finding satisfaction in the exposure of her body, was almost insolent. Whenever D was by himself remembering his friend, he imagined her that way, stretched out lazily on the bed, with the bedclothes that might cover her invariably thrown back even when she was dozing, offering her body for contemplation with a total abandon, as if the one reason for its existence was that D admired it and in reality it did not belong to her but to him and perhaps to the furniture in the room as well and even to the branches of the trees in the street, which could be seen through the windows, and to the sunlight entering through them, radiant and diffuse.

Sometimes her face remained hidden in the pillow and her dark chestnut hair, neither long nor short, almost impersonal in its absence of relationship with her facial features, crowned the long line of her back extending downward till it disappeared in the ample curve of her hips and the firm outline of her buttocks. Farther on were her long legs, parted at an arbitrary angle, yet closely related. At such times her body to D was almost of the nature of an object. But also when she was lying facing him, allowing her tiny breasts with their bright nipples and the magnificent stretch of her belly with no more than a hint of her navel and the dark area of her pubis between her open legs to show, there was something remote and impersonal about her body's deliberate self-abandon and its surrender to contemplation. Beyond question, D knew and loved that body and could not fail to experience the reality of its presence as it came and went from one place to another in the apartment carrying on those little everyday activities whose meaning becomes lost owing to the mechanical way in which we get them over and done with. And he likewise felt it when she undressed in front of him or when it was she who moved, still naked, from one place to another in the apartment, suddenly turning toward D to make a trivial remark. Hence, the presence of his friend, their shared solitude, the deep, calm sensuality of their relationship, in which she

was always naked and belonged to him, formed part of his apartment in the same way that it was part of his life and when they were with other people the knowledge of this relationship would suddenly come back to D, involving him with a disturbing force that made him feel for the skin underneath her clothes and separated him from everything while at the same time it made him sense that the knowledge he had of her was projected toward the others as a sort of need to share her secret attraction with them. So to him she was like a bridge that one and all must cross in the same way that the light coming in through the windows fell on her body as she lay stretched out on the bed and the way that the furniture in the apartment seemed to look at her along with him.

On one of those Sunday mornings when she was lying drowsing on the bed, D heard, through the closed door of the apartment, pitiful, insistent meows, rolling back on themselves till they became a single, monotonous sound. D realized, to his surprise, that this was the first time the cat had marked its presence in this way. His apartment was directly above the one in front of the door of which, one floor below, the cat lay on the mat; but the meows seemed to be coming from somewhere much closer, giving the impression that the cat was inside the apartment. D opened the front door and found it, small and gray, almost at his feet. The cat must have been right outside the door, aiming his wails at it. Without leaving off its caterwauling, it raised its head and stood staring at D, half closing its eyes till they became two narrow yellow slits and then immediately opening them again. Instinctively, D, who a moment before had thought of going out to buy the newspapers as he did every Sunday, picked it up in his two hands, set it down again inside the apartment, went out the door and closed it behind him. In the hallway and on the stairs he could still hear its meows, insistently rolling on and



on and on, as though they wanted something and weren't about to give up till they got it, and when he returned, with the newspapers under his arm, they had not changed. D opened the door and went inside the apartment. The cat was nowhere in sight and its meows sounded as if they were not coming from any one particular place but, rather, were occupying all the space in the apartment. D went on through the living room-dining room, onto which the front door opened, and through the other door, at the far end, leading to the bedroom, he could see his friend's body in the same position in which he had left her, drowsing with her head buried in the pillow. The covers pushed down to the foot of the bed made her more stark-naked still. D entered the room, enveloped in the pitiful meowing, and saw the little gray cat, its eyes riveted on the naked body, standing on all fours in the middle of the other door to the room, as if it were unable to make up its mind to go in. The layout of the apartment permitted access to the bedroom from the entry hall by either of its two doors; one could go directly through the front room or go the long way round through the kitchen and the little breakfast room that opened directly onto it and onto the bedroom. D caught himself wondering whether the cat had taken this roundabout way or gone straight to the bedroom and was now merely pretending it couldn't make up its mind to go inside. Meanwhile, in the bed, beneath his gaze and the cat's, his friend changed position, stretching out her long leg and placing it right next to the other and putting one arm round the pillow without raising her head or allowing her chestnut hair to fall to one side and reveal her face. D went over to the cat, picked it up without its leaving off its meowing, left it in the hall again and closed

the door. Then he sat down on the bed, slowly stroked his friend's back recognizing the feel of her skin against the palm of his hand, as though it alone could take him to the depths of the body



stretched out before him, and leaned over to kiss her. She turned over with her eyes still closed, threw her arms around his neck raising her body so that it clung to D and with her mouth to his ear whispered to him to get undressed and continued to cling to his body as he obeyed. Later, as the two of them lay side by side, with their legs still entwined and enveloped in the mingled odor of their bodies, she asked him, as though she had suddenly remembered something that came from much farther back, whether at some point or other he had let in the cat that had been meowing outside.

"Yes. When I went out to buy the paper," D answered, and realized that the meowing had stopped now.

"Where is it then? What did you do with it?" she said.

"Nothing. I put it out again. There was no reason for it to be here. I wanted it to surprise you while I wasn't here," D said and then added: "Why?"

"I don't know," she explained. "I had the impression all of a sudden that it was inside and it surprised me and pleased me at the same time, but I couldn't make myself wake up..."

His friend stayed in bed till late in the morning, as D, sitting on the floor, alongside her, read the papers he had left on the table as he came in. Then they went out to have lunch together. The cat had not meowed again and it was not in the hall, or on the stairs, or in the lobby, and the two of them forgot the incident.

During the following week, though he did not hear it meowing again, D came across the cat several times, gray and small, looking at him for a moment, imperturbable on its mat in front of the apartment downstairs, curled up between the iron balusters on the stairs, going up or down in front of him without turning round to look at him, as though running away from him, or walking very slowly, right up next to the wall of the lobby, and when he closed the heavy glass door opening onto the street, leaving the cat behind, it seemed to him that it was acting more and more as though it owned

the building and waiting mistrustfully for D to come back exactly the way the custodians did, feigning indifference there on its mat or curled up between the balusters on the stairway, with its frail and delicate look of a young cat that is never going to grow up and yet does not need anybody. Despite the fact that at times its silent presence was disquieting, there was always something tender and touching about it that made one want to protect it, giving one the feeling that its proud independence could not conceal its weakness. On one of these occasions, D came across it as he was going up to his apartment with his friend and she, noting the small gray figure, asked who it belonged to, but was not surprised when D was unable to answer her and immediately accepted as though it were the most natural thing in the world the supposition that perhaps it didn't belong to anyone, but had simply entered the building one day and stayed on in it. That night they were in the apartment till very late and as on many other occasions his friend, who always said she preferred it if D stayed in the apartment after being with her, did not want him to get up to take her home. The next time they saw each other, she remarked that when she left she had come upon the cat on the stairway and it had followed her down to the lobby, stopping only as she was about to step outside, as though it wanted to go out into the street and at the same time was afraid to, so that she had to be very careful as she shut the door.

"I felt like picking it up and taking it with me, but I remembered that you said it had chosen the building," his friend concluded, smiling.

D made fun of her love for animals and forgot the little gray figure again; but the following Sunday, on coming back after buying the papers he came upon the cat, which he had not seen as he went out, curled up between the balusters on the stairs. He went by it without



its starting up the stairs in front of him and D, in surprise, turned round, picked it up, and went into the apartment with it. His friend was waiting in bed as usual and D, who had left her awake, tried not to make any noise as he closed the door, so as to surprise her. He was still holding the cat in his arms and it had curled up comfortably on his bosom with its eyes half closed. D could feel its little body, warm and frail, palpitating next to his. On entering the bedroom he saw that his friend had fallen asleep again, stretched out full-length on the bed, with her legs together and one arm over her eyes to shield herself from the light flooding in through the windows. There was no sign of expectation in her body. She was simply there, on the bed, beautiful and open, like a graceful, indifferent figure that held no secret for herself and yet at no time was unaware of the silent play of her limbs and the weight of her body, which gave form to its inherent reality, and was capable of causing her to be desired and of desiring herself in a double movement oblivious of its own starting point. D went over to her with the gray body curled up in a tight ball on his bosom and after looking at her for a moment with the same odd excitement as when he sometimes saw her fully clad in the company of other people, he very carefully set the cat down on her



body, very close to her breasts, where the little gray figure appeared to be an object barely alive, fragile and terrified, unable even to move. On feeling the weight of the animal, his friend took her arm away from her face and opened her eyes with a look of recognition, as though she had imagined that what had touched her was D's hand. Only on seeing him standing facing the bed did she lower her eyes and recognize the cat. It was lying motionless on her body, but on seeing it she gave a start in surprise, and the little gray figure rolled down alongside her on the bed, where it lay still again, unable to move. D laughed at her surprise and his friend laughed with him.

"Where did you find it?" she asked then, raising her head without moving her body to look at the little cat lying motionless at her side still.

"On the stairway," D said.

"Poor little thing!" she said.

She took the cat and set it down on her naked body again, close to her breasts, in the

same place where D had put it before. He sat down on the bed and neither of them stirred as they watched the cat on her body.

After a moment, the timid gray figure drew its paws out from under its body, stretching them out first on her skin and then setting off in an uncertain attempt to walk along her body only to come immediately to a dead stop again, as though unwilling to risk leaving it. Its yellow eyes turned into two narrow slits and then closed altogether.

D and his friend again laughed in amusement, as though the cat's attitude were unexpected and surprising. Then she began to stroke its back with a gentle repeated motion and finally picked the little gray body up in her two

hands and held it in front of her face, repeating over and over, "poor little thing, poor little thing, poor little thing," as she rocked it slightly from side to side. The cat opened its eyes for a moment and then immediately closed them again. With its paws hanging down, free of the hands holding it up by its body, it seemed much larger and had lost something of its frailness. Its hind paws began to strain downward, as though trying to support themselves on the body of D's friend and she stopped moving it from side to side and slowly lowered it, setting it down carefully on her breasts, where one of its extended paws directly touched a nipple. At her side, D saw how the nipple grew hard and erect, as when he touched her while making love. He stretched his arm out to touch her too and along with her breast his hand encountered the cat's body. His friend's eyes stared at him for the space of an instant, but both of them immediately looked away. Then she laid the animal aside and bounded out of bed in one leap.

For the rest of the morning they read the papers and listened to records, exchanging the same casual remarks as usual, but between the

two of them there was a secret current, perceptible only from time to time and allowed to die down by tacit agreement, unlike that of all the Sundays before. The cat had stayed in the bed and when D's friend stretched out lazily on the sheets, without covering herself, as she did each Sunday so that the sun would touch her body along with the air that was coming in through the open window and D's gaze began to become one with that of the furniture, she stroked the little figure from time to time or placed it on her body to watch the way the cat, which appeared to have recovered the ability to move on its own, walked on top of her, placing its delicate feet on her belly or her breasts, or walked from one side of her to the other across her long legs stretched out on the bed. When D and his friend went into the bathroom, the cat stayed on in the bed, asleep amid the rumpled covers that she had cast aside with her foot; but when they came out they found it standing stock-still in the living room, as though it had missed their presence and been looking for them.

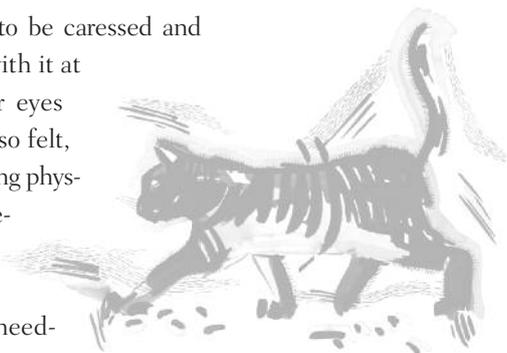
"What are we going to do with it," his friend said, still wrapped in a bath towel, pushing her chestnut hair to one side and looking at the cat with mingled affection and doubt, as though they had realized all along that ever since the innocent joke at the beginning it had been with them the whole time.

"Nothing," D said in the same casual tone of voice. "Leave it in the hallway again."

And though the cat followed them as they went into the bedroom again to get dressed, when they came out D took the cat in his arms and unconcernedly left it on the stairs, where it stood, motionless, small and gray, watching them as they went down.

From that day on however, whenever they came across it, silent, small and gray, in the hallway with its yellowish half-light spotted with dark shadows, in the lobby or on the stairway, his friend took it in her arms and entered the apartment with it. She would put it down on the floor as she undressed and the cat would then

stay in the room or wander indifferently about the living room, the breakfast room, or the kitchen, and then climb into bed and lie down on her body, as though from the first day it had become quite used to being there. D and his friend watched it, laughing, delighted at the way it made itself at home on her body. Every so often, she would caress it and it would close its eyes till they narrowed to a thin yellow slit, but most of the time she simply let it be there, hiding its head between her breasts or slowly stretching its paws out on her belly, as though it had not noticed her presence, until as she turned to embrace D it placed itself between the two of them and she pushed it aside with her hand. When D was waiting for his friend in the apartment, she always came in with the cat in her arms and one night when she announced that she hadn't found it in any of the usual places, the small gray figure suddenly appeared in the bedroom through the closet door. However, one day when she tried to feed it, the cat refused to eat a single mouthful, though she even tried taking it in her arms and bringing the dish up to its mouth. From the bed, D felt an obscure need to touch her as he watched her clasp the long slender figure to her and called to her to come to him. Now, on Sundays, the small gray figure had become indispensable next to her body and D's vigilant gaze noted its precise whereabouts, seeking at the same time to discover her reactions in its presence. She for her part had also accepted the cat as something that belonged to them both without belonging to anyone and compared her body's reactions to it with those which contact with D's hands produced in her. She never caressed it now, but instead waited to be caressed and when she lay drowsing with it at her side, on opening her eyes after falling asleep she also felt, as though it were something physical, covering her completely, the fixed gaze of the half closed yellow eyes on her body and then she needed to feel D next to her again.



Shortly thereafter, D was obliged to stay in bed for a few days with an unexpected attack of fever, and she decided to arrange things so that she could stay in the apartment taking care of him. Dazed by the fever, plunged into a sort of constant half-sleep in which the dim consciousness of his aching body was at once unpleasant and pleasant, D noted almost instinctively his friend's movements in the apartment. He listened to her footsteps as she went in and out of the room and thought he saw her bending over him to see if he was asleep, heard her open and close one door and then another without being able to tell exactly where she was, perceived the murmur of water running in the kitchen or the bathroom and all those sounds formed a dense, continuous veil onto which day and night were projected without beginning or end, like a single mass of time within which only her presence was real, simultaneously near and far, and through that veil he seemed to note the extreme to which they were united and separated, as each one of her

actions brought her into view before him, apart and secret, and for that very reason all the more his in this separation wherein she knew nothing of him, as though each of her acts were situated at the end of a taut, vibrating rope that he was holding onto from the other side, in the middle of which there was only a void impossible to fill. But when D finally opened his eyes all the way between two dream intervals without number, he could also see the cat following each of his friend's movements, without ever coming much closer to her, always a few steps behind, as though it were trying to pass unnoticed, but, at the same time, could not leave her alone. And so it was the cat, the presence of the cat, that filled the void that seemed to gape open inevitably between the two of them. In some way, it united them definitively. D went back to sleep with a vague, remote feeling of expectation, which perhaps was simply part of the fever itself, but in the space of which there reappeared, again and again, distant and unreachable at times, immediate and perfectly drawn at others, invariable images of his friend's body. And then that very body, concrete and tangible, slipped into bed alongside him and D received it, feeling himself inside it, losing himself in it, beyond the fever, as at the same time he apprehended, through those very sensations, how she was always there before him, unreachable even in the most intimate closeness and therefore more desirable, and how she sought his body in the same way, until she left him alone in the bed again and began once more her obscure movements about the apartment, prolonging the union by means of the fragmented perception of them that fever gave to D.

During those long moments of concrete rapprochement, the cat disappeared from D's consciousness.



On one occasion, however, he realized that it too was in bed with them. His hands had come upon the little gray figure as they wandered over his friend's body and she had immediately moved in such a way as to make the meeting more complete, but this end was never wholly realized and D forgot that there was an alien presence next to her. There had been no more than a brief ray of light in the middle of the dark lagoon of the fever. A few days later the fever broke as unexpectedly as it had come on. D began going out again and was with his friend in the company of others. There appeared to be no change in her. Her fully clothed body held the same secret that D suddenly wanted to bare before everyone; but as the moment approached when they would ordinarily have gone to the apartment, she began, despite herself, without her apparently being consciously aware of it, to show clear signs of uneasiness and tried to hold off their arrival, as though there awaited her in the apartment a confirmation that she was unwilling to face.

When, after a number of delays inexplicable to D, they finally entered the building, the cat was not in the lobby, nor in the hallway, nor on the stairs, and as they made their way along them D noted that his friend was anxiously looking about for it. Then, in the apartment, D discovered a large reddish scratch on her back. They were in bed and when D pointed the scratch out to her she did her best to get a look at it, breathing hard, straining as though she were trying to feel it outside her own body. Then she asked D to keep rubbing the tip of his fingers over the scratch as she lay motionless, tense and expectant, until something seemed to break inside her and with panting breath she asked D to take her.

The cat did not appear on the following days either and neither D nor his friend spoke of it again. In reality, both of them thought they had forgotten it. As before the appearance of the fragile little gray figure between them, their relationship was more than sufficient for the two of them. On Sunday mornings, as always,

she lay stretched out full-length on the bed, open and naked, displaying her indolent body as D whiled away the time carrying on the usual little everyday activities; but now she was unable to doze. Hidden behind her indolence and completely alien to her will, there appeared, more definite by the moment, an evident attitude of expectation which she tried to ignore, but which obliged her to keep changing position without finding repose. Finally, on returning after going out for the newspapers, D found her waiting for him with her body raised up off the bed, leaning on it with one elbow. Her gaze was frankly directed at D's hands, searching without even noticing the newspapers and on failing to find the hoped-for gray figure she let herself fall back on the bed, allowing her head to loll almost out of it and closing her eyes. D went to her and began to caress her.

"I need it. Where is it? We have to find it," she murmured without opening her eyes, accepting D's caresses and reacting to them with greater intensity than ever, as though they were one with her need and capable of provoking the appearance of the cat.

Then the two of them heard the long plaintive meows immediately outside the door in a transport of ecstatic happiness.

"Who knows," D said in a barely audible voice, almost to himself, as though all words were unnecessary, rising to his feet to open the door, "maybe it's simply a part of ourselves."

But she was unable to hear him, her body awaiting, tense and open, only the little gray presence. **MM**



NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Encounters*, translated by Helen Lane, with an introduction by Octavio Paz (Hygiene, Colorado: Eridanos Press, 1988), pp. 5-22.