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THE LIVES OF ANIMALS

To fulfill a state-mandated standard, in eleventh grade I had to write a research report. It would be the second of my academic career, after my state report in fifth grade—Nevada—and so I knew from experience that I really ought to find a subject that resonated with me. Mr. Simonds had not enjoyed reading my lists of demographic data, my flatly paraphrased biography of Kit Carson, or my uninspired discussion of the mining industry any more than I had enjoyed transcribing it all. But things would change that junior year, because I chose to write about the noble chicken.

The chicken had certainly sunk its scaly claws deep into my life by eleventh grade. Mom had embraced healthful cooking by then, so baked chicken was the cornerstone of every Atkinson dinner. My classmates and I were dissecting chick embryos in Biology. And with any casual stroll around our yard, you were apt to shove your foot deep into a cache of Miss Fluffy's eggs, green inside and out.

The eggs were years-old remnants of the pet chicken that had belonged to the McAlisters, our next-door neighbors. Miss Fluffy had been a free agent, a roving visitor throughout our affluent waterfront neighborhood. Discovering one of her long dormant nests was like unearthing a fossil from my elementary school-era childhood. She, alone of her initial herd¹ of about six other birds, had managed to survive in a territory where golden retrievers and German shepherds patrolled vigilantly across homogenous and pristine green lawns within their invisible shock-delimited enclosures. Once a dog snapped off most of her tail feathers—but they grew back—and Miss Fluffy became even more cautious and alert. As I look back now, I am genuinely impressed with her longevity: conspicuously white, hemorrhaging a sizable egg day after day, Miss Fluffy was not accorded many natural defenses against the suburban wilds.

I was, however, much craftier than some purebred show dog. As a ten-year-old, I mastered the technique of chasing Miss Fluffy into a convenient expanse of ivy groundcover, where I would pounce on the floundering bird, flip her onto her back on my lap [flap, flap, squawk, squawk] and rub her belly. Within seconds, she would lie calm as the Buddha², and I could then sit and pet the flaccid chicken until my attention wandered elsewhere. There are a number of snapshots in the Atkinson family photo album featuring me, my beaming smile, and a seemingly dead and boneless chicken draped across my lap. Miss Fluffy did not seem to hold this treatment against me, though. Whenever I or any of my other family members were in the back yard messing around, she was always there, scratching in the dirt and sand for worms and bugs. She'd follow you, at a distance, wherever you moved. While the cats busied themselves by stalking ducklings, Miss Fluffy stalked us.

¹ The chickens really did run as a herd. They were a gang, charging together over the gentle hills of my neighbor's back yard, roosting together in the branches of a tall pine tree, lurking together beneath the thick foliage of the McAlister kiwi vine. They were slowly exterminated like the bison of the American West—the weakest and slowest were picked off one by one, until only Miss Fluffy remained, a hardened survivor.

² Lately I have begun to wonder if what I called “hypnotizing” Miss Fluffy was not, as I thought, taking advantage of some strange acupuncture-triggered reflex, but was really a catatonic state induced by pure terror. But please note that I'm still in favor of the former theory.

But I digress. My eleventh grade research report, “The Holistic Chicken,” was great. This is thanks to the fact that—unlike Nevada—chickens are multifaceted and cool. When it comes down to it, the chicken is a veritable disco ball of facets. The report began with a full page photo I’d found in *Elle*—it depicted one of Kate Moss’s sorority sisters languidly cradling a soft, white chicken in her arms, just like some of those pictures of me and Miss Fluffy. Both the model and the chicken gazed obliquely into the middle distance, flowing hair, gauzy dress, and downy feathers slightly displaced by the fan positioned somewhere behind the camera. Deep down inside I knew that when we as a culture push something into a fashion magazine to be ogled as a thing of beauty, then that thing has *arrived*, in one way or another. Mr. Herbison, A-one English teacher, turned the page and was treated to my antiseptic dissection and analysis of chicken anatomy [“...and here’s a sketch of what the giblets looked like after I took them out of the bag”]³, my review of the elusive chicken psyche⁴, a discussion of the chicken’s importance in human culture⁵, and oh so much more. But I’m not going to recount all that now, because—gotcher nose!—this paper is not a report on chickens.

Now here’s where I segue to my real point and three subpoints and supporting evidence. At the end of the quarter in a philosophically-oriented class like this I get to thinking about the Big Questions and the Big Picture. What does it all mean—humans and animals, marooned together on this little island we call Earth? My brain twitches. Have I had this conversation before? And was it punctuated by exclamations of “It’s the *System*, man,” and “Hey, this pipe is cashed”? It’s true, God did not place me here to solve the big problems after all. But I’ve put a lot of thought into the idea of living with animals, particularly farm animals. I’ve realized that—in line with the conspiracy theorists who deny the existence of the Holocaust—without zoos, big exotic animals would be about as real to me as that “moon landing” everyone talks about. Yet thanks to Miss Fluffy and others like her who kindly donated their time, I am now pretty qualified to comment on a future life with farm animals and other recovery fauna⁶.

The idea that I’m slowly lurching toward is a message of political correctness. I am setting aside the tragedy of the loss of those foreign-born animals on the Discovery Channel, focusing instead on the charm and allure of the animals we have now, and the animals yet to come. I have always been puzzled by all of the negative sentiment hurled toward the hypothetical future fauna of Earth. Is this a result of anger displacement? I’m as upset as the next person about the forecasts of an elephant-less African Savannah, but that sort of thought is independent of my anticipation of novel families of chickens, molded into new morphologies like the fantastical and functional body plans of termites. See, after a week or two of intensive study, I am now a crack journalist of future evolution, covering all the angles—the big controversy these days is whether humans will live until the end of the Earth, or will instead be the forgotten engineers of our successors. The imaginative Dougal Dixon of *After Man* fame predicts a stark absence of humans in a few hundred years, but local scientist Peter Ward has his money on the survival skills of plucky *Homo sapiens*. Being a Husky to the bone, I am of

³ It is a cold, cruel world for the nascent biologist: none of the chicken farms from here to Bellingham were willing to tweak the USDA regulations and sell me a fresh chicken carcass. As I was not yet prepared to personally kill a live chicken in the name of science, my dissection was performed on a featherless, headless, gutless chicken purchased at the QFC.

⁴ Factoid: It’s been demonstrated that chicks have memories of their pre-hatching-from-the-egg experiences.

⁵ This gem of a chapter boasted a nearly exhaustive list of “Why did the chicken cross the road?” jokes.

⁶ Recovery fauna, *phr*: Species capable of repopulating a large habitat after a mass extinction.

course rooting for the home team. The images Ward describes are not particularly uplifting; he envisions a scene from the end of the world, 500 million years from now, featuring humans burrowed deep under the parched soil like Morlocks, inhabiting a near dead Earth lit by a red giant of a sun. Pessimism aside, this idea is more plausible to me than the prediction that a nuclear war would manage to fry every last one of us. I think humans are a pretty weedy species when it comes down to natural or intentional attempts at extermination.

Fortunately, despite the best efforts of the greedy souls who pull the strings of environmental policy, it will be a few years before we terraform the planet to create one giant desert⁷. Nearer realities will sport a fine crop of humans, our living chattel, and a good selection of other organisms that depend on humans. Now since I've definitely got some misanthropic tendencies, I am avoiding any discussion of the pros of living snugly together with masses of people; I suspect that Godot will arrive before any serious self-policing of the global human population. But consider sheep. I like sheep. I am absolutely willing to share my personal space with flocks of sheep of all breeds. Like other livestock, there is that underlying appearance of helplessness, stemming from the knowledge that sheep are totally dependent on the stewardship of their sheepdogs and their human owners. They trigger my maternal instinct. My Dad grew up in Scotland, where his father worked in a brick factory, and his recollections of the local sheep managed to pique my interest at an early age. Out in the countryside of Clackmannanshire, on the moors I suppose, the sheep are an impeccable tint-less white. I visualize perfect elliptical forms, cumulus clouds of woolen coats—the sort of sheep that show up in cartoon form on mattress commercials and pajama prints. But then as the observer, driving through the country, approaches the town of Alloa, the sheep slowly begin to take up a dusting of dinginess, becoming browner and greyer. I am fascinated by this view of sheep as barometers of aerosolized pollution, gently coated by a film of soot and bits of brick. It sparks images of asthmatic children and asthmatic sheep suffering together, games of tag and field-gamboling cut short. We have shared histories and toss viruses and malignant bacteria to and fro. Perhaps aging sheep have their own insomnia and arthritic nightmares.

To be honest, hearsay aside, I have only gotten to personally know one sheep. His name is Jacob. Jacob tramps back and forth across the image of the helpless, dependent ruminant. He lives on a small hippie farm just outside of Port Townsend, a loner held apart from about twenty-five flock-mates. Jacob is, appropriately, of the Jacob breed of sheep⁸; this is a rare breed characterized by small size, black and white spotted fleece, and between two and six curved horns. When looking at Jacob head on, with his bouquet of horns branching out from his face, I am reminded of that Hollywood portrayal of Indiana Jones plugging up a cannon with a rock; detonation causes the barrel to split apart and curl to resemble the horns of a Jacob sheep. Jacob's herd is wary of people—as a group they delicately pick their way through small thorny bushes, across hillocks and crabgrass, spooking and tearing off at the sight of a stranger in their field. Jacob himself is unafraid

⁷ Yet there is a practical side to desert as well. In the words of the great David Foster Wallace, “We need a wasteland A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. A place without malls. An Other for Ohio's Self. Cacti and scorpions and the sun beating down. Desolation. A place for people to wander alone. To reflect. Away from everything. Gentlemen, a desert.”

⁸ The Jacob breed comes from Britain. “The name Jacob comes from the Old Testament story of the dealings between Jacob and his father-in-law Laban. This Biblical story of Jacob's striving to achieve spotted sheep and goats is thought to be the earliest record of selective breeding.” <http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/>

of humans. Like Miss Fluffy he seems to enjoy tagging along with people; unlike Miss Fluffy, Jacob's presence is very hard to ignore. He was taken in by the farm after being hand-raised by a couple a few miles away. As a lamb, little Jacob must have been adorable. His blithe skipping, butts and bucks in response to pats and pets, are no longer cute now that he weighs around 150 pounds. He craves touch, but will shove anyone who responds to his invitations. His owners say he thinks he is a human; I think he is a bit reminiscent of a slightly violent and mentally deviant adult.

I can imagine Jacob scampering through the Olympic National Forest, ascending mountains, and fighting off cougars with the aplomb and technique of a linebacker. Jacob is the sort of sheep who would win the Nike spokes-sheep contract, who would be played by Vincent D'Onofrio in the movie version of his life. He is, in essence, the opposite of the sheep that I dreamed of constructing all through high school. My plan was to go to college, become a biology major, and obtain the tools to create a miniature house sheep. I am now older and wiser; I've realized that the task is a bit more complicated than I'd assumed at first. I have not yet manufactured this sheep of my dreams, and it will likely never happen in my lifetime. But bear with me here—close your eyes, and picture a cat-sized sheep sleeping at the foot of your bed at night, greeting you with limpid eyes in the morning, curling up on your lap for an evening of television, autonomously clipping the front lawn to an attractive length, providing a convenient surface with which to dry your hands when a dish towel is unavailable. Do you object to this idea? Is it a cruel manipulation of the holy concept of Sheep? Sometimes I think that the protests of biological engineering are rooted in some idealized, cherished construct of naturalness⁹. And yet our planet is a dynamical system—there is nothing more natural and predictable than change. We humans are removed from the system to a degree that enables us to prolong or hasten the transitions between states of the system, but transitions are inevitable. I can only hope that someday the inhabitants of Earth will be able to share their space with a new spectrum of sheep, each with unique personalities and diverse niches to exploit.

I could go on to hype crows and cockroaches, fluorescent bunnies and clones of Fido, but the hour is late and I have yet to discuss my favorite animal, victim of innumerable libelous assaults, and surely a witness to our exploits in the Future. My first close encounter with rats was in the context of science. I was hired on as a rat wrangler in a cardiology lab—my theater of operations was hidden in the basement of Health Sciences, away from the prying eyes of activists and other militants. Every other day I would descend to the animal facility, swipe my access card, take a shower, and suit up in scrubs, booties, gloves, sleeves, and a hair net. After a refreshing spritz of disinfecting solution, I was ready to check in with the colony. My charges were certified as Specific Pathogen-Free—you could eat off of any one of them. There was an interesting hive-like feeling in the room, where the sounds of shifting and shuffling bodies and a faint non-sterile scent emerged from the wall of

⁹ Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*, is accordingly attached to a snapshot in time: "If the sun is beating down on you, you will not have the comfort of saying, 'Well, that's nature.' Or if the sun feels sweet on the back of your neck, that's fine, but it isn't nature. A child born now will never know a natural summer, a natural autumn, winter, or spring. Summer is going extinct, replaced by something else that will be called 'summer.' This new summer will retain some of its relative characteristics—it will be hotter than the rest of the year, for instance, and the time of year when crops grow—but it will not be summer, just as even the best prosthesis is not a leg."

cages, which was basically a high-rise rat condo. I would check for new litters¹⁰ and record their birthdates. Adolescent rats were graduated to their own bachelor and bachelorette pads. Sometimes I would play matchmaker, setting up new breeding pairs. Sometimes I would retire old breeding pairs to the breeding ground in the sky¹¹. These rats were assisting in the war on heart disease, helping you have it your way at Burger King, and allowing Snickers to satisfy.

When it comes down to it, in almost two years of putting rats through strange maneuvers, I was never once bitten when I didn't deserve it¹². I took countless blood pressure readings, which involved immobilizing the rat for up to five minutes while it wore a tiny pressure cuff around its tail. I was constantly picking them up, measuring various features of their bodies, sticking needles into them, moving them around, making them huff isofluorane, talking at them, and making them listen to music that they probably didn't appreciate as much as I did. Those lab rats were incredibly tolerant. I enjoyed their company so much that when I left the job, I secretly took a pair with me—ostensibly to explore a relationship with rats independent of needles and gloves.

Chupacabra was a reticent and twitchy wild-type rat, a tiny brown Norway. Special-K was a boisterous and extroverted spontaneously hypertensive stroke prone albino rat. By day they curled together to sleep, Yin and Yang, and in the night they arose to rip Kleenex and newspaper, industriously creating mountainous, aerated structures. I loved that they seemed to like their enclosure, assuaging some of my guilt for being their captor. Sometimes Chupacabra would leap, batlike, from furniture or a human grasp to get back to her cage. Before they went senile, I always admired the precise and mannered way they had of accepting cheez curls and carrot sticks from my fingers¹³. They were the greatest pets ever. By the time Chupacabra was taken to the vet's to be put to sleep, blind and lame at a methuselan three years and three months¹⁴, I had come to understand that I would never find a better roommate.

I say this with sincerity: even in a world of decimated biodiversity, those species that survive and flourish in an environment customized by and for humans are spectacularly vibrant, if you take the time for a closer look. The domesticated animal tends to lose intelligence. But why care about rational thought? If you want to be around a perfectly rational being, take a trip to your nearest computer lab. We have a tendency to reject things that are common and familiar, things that are constructed and polluted by human intervention. We detest the manipulation of nature, whether to tame something wild or practice innovation independent of

¹⁰ We called the baby rats “pinkies”—for the first couple of days, they are a bright pink, with translucent skin. You can even see some of their organs, which is a little creepy. The healthier they are, the brighter their color—dead pinkies are purple. As they get bigger, they are almost constantly nursed by the mother rat. In larger litters, with, say, twelve pups, the mother rat will actually be lifted off of the cage floor by the squirming mass of baby rats beneath her.

¹¹ Euthanasia, or the “sacrificing” of lab animals, is heavily regulated. I either overdosed them with injected ketamine (yes, the party drug) or replaced the air in their cages with carbon dioxide. In both cases, they simply lie down and go to sleep without agitation.

¹² In contrast to mice, rats will only bite you if you hurt them. I was bitten when I was not careful enough when handling a rat recovering from surgery, and once when I tried to take the blood pressure of an irritable rat. It is simple to tell when a rat is moody or upset—its fur will be pricked up, and often it will have red discharge around its nose. Rat snot contains a porphyrin; this is the same class of pigment that makes blood red.

¹³ In their later years, you definitely had to be careful lest they mistake a fingertip for a tasty meal. Which is a slight contradiction to the former footnote. But they were *old*—they had cataracts.

¹⁴ Special K had to be euthanized before the tender age of two—presumably she had begun to suffer complications relating to high blood pressure.

natural forces. But where is the basis for this mindset? It seems to me to be an arbitrary prejudice. Those abstract qualities that we appreciate in the archetypal wild animal are also to be found in the chicken, the sheep, and the rat. They are also wild and independent, exceptional in their own way¹⁵.

I Like Rats

by Kenneth Koch, after D.H. Lawrence

I never saw a rat
Sorry for itself.
I never saw two rats
Consoling one another for being rats.
Rats live good full rat-lives with other rats.
Rat mind and rat heart plunge them into rat sex with other
 impassioned rats.
People say they are poison and ugly and cause disease.
I say people cause disease.
I never caught a cold or syphilis or gonorrhoea or manic
 depression from a rat.

¹⁵ Works mentioned: Dougal Dixon, *After Man: A Zoology of the Future*, 1981; Peter Ward, *Future Evolution*, 2001; David Foster Wallace, *Broom of the System*, 1987, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, 1989.