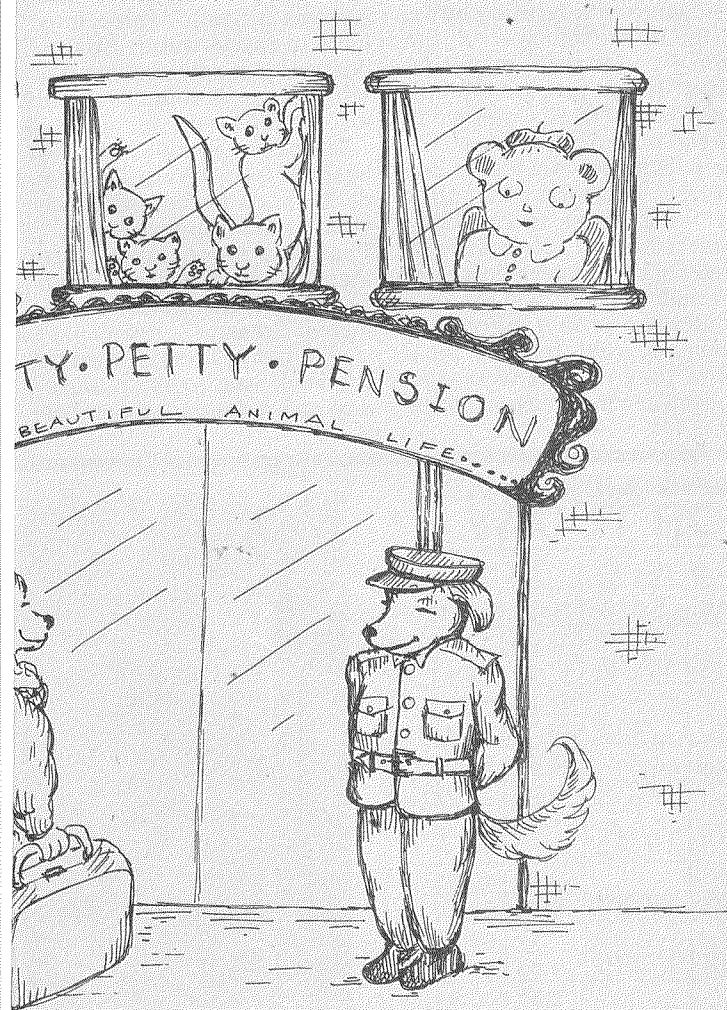


Japan's pet kingdom



of them looks like some rumpled old polar bear that's just had a run-in with a gang of Eskimos hopped-up on seal blubber. One look at this cat and we rule out pretty. Primal is more like it. When it opens its mouth to hiss at me, I feel as if I'm looking down some dark prehistoric tunnel.

The other cat may be on the pretty side, but that doesn't mean that it refrains from viciously attacking my feet as I'm putting food into its bowl. Furthermore, this does not mean that I then pick it up and smash it against the wall, or throw it out the window, at least not every time, because, from the point of view of animal psychology, I understand that this is merely the cat's way of paying homage to me, showing just how much it cares.

Yes, you see, I've read the works of the late great Franz Mesmer, who discovered, among other things, the existence of animal magnetism, the hypnotic bond between man and beast. This is the same Mesmer who was later guillotined in France for his crack-brained ideas. Nevertheless, I understand that it is

der my spell. Either that, or I'm under theirs, which might explain why I'm compelled to feed them every day.

Unfortunately, the power of hypnotic magnetism is an imperfect one. The next-door neighbor's house, for example, is more or less identical to mine. Occasionally the local cats get a little confused and end up prowling around on the wrong roof. The other day I heard her screaming, so I rushed over and found her upstairs trying to hold off a group of stray toms with a broom.

"My god," she howled, "what are these things?" "They're cats," I told her. "Never," she whined. "Cat is pretty."

"Yes," I said, "but these are mutants, crossbred with rats and lizards below ground, possibly throwbacks to the dinosaurs."

"Then I'm doomed," she cried.

"Not at all," I told her. I then went on to fill her in on the work of the great Mesmer, as well as giving her a brief rundown on my own animal magnetic gift, all of which she listened to with about as much interest as a

ning to work my magic on the cats. "Stop that hissing and yowling," I told them. "Go back. Retreat. Outside onto the roof. Now."

The next thing I knew, the neighbor herself was crawling out onto the roof, purring like crazy. I tried coaxing her back, but to no avail. Eventually I brought over a bowl of dry food, which seemed to keep her very happy. Explaining the whole thing to her husband when he got home from work was much more difficult.

Well, you're probably wondering, what's the point? Unknown at this time. But I think it is safe to say that we Americans relate to our animals differently than the Japanese.

Take, for example, the American guy who was recently arrested for hitting his mother in the head with the family Pekingese. Undoubtedly this is a rather churlish thing for a boy to do, but it is nice to see this sort of interaction between people and their pets.

But all is not lost here in Japan. Recently, the first pet hotel in Sendai opened. There are basically two schools of thought on pet hotels. One says that the appearance of pet hotels indicates that a society is about to make the big step up to a higher collective level of consciousness. The other says that the existence of pet hotels confirms that a society has already peaked and is in serious, irrevocable decline.

I figured I had to check the place out anyway. I mean, from the leaky doghouse to the pet hotel, there's a very big gap. I took the polar bear with me, thinking that she could use a few days in the lap of luxury.

"Excuse me, sir," the guy at the front desk said to me, "but what is that?"

"It's a polar bear," I told him.

"Sorry," he said. "Only cat, dog and bird here."

"One of each, huh? Must be a small place."

"And we only take animals whose feet have never actually touched the ground. Portable carry-on types, you know?"

So much for the pet hotel concept. On the way home the polar bear caught sight of a guy wearing one of those heavy fur parkas. She hissed once, then jumped out of my