
Mice

*Ah, whom can we ever turn to
in our need? Not angels, not humans,
and already the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in
our interpreted world.
—Ranier Marie Rilke, *The First Elegy**

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When they found the first mutilated cat, it was easy to blame the owners. There was some suggestion at first that the daughter of the cat's owner had recently broken up with a guy at school. They hadn't noticed the cat had been missing for three days. Another animal had gotten to it; they should have made sure the cat was in at night.

But when animal control detailed their findings—the cat's heart and lungs had been cut out. The edges of the wounds were sharp, the kind a scalpel would make, not teeth. There was no blood around the porch where the cat had been found. In fact, except a small patch of blood matting down some of the cat's fur, there wasn't any blood found at all.

My husband Erik and I live next to an empty lot. Whoever owns the field cuts the grass throughout the summer, but mainly it's left to the quail and mice and the dogs whose owners don't clean up after them. In the summer, if the people who cut the grass pay attention and don't cut them down, sunflowers grow wild. Hence, seed for quail and for mice.

The mice are a problem only in the fall. When the grass dies and the sunflowers go to seed, the mice grow wild. Or at least plentiful. And our cats, four of them—Pheadra, my first cat, Jelly, my second cat, left behind by my sister Paige, Box, who I got at the Oregon Humane Society and Bagiera who came to live with me after my sister Valerie married a man with a dog with a penchant for chasing cats—find this all fun, warm weather experiment. To see how many they can catch. To chase them around the field, down the sidewalk, across the driveway. We try to put collars on the cats. Collars with bells. To warn to the mice. But the collars fall off and I am reluctant to buy new ones because the bells keep me awake as the cats slide across the wood floors.

Late at night, around one or two, the cats come in. We hear no bells but a lot of jumping and chasing and knocking stuff over. Cleo gets excited and jumps off the bed. She yips in her highest tone. I make Erik get up with me to see what's going on.

Cleo, Box, and Jelly huddle around the edge of our corner hutch. We know it's a mouse. They brought one in a week ago. This is where the mice

go to hide. Erik tells me to get the Kleenex box. He gets the flashlight. The job, which we've performed successfully at least six times now is for me to chase the mouse out from one side while he lowers the empty box of Kleenex hole-side down onto the mouse. The plan is then that I get another piece of cardboard, Erik slides it under the opening, turns the box right-side up and takes the mouse back outside. I yip a bit because the mice have a tendency to come towards me. But I try not to be too much of a girl about it and shoo the mouse towards Erik best I can. After about 14 tries, this usually works.

This time, though, it was so late and we forgot to put Cleo outside and she kept sticking her nose in everything hey-guys-watcha-doin?-like and the cats still think this is their damn mouse even though I yell at them to get the hell out of here, don't we feed you enough? But it's not about the food. He's a fun wind-up toy. So they're still around and in the way. I get the fireplace poker because it's the only thing that will fit behind the hutch and I start sliding it toward the mouse. I'm careful not to stab him. He runs toward Erik and Erik's almost ready to pounce but then Cleo yips, I yelp, Erik swears and the mouse runs toward the corner. Jelly's almost right there and then plop, the mouse contorts himself into size of a quarter and slides down into a heater vent. We try to talk him out of there. It's suicide. But we know it's too late. He'll wander through the ventilation system the rest of his days hungry and hot and alone. If he's lucky, he'll avoid falling into the furnace proper and burning up like one of his fellow-species did in an unfortunate oven-accident earlier that summer. I don't fall back to sleep for hours and every time the heat kicks on I imagine the little mouse's dried fur being blown, the hot air tanning his hide, the desiccated mouse mummy that some cleaning specialist will eventually vacuum out.

It's not difficult to see how I developed a heart so bleeding. My mom ushered hornets out of the house with a paper towel and a pinch. We had spoiled, fluffy cats that we had to give away because my dad grew too allergic. When he was caught with the receipt for two airplane tickets to Florida, one of which was for him and the other was not for my mom, he made his amends by buying her long-stemmed roses, a new kitchen and two new, spoiled, fluffy cats, Koshka and Yoda. Even though mom didn't like dogs or horses, she cultivated my sisters' and my obsession with animals: stuffed animals, zoo trips, Paige's I ETA membership, and Val's bunny rabbit. She didn't laugh at my best friend and me as we rode our bikes, pretending they were horses, hee-yawing them around the block. We stuffed grass between tire and fender to feed them. We watered them. We brushed their aluminum hair.

I don't think my attitude toward animals is particularly extreme for my generation. We were raised on Disney characters, animated or not,

outfitted with human voices, human body language and human emotion. Here's a teaser from Disney's video website: "The Wonderful World of Disney: The Yellowstone Cubs"

In "The Yellowstone Cubs," hunger and curiosity drive Tuffy and Tubby, two young cubs in Yellowstone National Park. When they're separated from their mother, chaos and calamity occur as they are turned loose on vacationers and campers, with hilarious results. A madcap animal escapade from the Disney Wizards. In "Flash, The Teen-Age Otter," as soon as Flash is old enough to swim on his own, his natural curiosity takes him far away from the old mill pond that is his home. He struggles to survive man-made hazards ... and man himself ... in his quest to return home to his loved ones. A poignant animal adventure for everyone!

Cute! In a novel I'm working on, there are bears and otters. They are all nice and cute. Although none are named Tuffy or Tubby or Flash, the animals figure for something inaccessible to human relationships—admiration as (animal) Other as opposed to fear of (human) Other? Is the animal Rousseau's unadulterated (and unalterable) savage? Do we admire them for having survived man at all? Are humans disconnected from adventure or from poignancy? Do we wish Flash were we or we were he?

Animals figure as metaphors for ourselves. But they also seem to remain alien to us. We see them, project human qualities onto them, even expect them to act human, but what we admire is that unknowable aspect, the aspect that suggests animals know something we don't. And what they know isn't human knowledge. Domestic and farm animals in particular hang the line between über-familiar and über-foreign. Perhaps it's the line we're drawn to—that space between good and evil. Or the space where such categories don't exist. We nuzzle our dogs behind the ear. Or we kick the dog. The dog loves us either way. The dog has a different idea of justice and we can't know it. As Nietzsche writes in "Truth and Falsity in an Extra Moral Sense":

No, it [intellect] is purely human and none but its owner and procreator regards it so pathetically as to suppose that the world revolves around it. If, however, we and the gnat could understand each other, we should learn that even the gnat swims through the air with the same paths, and feels within itself the flying center of the world.

Our animals mark the line describing that narcissism. Narcissus, his knees bent, touching land and water, marks the line between bank and pool. The two extensions of the narcissus myth show that on the one hand, narcissus is riveted by his own image. On the other hand, narcissus is in love with himself because he sees himself as other. We stare in the water and do not recognize ourselves. It is we who stare back, but we stare back with the knowledge of pool and ripple and depth, not sand or sky or root. The

animals, in our near-periphery, seem at once of us and unrecognizable. We love them, we cannot truly know them, but they are of us.

(Clea and Box just came in from playing outside. Box teases Cleo. He hides behind the garden box, makes Cleo chase him. Then, if he gets nervous at Cleo's overly energetic jumping, he just takes off through the hole in the fence that Cleo can't fit through.)

Writers know readers have a soft spot for animals. A soft spot like the soft spots on a baby's head. An unformed, dangerous place. Disney may have kept the skull from closing, but the skull was born gapped. Kim Barnes, a memoirist and poet from Idaho, in her first novel *Finding Caruso*, strokes the exposed area with a gentle finger. She puts all weight behind her finger and pushes down into our skulls. Hard.

Our father rises, limps his way to the barn. We hear the cough of the Ford pickup, see him coax it out in an oily fog. He's given up, I think, he'll drink now, and some part of me is glad. He revs the engine smooth, slips the clutch, but instead of turning for the road, he steers for the pasture. The truck jerks forward across hummocks and . . . rock pockets, our father jouncing behind the wheel, head knocking the roof.

I am curious, wondering what he brings, what he means to take away, realize as the Ford picks up speed that he's gunning straight for the mare. He hits her hard, knocks her through the fence, rails splintering, raking the fenders.

"Hold," Lee says, and I do because I cannot imagine what else.

The mare is on her side, legs churning. Our father pulls rope from behind the seat, lashes her hind hooves, throws the other end over a fat limb of hickory, ties it to the bumper, backs the truck until she hangs suspended.

We watch him step out with the tire iron, hear the crack of ribs, the horse's screams. Her joints tear, lungs collapse beneath the visceral weight.

Our father exhausts himself, drops the iron, uses his fists, and I think I can hear this, too, although by now I am humming along with Lee, our voices growing together, louder and louder. No words, just the vibration at the back of my throat, deep in my chest.

Kim Barnes read this at a reading in Salt Lake. Some people in the audience cried. Some people got mad. Resentful. Felt manipulated. But why? No narrator approved of the father's actions. The sons watch their father in horror. The narrator holds still "because I cannot imagine what else." The scene is rendered without exclamation, no anthropomorphizing, no purple adjectives. The horse is undone systematically. Her body is broken down like a car. There is motivation, but it's out of whack. No sane person

would do this. The story does not deny that. So why anger at the author? Because nobody is supposed to touch that soft part of our brain too hard. Because we're in public and we shouldn't be rendered like beef tallow. Because now we care about the horse but the horse is already dead and we should read on but we can trust her? She might do it again. Because she battered through our walls. Sentimentality alarms were down. Because it's so mechanistically described, we don't even smell the incipient shock value. It's a horse. It's just a horse, we remind ourselves. But, damn, it's a horse.

Killing animals for food, for sport, even for ritual sacrifice is not what bothers us most. Christianity doesn't condemn it. Humans are masters over their domain and animals are for us to use as food, pet, sport, even testament to God. So why is animal abuse so difficult to bear? Kim Barnes wrote back to me after I asked her what I planned to do with the portion of her novel that had caused so much emotion.

Nicole,

It might interest you to know that a poet from CA wrote me about the horse scene and said that "it was much worse than anything Jeffrey Dahmer (sp?) had ever done." I was stunned.

My writer friend thinks that readers have become so desensitized to human-human cruelty that it no longer affects them, but that human-animal cruelty is the last frontier.

Take care,

Kim

Who is being compared to Jeffrey Dahmer? Kim or the father in her novel? That anyone could imagine such cruelty does not suggest that person may well act out that cruelty. Of course reading the slow torture of anything is painful. But I disagree with Anthony Hudgins who argues that to elevate animal torture is to devalue human torture. To read about a person's torture, or watch, is a different experience. We can name our emotions, hate the perpetrator, blame the victim, imagine his pain, devise a way for the tortured to escape, find a way to punish the torturer. But animal suffering has no name. We cannot suppose what the animal experiences. Nor can we, because of a complex history of property laws, food consumption, animal testing, animal sacrifice as substitute for human blood, do anything but implicate ourselves. She calls attention to what is done every day. The impolite act of acknowledging the beastly way we have and do treat beasts.

The person who accused Kim of behaving like Jeffrey Dahmer missed the point entirely. Kim's narrative construction, more than a plot device to

garner sympathy for two young boys, more than an exercise in exposing inhumanity, reveals to the audience how closed off we are to suffering other than our own. And how quickly we must return to our human reactions—anger, feeling manipulated—so that we can *be* in a place of empathy, understanding, communication, intellectualism—each, at least as far as we can know, human places. Yet, how we treat animals still testifies to humanity. That we hate what we see shows our complicity, but also our true compassion for that which we cannot quite be.

What is important to note about Kim's novel is that the novel's larger subject is not about an animal. Nor is it, necessarily, about cruelty. So is it ethical to break an audience by horrifying, therefore, enrapturing them, with a horse's excruciating destruction? Perhaps not. However, would the reader be as engaged in reading a story about a horse that just as painfully becomes swallowed by a bulging river? If the book is about limits of human suffering or those of resilience and survival does the horse figure as a substitute for humans? No, the horse story is about a lack of humanness. The inverse of humanity is inhumanity. Inhumanity distinguishes us from the animals as much as humanity does. The horse stands for what we are not. We are not creatures of instinct or survival. We mine iron, bend steel, motorize trucks. Such talents are not distinct from the talent to lash hind hooves, to throw a rope over hickory branches, to wield a tire iron. The rest of the novel struggles to distinguish not what is human and what is brute, but what is humane and what is brutality. Perhaps the rest of the novel serves as commentary on the horse. What we find so disconcerting in reading such explicitly wrought scenes of cruelty toward animals is that the construction of the scene is doubled. The cruelty we make, invent, construct, devise is compounded by the novelist's unflinching remake, re-invention, reconstruction of that which we would rather ignore than recognize.

Some would even suggest that the act of writing these stories warrants censure. In fact, Brian Evenson, a Utahn and Mormon, may have resigned his position as a professor at BYU, the church-run University, and eventually left the church due to the outcry against a cat mutilation story. Evenson blithely recounts several cats' deaths in a droll story in his collection *Altman's Tongue* titled "Killing Cats." The narrator is at first just asked to drive the cat killers to their cat-killing destination. He asserts throughout the story that "I did not much care to try my hand at cat killing, but all I would have to do was drive. I did not have to kill the cats." With guns and rags and a series of apologies for the names of the cats, eventually, the narrator and the cats' owners climb into the car and drive out to the desert. As they drive the owners toss the cats out the car win-

dows and the cats screech “like power saws when they hit the pavement.” Although the narrator watches from his rearview window, showing that he is at least at two removes from the act of killing the cats, the owners regret that the dropping hadn’t quite killed them. The story ends with the man telling the narrator/driver to “Be a friend to me in this,’ he said. He took the empty pistol from his wife and held the snout against my neck. ‘Aim for their skulls.’”

This story implicates the narrator from the beginning. He insists upon his non-involvement while he involves himself in the actions. Like the image of Narcissus, again the construction of these events reveals a character who is at once obsessed with himself and completely unable to recognize himself. The story’s final Carveresque punch is that at the moment of recognition, where he must recognize his part in the killing, he figures now not only as killer but as killed. He is a man driving. He is a cat whose veins pulsate against a cold gun. By positioning the narrator as both aggressor and victim, the story echoes Barnes’ horse. To feel for the cat is to feel human. To kill the cat, to express power over the cat, is to act human.

Evenson was excoriated for his book. He wrote to the chair of his department as he stepped down from his professorial position on behalf of another professor but also due to the criticism he has received,

Despite all claims made for a fair review process, the administration has already made up its mind. In the case of both presidents, their comments demonstrate that if they have read my book at all, they have read it in only a cursory fashion.

Eric Dickson explains the event and repercussions in the article “Inside the Mormon Ivory Tower”:

An anonymous student note triggered the investigation, decrying the book’s ostensible graphic violence and amorality. Evenson acknowledged “that *Altmann’s Tongue* is one of the most difficult books ever written by a Mormon . . . but I also think it is one of the most unpromisingly moral books as well, and many people have agreed.” He saw his fiction as a realistic portrayal of evil and violence that countered glamorized depictions seen elsewhere. School officials disagreed.

As some would suggest, even reconstructing violence is amoral. As if the construction of the events equaled the acts themselves. Evenson is amoral, Barnes is like Dahmer. Reduced to the immediacy of emotion, these authors suffer for creating an uncomfortable tension. These are just animals, we readers seem to say, yet you made me feel for them as if they were human. And yet by asking me to read in drawn-out detail the slow, methodical practice of killing, you let me be fascinated. My fascination makes me recognize my culpability. I define myself as opposite animals. I mark that definition every day by showing my superiority. You belong to

me. I can do what I want. I can own you. I can eat you. I can kill you. Just don't make me look at your pain in slow motion again. By making us look at ourselves with this dual vision—commisserator and perpetrator, perhaps these authors do perpetrate, on their readers, an act of cruelty.

Equally affecting, although contextually different, is a scene in *Pig Earth* by John Berger. Necessity, tradition, and economics bring about the slaughter of a cow. But the execution of the scene, as well as that of the cow, strikes the reader as viscerally as the killing of the horse and the cat, even though this cow's slaughter lacks the *senselessness* of the others.

The slaughterer's son brings the cow to the room blinded with a black leather mask. "Seeing nothing, the cow is hesitant to move," and "at the door to the slaughter-house the cow hesitates again. Then allows herself to be pulled in." *Hesitation*. Giving the cow motivation immediately anthropomorphizes her. But the reliance on the son as leader makes her subject to his mastery of her. The son performs, just as the cow does, his role.

The son pushes a spring through the hole in the skull into the cow's brain. It goes in nearly twenty centimeters. He agitates to be sure that all the animal's muscles will relax, and pulls it out. The mother holds the uppermost foreleg by the fetlock in her two hands. The son cuts the throat and the blood floods out onto the floor. For a moment it takes the form of an enormous velvet skirt, whose tiny waist band is the lip of the wound. Then it flows on and resembles nothing.

Berger couples a mechanistic style with a lyrical one. The actions are mechanic. The first clauses in the sentences are declarative. But then the supporting clauses illustrate metaphorical connections. The mother's body becomes the machine while the animal's now-dead blood inspires human associations. The wound and the blood flow like a dress. Humanity, in the tailored effects of civilization, has been incorporated into the body of the animal. The animal's body signifies humanity—again necessity, tradition, and economics. The cow figures for man but only in the moment of the cow's death. And then it resembles nothing.

(Every morning the cats share a small can of fancy feast. Most of a quarter for each of the cats on separate plates. Cleo waits for the can. She scrapes the left-over cat food out with her tongue).

When I worked at the Oregon Humane Society, I shared an office with the Humane Agents, Mark and Randy. They wore full-on uniforms with badges and handcuffs and baton-like flashlights. Mark thought it was VERY important to carry guns as they responded to calls about animal cruelty. But usually, the people were long gone and the pets left behind so emaciated and ill they were in no shape to attack.

They brought pictures back from the worst scenes.

Dead cats with matted fur. Hard to distinguish them from the garbage.

A dog's body so emaciated the length and width of the ribs were visible.

A dog. No tongue. The owners thought it would make him stop barking.

Cat heads. No bodies.

A pit bull, cropped ears, no tail. A claw from another dog embedded in his eye.

One that disturbed me the most was the one that had been most orchestrated. At a playground from the parallel bars hung (hanged?) an orange tabby cat. His head had been tied with pink ribbon to look straight ahead. His forelegs strung wide while his back legs hung, broken, downward. The man they found claimed the cat was already dead when he found it. He hung it up for his son who had been diagnosed with cancer. The son loved cats.

The fifth cat they found had no head. The newspapers named the story "Cat Mutilator." Temma Martin from the Salt Lake Animal Services was quoted, "We have to start asking ourselves if this person is capable of doing this to a human victim. Maybe they're desensitizing themselves with cats." She also suggested that we keep all our animals indoors. The Humane Society offered a \$6,500 reward. The cat had been found cut in half. The fore-half, the half with the head, was found at the cemetery on a headstone. I do the math. The cemetery is a mile and a half from my house.

(My dog is currently bringing me a tennis ball and bouncing it around my office. I try to be stern but promise to take her on a walk in fifteen minutes.)

There seems to be a trend in writing about the pain inflicted by humans onto animals. Maybe it started with Tim O'Brien's "How to Write a True War Story." After Curt Lemon gets blown up and Rat Kiley, who was with him, survives, O'Brien interrupts the Lemon/Kiley story with a long story about one of his fellow soldiers who makes up a lot of lies. When he returns to the Rat Kiley story, he begins with the claim "This one does it for me." As Rat opens a can of "C Ration Pork and Beans, but the baby buffalo wasn't interested."

He shrugged.

He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and

in the hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. Later in the week he would write a long personal letter to the guy's sister, who would not write back, but for now it was a question of pain. He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. All around us there was the smell of smoke and filth and deep greenery, and the evening was humid and very hot. Rat went to automatic. He shot randomly, almost casually, quick little spurts in the belly and butt. Then he reloaded, squatted down, and shot it in the left front knee. Again the animal fell hard and tried to get up, but this time it couldn't quite make it. It wobbled and went down sideways. Rat shot it in the nose. He bent forward and whispered something, as if talking to a pet, then he shot it in the throat. All the while the baby buffalo was silent, or almost silent, just a light bubbling sound where the nose had been. It lay very still. Nothing moved except the eyes, which were enormous, the pupils shiny black and dumb.

O'Brien follows this immediately by white space and then by "How do you generalize?" This is a lesson in writing true (true?) stories. They must be specific. They must have scene. They must evoke emotion not through telling but showing. Is there anything more particular than spurting blood and guttural sounds? Is there anything truer than a baby water buffalo on her knees?

I included the entire passage here to show how simultaneously horrifying and fascinating the piece is. I included it to show in what great detail O'Brien writes the scene. The whole passage is interrupted by the insertion that Rat will write "the guy's sister." We're told that he will return, or will even remain during, to the world of human niceties. Then the passage turns from meat to body parts. Each buffalo body part correlates to a human's knees, nose, eyes. The animal turns human at the moment he had been reduced to meat and automation. Animals eat prey. Humans eat meat. Animals work by instinct. Humans, by automation. And yet, even though O'Brien claims his platoon felt no pity, he knows his readers will. For the water buffalo and for Rat Kiley. At the moment of "almost silent," Rat Kiley and the water buffalo are one. Not substitutes for the other. But one creature. On the verge. Crossing a line.

(Box killed a quail once. Cleo tried to eat a mole. Or at least held it in her mouth and felt it squirm around.)

As much a sap as I am, I killed an animal once. Before I killed her, I named her Hilda. She was a possum that hunted for garbage scraps behind my apartment. I lived alone. Not by choice. A phase I went through where no one seemed to be able to live with me. Except my cat, Phaedra, who kind of looked like a possum—fat around the stomach, a small head and mottled fur. But Phaedra had a furry tail. This distinguishes all animals from rats and even though I've learned to love the naked-tail species a bit, (as evidenced by the Kleenex box/mice project), I still qualify the difference.

Hilda made me nervous. I didn't like going out at night to put the garbage out and I would not let Phaedra outside past dark. But I felt sorry for Hilda too. She lived outside in the rain; she had to forage for food. And here was my fat cat, sharing chicken Dijon with me, sitting on the table, with a roof over her head, floor-board electric heat, and a sliding glass door. All this difference for the fortune of a fluffy tail.

At night, with the kitchen lights on, Phaedra would look at the sliding glass door for hours. Did she see herself? Was she waiting for Hilda? Or was she just staring at the light as it bounced off the glass and back toward her cornea? Opossums only go around at night. I've never seen one in the day. Even the big ones. The ones the size of dogs. Their eyes are better than cats.

Here are some opossum facts:

North America's only marsupial (female has a pouch) mammal. The female carries and nurses her young in her marsupial until they are about 2 to 3 months old; then they are carried on her back another 1 to 2 months on her back whenever they are away from the den.

Size of a cat; grey to black fur; black eyes; pink nose, feet and tail; black ears; and pointed nose.

Solitary and nocturnal: usually slow moving; when frightened and unable to flee may fall into an involuntary shock-like state, "playing 'possum."

Hiss or growl and show their 50 sharp teeth when frightened; but, in reality, they are gentle and placid—they prefer to avoid all confrontations and wish to be left alone.

Omnivorous: eats insects, snails, rodents, berries, over-ripe fruit, grasses, leaves, and carrion; occasionally will eat snakes, ground eggs, corn or other vegetables.

Adaptable; able to live wherever water, food, and shelter exist. At home in trees; uses its prehensile tail to help stabilize position when climbing—it does not, however, hang by its tail.

Few live beyond the age of 1 year in the environment; can live up to 10 years in captivity. Killed by many predators: humans (and cars), dogs, cats, owls, and larger wildlife.

My actions make me a “one year in the environment” statistic-holder-upper. I justify my course of action (but not my method) because I knew opossums don’t go around in the day. Sick possums do. Ones with rabies. One Saturday morning I woke up to find a possum wandering in circles on my front lawn. I waited for her to go away. I wouldn’t let Phaedra out even though she was mewling like a bird. I knew the possum would scratch her eyes out and give her the rabies she was so obviously carrying. (I don’t know if she had rabies. I wondered why else would an opossum be outside in the day? As if rabies makes nocturnal animals diurnal. As if rabies makes animals walk in circles. When I looked up “opossum, rabies,” I found that opossums are highly resistant to rabies.)

I called animal control. If I caught it, they’d come get it.

Yeah, right. In my batman costume.

I called my friends. Well, I already mentioned, this was my year in exile.

I didn’t think to call pest control. Homeowners know about pest control, not renters. I should have called my landlord.

Instead I called some neighborhood boys over. I lived behind a convenience store. They were buying candy. Or milk for their mom. Or beer. I don’t know. They were ten or eleven. Three of them. Maybe they were brothers. Their hair hung down in their face and their Levi’s were loose. They seemed like capable boys. I think their mom watched. Or she was around when I asked them.

I pointed to the possum. I handed them a shovel.

As the boys approached, the possum hissed. It switched its tail back and forth. One of the boys raised the shovel, brought it down and hesitated at the last minute. The possum wrinkled his nose at him. Another boy, this one in a blue flannel, lifted the shovel as high as his shoulders and brought it down on the possum’s back. Not a crack, more of a thud. Internal organs, vibrating at varying resonance, canceled each other. The possum rolled over on its side, playing dead. His eyes still twitched. It did not try to get up. Another boy took the shovel, his turn now, and struck the possum on his ear. This time the possum made a sound. A sort of cawing stuck in his throat. A phlegmy caw.

They tossed it in a hole some city workers had dug. That would be a nice surprise come Monday.

I should have called pest control.

I should have bought the boys some candy. Or some beer. Certainly this qualified them for man-hood. I hope not serial-killer-hood.

I should have buried that possum nonetheless.

I should have left the possum there. I could have moved. I knew how to look up movers.

I did penance by taking in a cancerous cat. We named him Darth and gave him intravenous fluid. From the experience I learned how to kill a possum (or rather, to convince kids to kill things for me) and how to find a vein in a really small animal.

Perhaps it's not until you have watched how cruel people can be to animals, yourself included, and only until you have sacrificed something dear, in my case, a fear of needles, for an animal, do you know where your humanity lies.

Cleo and I are walking up G Street. I live on G Street. We are four blocks from our house when I see the truck from animal services. I see Temma Martin as she pulls up. A news truck pulls up after her. The lady who found the cat is not crying. She said her son went over to mow the neighbor's yard and bent to pick up what he thought was dog shit and saw instead that it was a brown tortoise-shell cat. My cat Jelly is a brown tortoise-shell. But I have seen her this morning. This is not my cat. Cleo and I finish our walk. After I take her home, I walk back up to talk to the lady. Maybe we should start a coalition or something. But she, the news truck, animal services, even Temma Martin is gone.

(Cleo brought me the ball again. We just went on a walk I told her. She agreed and jumped up on the bed.)

Dogs suffer more than most in stories. Well, dogs, wolves and whales. (I keep forgetting about Moby Dick). Kelly Magee, in the short story "Not People, Not This," wrote about dogs during tornados, "His own father had tied the family dogs down by their feet, but Trooper wasn't a violent man." In the following poem, joyriders entice a dog by wrapping a towel in a hubcap. The temptation is too much for the dog and he chases the car to catch the towel.

His snarling teeth
 clinched in on the towel, took the bait,
 took on
 down the whole length the spin
 of the tire, like
 a woodstock on a lathe, his head
 wrapped turban-fashion like a splayed
 Saracen. He felt every bone
 snap and puncture
 some inexplicable organ,

even for a dog.

The “even for a dog” underscores the betrayal. Dogs are written as the most constant of man’s companions. When man betrays dog he betrays himself. Does it follow that they always function as an extension of man? “William Maxwell’s novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is about transgressions: the transgression of memory and friendship, but also in narration as the “I” narrator shifts and point-of-view turns to other characters. Even a dog’s.

In a chapter titled “The Machinery of Justice,” the narrator moves between several points of view. Clarence thinks that what went wrong with his marriage to Fern was that “[T]here wasn’t anything he could tell them that wouldn’t make them grieve, and anyway, he couldn’t bear to talk about it.” The narrator enters Fern’s point-of-view as she thinks of her lover’s hands and how “she shuddered with happiness.” Then he enters the son’s point-of-view as he reacts to the divorce: “Cletus didn’t feel like hanging around the schoolyard after school.” But most surprisingly, he visits the dog’s thoughts.

The dog waited every afternoon by the mailbox. She knew when it was time to round up the cows, but the boy might come and not find her there. So she went on waiting, and when she saw the man coming toward her she ran off into the cornfield, but only a little ways. She really didn’t try to escape the beating she knew he was going to give her.

And, as the farm is being liquidated, the narrator has the dog wonder why everyone is pulling furniture out into the yard where it will be rained on. Everything, even the animals she herds, “*seemed to be leaving.*” Clarence ties the dog to a tree, takes his son to his sister’s, and leaves the farm for good. The new tenants feed and tend to the dog, but the minute that they let the dog loose, she goes hunting for her old master.

In the end she found them. Clarence Smith’s mother looked out of the window at the side yard and exclaimed, “I declare, it looks like we’ve got company.” From the way the man made over her, the dog thought she was going to be allowed to stay. And that he would take her to where the boy was. She smiled ingratiatingly at the old woman, who said, “It’s all right with me if you want to keep her here,” but that wasn’t what happened.

Like Barnes, Maxwell uses an animal to evoke strong emotions. But unlike Barnes, Maxwell makes the dog’s thoughts matter. The effect is not the same. No longer does atrocity toward animal carry the weight of negotiating the line between animal and human. If the dog’s thoughts become human, then we as readers relate to her as human. Then we wonder about her motivation. We wonder why she doesn’t she help herself. We wonder why, after all this, does she think “she was going to be allowed to stay.” By narrating the dog’s thoughts, Maxwell situates her as human. In doing

so, we still feel empathy for the dog. But empathy. Not sympathy, not complicity, not shame, not peripheral.

Donald Revell extends the idea behind the Nietzsche quotation when he claims that it is not for humans to say whether or not animals—or even minerals, even wind—have consciousness. We have no way to imagine without being presumptuous what form that consciousness should take. That said, as Maxwell transgresses the bounds of first-person narrative convention by employing an omniscient narrator, he allows himself access to a story he could never know the whole of otherwise. This way, the dog becomes not the allegory or synecdoche of the story but the metonym. The dog flows associatively, complementarily, alongside the current of the other characters' motivations and emotions. Although within the content of the narrative, the dog is degraded, in form she is elevated to human status. This is not to say that her mind is human-like, but it credits her with comprehension and emotion as they are manifest in her actions.

I disagree with Kim Barnes' writer-friend. We are not completely desensitized to human upon human violence. As Barnes herself says in an interview, quoting Carl Jung, there are no new stories, just new ways of telling them. The manner of the telling can make anything sensationalized or anything understated. Stories where the human character has no choice, can find no way out, has no voice, can effect us a dramatically as stories where an animal is equally limited. But to feel for human suffering strikes a natural, expected, conventional chord. As a writer, to evoke it, one risks sentimentalizing or pornographing. To care for the fate of animals draws upon a much more subtle string. We suspect a consciousness other than human but our language has no way to access that. It's the body of the animal ruined or saved that provides the hint.

(I'm at the Avenues Bakery on my birthday. I'm waiting for my friend but am thinking about ditching her to run up the street, check on the cats, give Cleo a bone).

Last winter, several more cats were found mutilated. They were found without heads, with their hearts removed, their intestines eviscerated. Twelve cats, or at least parts from twelve cats, were strewn all over the neighborhood. The reward was raised to \$8,500. People would post hopeless looking signs on light poles with colored pictures, at sixty-nine cents a copy, of their lost cat, his name, his nicknames, his collar color. Cleo and I would look for them on our walks. I called their names. Of course, this was the winter that I was also, as was everyone else, looking for Elizabeth Smart. You could hear me as I walked through the park calling "Frazel," or "Billsby," or "Elizabeth." I had little hope of finding either cat or girl. I hated living in a neighborhood so evil.

It turned out, although some say it doesn't solve all the cases, that it wasn't some satanic child, but instead some wayward fox that had killed the cats. They found some cat DNA, one-thousand dollars per test, in the foxes' feces. Everyone was relieved. I wondered why it was somehow okay for the fox to have done the killing. Because the fox was just doing what it does. Some human was out of line doing what he did. He crossed the socially binding principles that dictate our respect for property, innocence, God, cuteness.

The fox that kills is "real." The boy who kills does so artificially, with design. His use for the animal is usually as symbolic as any narrator's—the killing stands as a sign for Satanism, or neighbor-hatred, or for domestic abuse. As we translate and interpret designed killing as it is put to us in literature, we are forced to question our own relationship to "design," "killing," and "animal." By using this dramatic technique to draw an audience into a story, the authors I've mentioned here don't harp on the effects of animal torture on their characters' psyches. But by including the animals, the authors cause us to reflect on why these stories affect us on a visceral level. It may well be natural for us to be carnivores, to manage dangerous predators, to embrace medical research, to burden beasts or to domesticate cats and dogs. These designs are distinguished from the design to use animals as sacrificial penitence for our sins, as bearer of the brunt of our anger and frustration, or as tools to demonstrate our capacity to inflict suffering. If our calculated cruelty to animals defines our humanity as much as our compassion for them, then by illustrating that dichotomy perhaps we are being urged to look for a less self-indulgent word than humane.