



## OVUNQUE SIAMO

NEW ITALIAN-AMERICAN WRITING

Anna Monardo

### THE CAT

Neither of us wanted the cat, but we didn't admit that—not to our friends or to each other or to ourselves, not for a long time. We found her in August, during my visit to the poet. I'd met him three months earlier when he was a visiting professor at the university where I taught fiction, and I'd just flown from New York to the southern Missouri town where he taught. On my way, I'd had several flight delays, which I interpreted as the gods' suggestion that I turn around, go home, spare us both. Romance-wise, the stakes were high. I was thirty-nine, never married,

childless, hoping to somehow have a baby, and spooked by my history of serial breakups. Meanwhile, the poet was more than a decade older and already father to three teens. He was tenured; I was not. One thing we did share: grief. My father had died not long before, and the poet's decades-long marriage had recently collapsed.

*Cute, I'd thought when I met him, but no way.*

Except we made each other laugh. And when I arrived in his town and met his kids, I was crazy about them, and the poet wasn't turned off by how often I mentioned babies as we walked each evening down the country roads that flanked the suburban development he'd moved to post-divorce. His backyard was still a mud pit, and on our walk that night we were embellishing a plan to grow tall wild flowers rather than grass. We'd build a patio from native stones and never own a lawnmower. In these small ways—as well as in big ones—we would, together, transcend the reckonings of any quotidian narrative. Holding hands, sharing his meerschaum pipe, we passed a field over-fraught with plump ears of corn, and there in a roadside gully appeared the kitten.

No, wait. I wrote that scene based on how I remembered it, but when I looked in an old journal, I found this:

We were walking down the country road, it was evening, when, on the brink of an argument, we interrupted ourselves because we heard an insistent crying from the trough of weeds alongside the country road by the chicken farm. We walked over to the sound, happy to be lifted out of our argument, which I had a feeling was likely to bring us to some irreconcilable place where I'd have to do what I'd been doing with men forever—leave. But instead of having the argument, we found the kitten. The color of her fur sliced her down the middle—half dark, half light. Tortoiseshell patterned, abandoned, maltreated, pulling her wormy butt along the road, crawling with fleas, as small as a hand but as insistent as a fist in the way she socked herself into our lives, into what by then was already the beginning of *our life*. That line down her face always fascinated me. I'd try to touch it, but she'd flinch.

So much for the accuracy of memory. I do know that when I wrote that journal entry, two things were happening simultaneously—there was my impulse to leave the relationship because of its logistical complications and our increasing number

of arguments about those complications, *and* there was the intricate planning for our shared future.

I wouldn't touch the cat, didn't know what to do with a cat, had never had a pet, though I'd flirted with the idea because I'd been told by more than one therapist that the unconditional love between pet and owner would be a good lesson in learning to trust myself. But I didn't know where to start, and this wormy thing was so insistent, twining herself between our ankles. I kept saying, "We can just keep her in the garage tonight and take her to an animal shelter in the morning."

He kept saying, "They'll kill her there."

I kept thinking, So what? But I didn't say that aloud.

Everything we said skated around the impossibility of making a good choice. We turned and headed home and the kitten followed and so then she was ours, living in the backyard.

Three weeks later, in an act almost as impromptu as our acquisition of the cat, the poet and I married after a four-day engagement.

Not long after our wedding, I flew back to my job for the fall semester. My new husband visited a few times over the following weeks. During one visit I was extraordinarily tired. "Maybe you're pregnant," he said.

I scoffed, but he went out and bought a pregnancy test, and the result was positive.

I told no one my news. I don't know why I told no one. I do know. *Baby* was too precious a word to breathe into the world. I couldn't risk attracting the attention of any Evil Eye.

And yet, for all my caution, it happened. Miscarriage.

Now grief was compounding grief. The poet and I had liked to say that before we met, we had been calling to each other over distance and time—"as deep calls out to deep"—howling our respective pain, and we'd heard each other and, finally, come together. But now this. After the miscarriage, a surgical procedure, and a

subsequent energy-sapping infection, I resigned my teaching position and returned to Missouri. The least I could do was give my marriage the best possible shot.

Three months into our cohabitation, I was pregnant again. Another miscarriage. Same routine. By this time, the cat had slashed some of the window screens so we had taken her in for her own surgical procedure. Declawed, unable to defend herself, she was now confined to the house. I had named her Gigi, expecting she'd deliver the hard-won happy-ever-after of Colette's 1944 novella *Gigi*, and the 1958 movie, but so far, no. Sometimes the poet and I liked the weight of the cat on us as we lay together on the couch in the evening to read. Sometimes we did not. Sometimes we just settled in at our separate desks. I'd pull Gigi onto my lap, and she was a warm heartbeat beneath my hands, but then out of the blue she'd swipe at the keyboard or nip me with her little teeth and I'd have to toss her out and close the door behind her.

I had no right to be upset. Gigi's patterns, by now, were clear. For a day or two, maybe a full week, she would do no harm. Then, predictably, she'd do something unpredictable and destructive. Many mornings, we found our framed pictures askew because Gigi had been literally climbing the walls. We wanted to trust her but too often we were woken by the sound of something breaking on the kitchen counter.

"Maybe you're not cat people," a friend told me over the phone, "or maybe she's not your cat."

My unspoken fear was that Gigi very much *was* our cat: unpredictable, sniping, beautiful, Janus-faced, affectionate, and increasingly dark.

I had no right to be shocked by what went on between the poet and me in marriage. I was too old to be naïve about the high-pitched discord possible between two people who'd pledged to love one another forever even though their previous pledges had collapsed. Often, I could tell from the way the garage door opened if our evening was not going to go well.

I lived in the house in Missouri for one full year. Of my hundreds of nights there, I remember occasional warm Sunday evenings when, after our walk or a drive into

town for dessert, I'd linger in the driveway and look up at our country sky patched with stars. Summer nights were cluttered with insect noise and the slanting scent of chicken shit, and had an end-of-the-world texture to them. This is your life, I'd tell myself. Often, this made me smile. I was now a sandal-footed, dusty woman who lived near pastures and wore all manner of thrown-together clothing, hair pulled up into odd piles. As a married woman in Missouri, I felt more solidly on latitude with my Calabrian peasant ancestors than with New York or any life of my own imagining.

How modest our wedding had been, with a slight air of desperation to it, like the wartime weddings I'd heard about in Italy. One of my uncles had had a friend whose wedding shirt had been quickly sewn from the cloth of an American soldier's parachute.

I'd parachuted myself into marriage as if on a mission—the purpose was urgent but unclear. Except on those occasional nights when, standing outside of our house on a road skirting farmland, far from the urban and suburban lives we'd lived before, I felt proud of my husband and me, engaged, as it seemed we were, in a noble experiment in the redemptive powers of middle-age love.

As good as the poet and I often were together, though, we were eventually brought down by a meltdown—sometimes his, sometimes mine.

“Who are we,” I asked him once, “when get the way we do?”

“Two people,” he said, “who are frightened.”

A few months after the second miscarriage, two years before our divorce, I visited friends in New York, and while I was there, my husband called to tell me he'd put an ad in the local paper, and a mother and her daughters had just come to our house and taken Gigi away.

“You gave her away without asking me first?” I tried to sound upset, as in the early days I had tried to pose as a person who liked cats—*Here, kittykittykitty*.

“Sweetheart,” he said, steering us away from the argument we were headed toward, “you don’t want that cat under your feet anymore than I do. We tried and it didn’t work.”

I had to concede that he was right. I admitted that I, too, was sort of relieved to be rid of her. I bet we even laughed together. But later, after we hung up, when I was alone, I couldn’t help wondering what, exactly, we’d given up on when we gave away that cat.

**Anna Monardo** is an American novelist of the Italian-American experience. Originally from Pittsburgh, she is a graduate of Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana and received her M.F.A. from Columbia University in 1983. She is a professor of the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.