

ANTHROPOMORPHIC

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1.

One day when I was five I was playing in the backyard while my mother gardened. I had recently watched an old black and white movie on TV, about a group of people who escape in a rocket because Earth is being destroyed by cataclysmic disaster. I took the garden hose and flooded an ant colony, all the while thinking about the movie's scenes of cities demolished by earthquakes and landslides. Mud and water overtook the ants as they tried to escape and I wondered:

Would I have been on the rocket or would I have been left behind to die?

My mother called me over. "Look what I found," she said, holding a newt in her cupped hand.

The newt's slow determined movements reminded me of a dinosaur. I asked if I could keep him.

My mother got a jar from the kitchen and placed the newt in it, along with some mud and grass. "Be careful," she said.

But the glass was slick from the mud and my grasp failed. The jar shattered against the

ground.

My mother sighed. “I *told* you to be careful.”

I watched in horror as the newt struggled to get away, leaving a thin trail of blood behind him. With each step he seemed to grimace with pain.

I bent down to help but my mother stopped me. “Leave him alone,” she said. “You’ve done enough.”

Later I cried in my room—not because I’d been scolded, but because when I remembered the newt’s face I was haunted by his doomed efforts to escape.

2.

When I was six my parents bought a purebred German shepherd because we lived in a suburb of San Francisco and the 60s—the decade of bombings and assassinations and Manson—were barely over. We named her Greta.

One day my friend Sophia and I were playing tag in the backyard. Greta had to stay in the garage whenever there were other children around and, because Sophia and I were screaming, she started barking. We thought Greta’s reaction was funny—we started yelling even louder, until we worked her into a frenzy. My mother came outside through the garage to find out what was happening, but when she opened the door she lost her hold on Greta. Greta leaped towards Sophia.

Our fake screams turned to real ones when blood appeared on my friend’s face. My mother grabbed Sophia and carried her into the house. Greta kept licking my face, her eyes registering the same panic I’d once witnessed from my mother when I ran out into a busy street.

I felt sick to my stomach—Greta had done this terrible thing because of *me*.

Sophia needed five stitches on her chin. My mother bought her an enormous doll, later, after we came home from the emergency room. Sophia’s mother, a Greek opera singer turned housewife, didn’t react badly to her daughter’s injury and my mother was relieved. I, on the other hand, found it impossible to hide my jealousy over the doll.

“You should be glad Sophia wasn’t hurt worse,” my mother said as we walked back to

our house.

I continued to pout in silence.

“Really Patrick, they could have *sued* us,” she said.

But I didn’t care. When Sophia came by later to show off her stitches *and* the doll, I found myself choking on bile.

“You’re just a big baby,” I yelled at her. “A big fat stupid baby.”

By the weekend the kennel in the garage was empty. My brother and I were told Greta had gone to live on a farm near Half Moon Bay, where she could run outside all day. I wasn’t given a chance to say goodbye to her.

I often wondered if she ever thought about me. I wondered if she felt bad about biting Sophia or if she felt like she’d only been doing her job.

3.

When I was seven my parents bought me a small turtle. I kept it in a kidney-shaped plastic tank that had an island in the middle and a tiny plastic palm tree. I didn’t take very good care of the turtle—the tank would turn fetid because I didn’t change the water, or I would forget to feed it for days in a row. Because I continued to neglect my pet, whose name I’ve long forgotten, my mother eventually gave it to Sophia.

I made a fuss when the turtle first went away, but my outrage was quickly replaced with the more honest emotion of indifference. I didn’t really miss the turtle. In fact, its only allure had been when I first saw it with the hundreds of other turtles in the giant tank at the pet store—my desire was always energized by overwhelming abundance, whether gargantuan packs of fireworks or gallon drums of rainbow sherbet or a swimming mass of green and yellow reptiles.

The turtle died not long after it went to live with Sophia. I made dark accusations that my friend had caused its death, disregarding the fact that my own carelessness had been responsible for the change in ownership. Sophia threatened to beat me up.

I found out from a mutual friend named Melanie that Sophia had buried the turtle in her backyard, a funeral at which Sophia’s mother had served homemade cookies and lemonade.

My jealousy grew into something hard and implacable: after all, *I* had been the turtle's primary owner. It didn't seem unreasonable to sneak into Sophia's backyard and dig up the turtle. My turtle would be buried in *my* yard.

Melanie told Sophia, who snuck into my backyard and retrieved the tiny corpse. This battle of wills went on until the turtle had been exhumed and interred three more times. Finally Sophia found a burial spot that escaped my detection. I was forced to admit defeat.

The turtle proved to be the breaking point in my relationship with Sophia. We never spoke again, not until my family moved to Montana and we were forced by our mothers to say goodbye. As we hugged wanly, all I could think about was the turtle—in Sophia's cool gaze I was forced one final time to acknowledge her triumph. Like a fetish object from some African religion, the turtle, wherever it lay, represented all of the power of our hatred.

It would never be uncovered and I would never forgive Sophia.

4.

When I was nine I convinced my paternal grandmother to buy me a parakeet. She kept the bird at her house. I named him Pete.

Unfortunately Pete refused to perch on my finger and *that* had been the whole point in getting him. Prior to buying him I'd checked out a book from the library that showed parakeets performing all sorts of tricks—pushing balls and *perching on human fingers*. Pete didn't even like to have anyone near his cage. Whenever you changed his water or added seed he'd flutter and squawk like he was being attacked by predators.

I grew increasingly bitter. I would watch the talented cockatoo on *Baretta* and brood over Pete's failure to live up to my expectations.

When I was twelve, my grandmother died and Pete came to live with us. His cage went on top of the bookcase in my bedroom to keep him safe from our cat. Placed out of sight, and without the lure of tricks performed on demand, it became easy to forget about him. Feedings were more and more infrequent. One day I remembered Pete and was overcome by a terrible feeling of doom. I pulled his cage down and confirmed the feeling:

Pete was dead.

My mother was sad about Pete's death because he was the parakeet that my grandmother had bought for me. I felt a powerful mixture of guilt and anger—because Pete had disappointed me I had become bored with him, and my boredom had led to a kind of negligent homicide. I was sure that my grandmother looked down from heaven and rued the day she bought Pete for me.

Now *she* was disappointed in *me*.

5.

When I was ten I decided to raise frogs in our backyard, in an old plastic wading pool. I captured the frogs from the creek that ran behind my great-grandmother's cabin—three miserable specimens who remained motionless at the bottom of the wading pool. The only way you could force them to swim was if you prodded hard enough, or threw a large enough object into the water. Otherwise, they looked and acted like they were dead.

Summer ended and leaves began to fall into the wading pool, so that the top of the water was covered and you had to fish around to find the frogs. One morning I had to break through a thin layer of ice. I stirred the water and leaves with a stick but the frogs were nowhere to be found.

I never did solve the mystery. I don't know if some animal caught them or if they finally found a way to escape. I was more than a little spooked by their sudden disappearance, because it seemed like Mother Nature was speaking some kind of judgment against me.

I take care of my own, Mother Nature seemed to say. *You wouldn't understand even if I explained it to you.*

When spring came I was more than willing to drain the wading pool of its filthy water and help my father take it to the dump.

6.

When I was eleven and my brother Tim was eight, we found a baby robin that had fallen out of its nest. The chick sat on the ground with an injured wing, while its mother fluttered

nervously in the branches above.

We gathered up the baby in a handkerchief and decided to take it to a house up the street. The owner of the house, unseen by either of us, was reputed to own chimpanzees and parrots and exotic fish.

“He’ll know what to do,” I promised Tim.

The owner of the house, a disheveled man my parents’ age, invited us in after we explained our visit. He had the annoyed attitude of a celebrity asked for an autograph.

“Everyone thinks I’m a zoologist,” he said. “But I’m not.”

He took us into the back of the house, where it was dark and noisy with the sound of motors and air hoses. Giant aquariums lined the walls, one holding several wafer-thin fish with underbites.

“Those piranhas will take your finger off if you’re not careful,” the man said. “So keep your fingers out of the tank.”

A red and yellow parrot was perched on a piece of driftwood. The bird squawked at Tim and flapped its wings menacingly.

“She’ll take your finger off if you’re not careful,” the man said. “So keep your fingers away from her beak.”

I was now feeling very anxious—the whole house was filled with danger at every turn. I wanted nothing more than to leave, but the man held our chick, and there was something about his demeanor that suggested it would not be wise to cross him. Finally we stopped in front of large glass cage with a wire screen covering.

The cage held a full-grown python.

“You know the bird is dead already, as far as nature is concerned. Once you kids touched it the mother won’t have nothing more to do with it. And no way it’ll survive on its own, right?”

I nodded weakly, unable to speak.

Tim’s brow furrowed. “But we thought you could put its wing in a cast.”

The man snickered. “The kindest thing you kids can do is put it out of its misery. And

you may as well let the snake do it for you. It's all about mother nature, no hard feelings right?"

Tim stared at me with disbelief. I swallowed hard and couldn't look at either my brother or the baby chick or the man.

"Right," I said.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "You kids can leave through the back."

We walked out into daylight, squinting our eyes like we'd just come out of a movie. We walked through the backyard, filled with overgrown lilac bushes and empty appliance boxes. A very old hound dog, tied to a post, started barking at us half-heartedly.

I looked at Tim and saw the bitter disappointment in his scowl. I understood his look without having to ask: we'd just helped murder the bird and the guilt of that would be impossible to erase.

7.

When I was twelve my family was given a female black lab by the man who wrote the self-help book "I Ain't Much—But I'm All I've Got." The dog's name was Inca and she'd been rescued from an abusive owner.

My brother and I had pestered our parents for a dog since Greta's departure, but the dog we'd envisioned was a puppy—a blank slate upon which we could inscribe our every command. Inca, to our disappointment, was an adult with a long list of annoying, entrenched behaviors.

She hated to play fetch. If you picked up a stick she would bark furiously and snap at your hand, often breaking the skin if you weren't careful.

She had an obsessive-compulsive need to lick your face. Inca's tongue would dart out of her mouth with a mind of its own, even after she was scolded and pushed away. In fact, to rebuke her merely made the behavior worse.

Most of all, she couldn't stand being left behind. If we drove away without her she would try to find a way out of her kennel to run after the car. My brother and I thought this last behavior was hysterically funny. Sometimes we would leave the door ajar just so we could watch her chase after us through the Catholic cemetery behind our house.

Whenever this happened our mother would pull over to the side of the road and wait for Inca to race across the busy road.

“That God damned dog,” she’d say every time. “*What* is her problem?”

My brother and I would sit there with stupid looks of incomprehension, letting Inca lick our faces once she got into the car.

When I was thirteen we moved to Hawaii. My parents found out there was a six-month quarantine for all animals brought into the islands, so they decided to give Inca to our veterinarian.

“She wouldn’t last a day in quarantine,” my mother said.

The veterinarian was a bachelor with a large piece of property on the edge of the Helena valley. Over the years he’d grown fond of Inca—the fact that she tried to bite you when you played fetch didn’t bother him at all.

“She thinks you’re going to hit her,” the veterinarian explained when I complained about the behavior. “Someone must have beaten her with sticks and she can’t forget.”

After we moved we got a letter from the veterinarian telling us that Inca had disappeared. He suspected she was older than we thought and that she might have been dying.

Dogs will sometimes sneak off to die alone, he wrote. It’s instinctive.

But I thought otherwise.

I pictured Inca running after our car when we left her with the veterinarian—chasing us over the Continental Divide, through the forests of Western Montana and Idaho, all the way to Seattle. I pictured her watching us fly off to our new life in Hawaii—without her. I pictured the despair on her face when she realized there was no way to overcome the Pacific Ocean.

I pictured her thinking:

I knew I couldn’t trust them after all.

8.

When I was thirteen I ordered a newt from a company that advertised in the back of Archie comics. The cost was five dollars, including shipping and handling. I’m not sure what my

plan was once I received the newt, because I didn't research what they ate or what kind of habitat they needed. All I know is I wanted one *badly*.

Two weeks after I mailed the order form I received a small styrofoam box containing a limp piece of moss and a newt about half an inch in length. I was relieved that the newt was healthy, but I was soon overcome with anxiety as he crawled in my hands.

"You don't seem very excited," my mother remarked.

I shrugged—she was right.

Later, before dinner, I sold the newt to a boy who lived on our street. I tried to act like it was big decision for me, but in fact I was relieved. I didn't even mark up the price. When the boy's father came by to give me a five-dollar bill my mother pulled me aside.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked.

I nodded. "I can always get another one."

But I never did.

9.

My boyfriend Joe used to keep nun finches. The birds were never formally named, but we called one of them Oldie because some of his feathers were grizzled from age. When Oldie could no longer hop around in the bath at the bottom of the cage, we gave him showers with a squirt bottle. Oldie would chirp with excitement when we sprayed him. He'd lift one wing, then the other—singing happily while the other birds clung to the sides of the cage, frozen with terror.

One day we found Oldie on the floor of the cage and it became clear that he was dying. Joe moved him to a tissue-lined box so he could die in peace.

Later that night, after Joe buried him in the front yard, I thought of Oldie's song whenever we gave him a shower. I went to our bedroom and cried, until it seemed silly to be mourning a bird.

Get ahold of yourself, I thought. *You're merely being sentimental*.

But then I would think of Oldie's song and I'd start crying all over again.

10.

I own a freshwater aquarium. At one time it was filled with expensive live plants but they eventually succumbed to hairy algae—there was either not enough light or too much; not enough minerals or too many. I gave up on the plants because I didn't have the time or the patience to solve the mystery.

The tetras, on the other hand, have done well. When I got them they were about as big as a dime—now they're the size of a quarter, a few even bigger. I take care of them to the best of my ability. I clean the tank every other week; I feed them regularly.

But I have to confess: I've never really warmed up to them.

I wish I could feel more than I do. The tetras are beautiful. They school in a *very* pleasing fashion. They even swim towards the top of the tank when I open it, as if they were greeting me.

But I know they're not greeting me. I *know* they don't think about me at all—I can see it in their vacant stares as they await their food.

When I was trying to save the live plants, I came across a website that recommended Siamese Algae Eaters. The owner of the website was a narrowly obsessed hobbyist who bullied readers from his message board.

pls don't tell me u changed > 25% H2O. ok? if u did u r a MURDERER!!!

The site offered slight anecdotal evidence that SAEs liked to eat hairy algae, yet I responded to the bully's authoritative voice. I bought a female SAE and hoped for the best.

Of course the SAE never touched the hairy algae, but I can't say I was terribly disappointed. She's shaped and moves like an ICBM, her tail fin fluttering like a propeller. She used to eat the regular algae that grows in the tank, but stopped bothering when she realized rations fell from the sky twice a day.

What I find most charming is that she's quite discreet about eating the tetras' food. She'll dart towards a flake until she sees me watching her—then she'll reverse direction, as if saying:

Why would I eat the tetras' food? I eat algae, remember?

Every so often she'll tuck herself in between the thermometer and the wall of aquarium. I'm still not sure why she does this, but the first time I saw her do it I feared she was hurt. I

tapped on the side of the tank and was relieved when she swam away.

It was my relief that revealed to me how much I care about the SAE and how little I feel towards the tetras.

Lately she's started chasing the tetras. Maybe she does it because they're now bigger than her and she feels a preemptive need to intimidate them. Or maybe she's just bored—maybe she's had enough of the well-mannered tetras.

God knows I would.

Good for you, I think whenever she darts at the other fish like a little heat seeking missile. I smile my approval, even though I know she'll never see it.

11.

I almost got rid of the tetras about six months ago. I was at a pet store and discovered fire newts, a species native to Japan, for sale. Joe, seeing my interest and knowing of my disappointment with the fish, bought me a book on how to care for newts and salamanders

Every night I read the book before I went to sleep. I imagined creating a marsh habitat in my aquarium, with a little waterfall and a mini-pond. I imagined lush maidenhair ferns surrounding the water. I imagined a tribe of five or six newts, happily splashing about the waterfall and mini-pond.

It was a beautiful and deeply satisfying fantasy.

One day I went back to the pet store to look at the newts again. They were next to a tank filled with neon-green tree frogs. As I observed the newts and frogs, I recalled an article I'd read about how amphibians are quickly becoming extinct—they're among the first in the animal kingdom to succumb to global warming and ozone depletion and pollution.

I continued to look at the newts and the tree frogs and the more I stared at them, the more they seemed miserable. Their tanks were dirty and ugly, their habitat haphazardly constructed and maintained. The animals didn't move at all, their expressions frozen in a kind of despair.

At that moment I recalled the film I'd seen as a small child, about the rocket ship that carried a group of humans to start a new life on Mars. I wondered if the newts thought this

tank in Petco was going to save them, like Noah's Ark, from the awful fate that awaited all amphibians. Or were they miserable because they'd come to realize that second chances only happen in the movies?

I didn't try to find out. I went home and put the book about newts and salamanders in a box in the garage.

12.

It was the end of summer last year. I was sweeping our driveway when I discovered a large spider, about an inch in diameter, on one of the butterfly bushes. Her body was a translucent jade green, her legs caramel-colored and prickly with tiny hairs.

I called over Joe.

"Yuck," he said, clutching my arm.

"I think she's beautiful."

"Good for you," he said. "I say yuck."

I began to check on the spider daily. Eventually she built a cone-shaped web around a dried flower stalk and inside laid an egg case that resembled a spiky apricot pit.

I admired the way she guarded her eggs. If you blew on her she would scurry to the egg case and hug it with all of her gorgeous, caramel-colored legs.

"Stop bothering her," Joe said if he saw me blowing on the spider.

"Isn't she beautiful?" I asked.

"Yes. Now leave her alone."

One day I mentioned the spider to my mother.

"She's bright green?" my mother asked with concern in her voice.

"Not so much bright green. More like jade."

"She sounds like she's not native to southern California. Maybe she's a poisonous spider from South America."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I said.

"I'd call the county. Just to be safe."

I hung up the phone and my affectionate feelings towards the spider dissipated by the minute. I imagined bunches of bananas on a cargo ship cruising through the Panama Canal. I imagined the jade green spider hiding in the fruit—a malicious glint in her eyes.

The next day I went online and discovered she was a Green Lynx, a native of the southern U.S. and northern Mexico. I felt relieved, and more than a little vindicated, to find out that she wasn't poisonous.

A skilled hunter who captures all sorts of flying pests, one website said. The green lynx is not entirely beneficial, however, due to the species' appetite for honeybees.

I found out that the female guards her eggs until they hatch. Then, if she's still alive, she'll guard her young from predators such as ants or other spiders.

My warm feelings returned ten fold.

Weeks went by and our green lynx grew thinner. I suspected she wasn't able to catch any prey while guarding her eggs, so I devised a plan to provide her with food. I stalked and caught a cricket, shaking it vigorously in a bag until it was nearly unconscious. I placed the disoriented cricket on the web and the green lynx hugged her eggs, until she suddenly reared up her two front legs.

"It's okay," I cooed. "I want to take care of you."

Joe and I went to Europe for two weeks at the end of October and it seemed likely we wouldn't see the spider again. We said goodbye to her before we left for the airport.

"It makes me sad," I said.

"I know," Joe said, hugging me like we were parents watching our child go off to college. "Me too."

When we returned from our trip we were surprised to find her still guarding her eggs. She was alarmingly thin and didn't respond when you blew on her. Eventually her body turned a deep coppery brown.

"I'm really worried about her," I told Joe. "What should we do?"

"Nothing," Joe said. "Just leave her alone."

One morning I checked on the spider and discovered dozens of tiny babies crawling outside the egg case. They were like specks of dust, so small you couldn't make out any features. Their mother sat motionless nearby. That's when I noticed ants racing up the branch.

The mother spider didn't do anything to protect her offspring—she must have been exhausted, on the verge of dying. The ants crawled over her towards her babies and she didn't even stir.

I tried my best to pick the ants off without disturbing the baby spiders, but it was impossible. I pleaded with the spider to help me, but she remained immobile. She might have even been dead already.

Doesn't she realize? I thought to myself. This is the worst possible way to end this story.