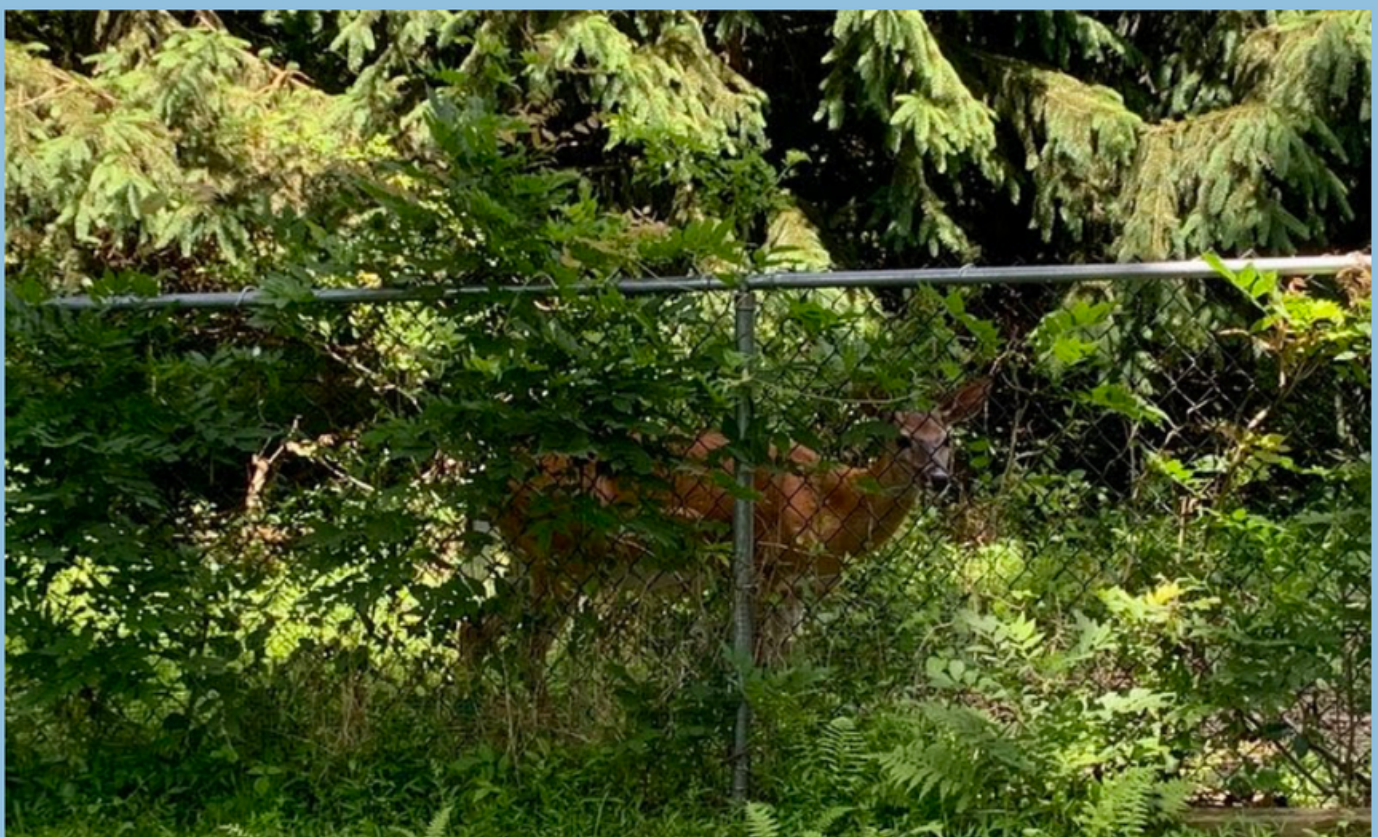




*Drawing Animals* is a weekly newsletter featuring an essay on our interconnection with animal life, an anthropomorphized doodle, and a short list of recommended readings related to the week's theme. Expect musings on a bird call's relationship to intuition, earth worms, myths about the land, and how we might think differently about consciousness. Twice a month, interviews are released with ecological writers, vegan chefs, animal-related spaces, artists, and more!



## ESSAY FIVE: "THE TICK"



Lately I've been thinking about a woman who lived in one of the transient hospitals my father stayed in while my mother battled the insurance company to cover a permanent place for him. He'd been diagnosed, after over a year of inaccuracies, with Lyme disease. Caring for him at home was no longer possible or safe. His nervous system would shut down slowly over seven years until he passed away in 2006. During those years of his illness as I grew from child to teen, I studied the bug that had infected him: a tick. I found the creature sucked to the back of my ear, crawling in my hair, and often in the fur of our pets. I felt taunted by ticks, that I wouldn't get my father back because of what the bug had done. Could do.

Whenever I came to visit my father, the woman greeted me silently by taking my hands between hers. She sat me at the piano in the lobby and put my fingers to the keys. I was seven, maybe eight, and didn't know how to play, but she rested her hand on mine. Pressed down lightly. Together, we made sound. I was unsure if she was teaching me, or if she needed my finger strength to fill the glum room with the massive instrument's music, or if maybe she missed a granddaughter, sister, child.

A few days ago, I pulled a tick from my dog's ear after taking him for an off-leash run in the woods upstate. The creature was less than sesame seed sized, not much blood yet puffing up their body. Mechanically, I stood over the toilet and flicked the bug in the bowl like a spent match before I disinfected the small wound on my dog's ear. Later that night, I took my daily probiotic.

I was thinking again of bugs, how they are everywhere, especially as the city heats up and I find myself covered in mosquito bites. How that word is often used to describe irritation, the neighbor who is *bugging* you with his dogs barking late into the night or the *bug* that crashed your computer.

When I think of the woman in the hospital, she was not bugging me. Sure, she attached her body to mine, sent something through me, but I was not irritated. I was curious.



I've been wondering how to look at "the tick" with reverence. How do I observe the bug's qualities so as to interpret them through writing? Animate them in cartoon? Or do I write instead of their common carrier—the soft faced deer whose bulging, wet eyes don't look much different from my dog's.

Maybe I can start by thinking of the pop I felt as I pulled the creature from my dog's skin, the clean break with all the bug's limbs attached, and how the tick seemed to be reaching for flesh as I carried them away. Maybe they were wanting to return to their new home. I was the one latching onto them.

I learned recently that when ticks do this with their arms, it is called "questing." They often extend their limbs as they balance on the edge of a blade of grass, waiting for something to carry them away. Close-up images of ticks questing remind me of bodies in prayer, a crying child asking to be picked up—all of those moments as a human animal where I've found myself wanting to be filled with something, taken somewhere, held.

Ticks don't fully register the shapes of the world around them, so what they latch onto is indiscriminate. They follow carbon dioxide to human bodies. When we exhale, we call them forward. They feel our heat, our odors. They are indifferent to borders. They like to shift host bodies, moving from animal to animal as they age. Ticks teach us about migration, and the ways our state imposed borders are artificial, especially as biomes change shape as the climate warms. The range of ticks in the northeast has expanded due to this fact.

If what I'm after is to detach from my resentment of the tick, to embody some sort of forgiveness for their indifferent action of infecting my father, maybe I need to turn inward to the 50 trillion bacteria digesting my almond butter toast. The bugs who help me live.

Or I can rewatch [the video](#) of when I tried to intervene in the interaction between two bugs who'd gotten into my home and were trying to eat each other (grasshopper versus ladybug) and realize there's no way to fully control the outcome of an interaction.

—

Brenda Hillman talks about moaning at the gas tank, feeling trapped in her reliance on what she knows harms, and I think I moan when I feed my dog ground up chicken and beef. I recognize I live inside a world of constant mitigation of harm, of compromise. I holler at a threatened ladybug, a tick I'm quick to squash. So what?

The so what is I'm still enacting a hierarchy in who I'll protect, still acknowledging the fight in me to kill the "bad" bacteria and bugs, savor the "good." That, I suppose, is to acknowledge I still have an impact on the nonhuman animals around me. Perhaps bugs are an invitation into chaos, a reminder that there is only so much evaluation of our own impact, and ability to influence others, that we can be responsible for.

There are other ways to latch on to each other, succubi of collaboration, we could say, perhaps. If to essay is to try, then these self-published weekly essays are experiments in failure. Constraints of time, removed layers of approval and editing from external hands. This week, I talked with Nicholas R. Silcox about the necessity of failure within capitalism and the restorative hope offered through play. He is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of English at New York University. His research and writing interests revolve around environmental issues and media & technology. He is working on a dissertation on sensing and sensor technologies and environmentality.



NEW PODCAST EPISODE

## What is the nonhuman?

Drawing Animals

Jun 13 · 54 min 10 sec



### Episode Description

In this episode, Juliana talks with Nicholas R. Silcox, a scholar whose research and writing interests revolve around environmental issues and media & technology. They discuss the word "animal," creature interactions, climate justice, whales, art-making, and the need for communal and performative practices to get closer to grief and, perhaps, understanding nonhuman experiences.

*"In the case of animals, how might we think about the ways in which our dog is able to interact with the world in a way that produces sorts of knowledge that we actually just don't have access to? And that might be enough for thinking about how we should then interact with them, how we should attempt to preserve, or accommodate, or fold those worlds into our own,"*  
*Nicholas shares.*

I decided to end the first episode with a poem about grief because so much of what we discussed was finding a relationship to loss, and losing. Of becoming more conscious and aware of changes in our lives, and the permanence of those changes. The decisions that make up the texture of life.

Maybe it's because Father's Day is this weekend, or that a few weeks ago it was my father's yahrzeit, which I observed for the first time on my own, burning a candle and reciting the mourner's Kaddish, which felt awkward as I spoke the sounds over my bathroom sink.

Last night I dreamt of being at pool that nobody would let me enter because I wasn't wearing the right swimsuit. I walked away from the group, and woke up with Sufjan Stevens' "Back to Oz," in my head, which sucked me back years ago to his Carrie and Lowell album.

He released the songs after his mother died. I got to see him perform the album live in Detroit, his home state, where I sat with my friend Saba as we cried through the show.



The concert felt like a public ritual, a sharing in communal grief, something I think we have yet to experience as the pandemic continues on. The distorted images from my flip phone at the time still captured the feeling of worship.



"We need to embrace a sense of not being precious with the worlds that are already present," says Nicholas. "We have to embrace letting certain worlds go."

In "Fourth of July," Sufjan speaks with his mother, with the past, with things unseen through animal images. The symbols become his language. Two animals, working in communion:

*Did you get enough love, my little dove?*

*Shall we look at the moon, my little loon  
Why do you cry?  
Make the most of your life, while it is rife  
While it is light  
Well you do enough talk*

*My little hawk, why do you cry?*

—

During my trip upstate with my dog, I was lucky to have fiddlehead ferns during their brief period of bloom, which is often seen as a symbol of new beginnings. The soft plant crumbled on my tongue as I ate feeling more removed from my upstate childhood town than I have in my life. Talking with friends more now as we gather again, we reflect on how it feels as though our transition to adulthood was blurred, that we thought perhaps there'd be a larger marker. Something to let us know we'd made it. Perhaps that's an internal decision. Or one that levels out over time. But as our places continue to change over time, understanding that deeper connection to change, to movement, feels essential. There is something brave about the tick, arms outstretched, unsure where they will land.

Even without a mass ritual, there is still space for individual healing and connection, smaller forms of communion. One of my rituals is to walk to the East River and sit at the tables where the waterline blends my perspective. I feel as though I am sailing off to an unbound place. The wind is fierce here, blows me beyond thought if I let myself stay long enough.



## COLLABORATION: VIRTUAL OFFERINGS & PODCAST

There's still time to sign up for the monthly "[how!](#)" (first is June 26th at 8:30 PM EST) where we gather to share stories of animals in our lives, learn from each other, and practice a guided writing/art making prompt. It is a casual environment—no specific skill set necessary to participate.

My *All We Can Save* circle begins on June 24th at 11 AM EST. Sign up [here](#).

Subscribe to the Drawing Animals podcast [here](#)!



# READING LIST: THINKING ABOUT TIME

This week, I'm traveling through time and wondering about ways to reorient and write about the past. Check out *The Art of Time in Memoir* by Sven Birkerts.

To find small ways to slow down and experience time in new ways, try *The Zen of Wilderness and Walking*, edited by Katharine Wroth.

Speaking of time, an essay of mine from 2018, "The Role of the Environmental Writer," is being reprinted in *The Gravity of the Thing's* new anthology, *Stranged Writing: A Literary Taxonomy*. [Reserve](#) your copy today. Here's a small excerpt from the introduction to my piece:

*Our implicit agreement for being on earth is that our time here will end, at the will of our bodies—a natural disaster, an unnatural disaster, at the hands of another or the state, but at some point, we go. And as the best estimates of our scientists predict, the earth as we understand the composition of the matter and molecules around us to be has its own end coded into existence. Half-lives, transmutations, evaporations. And this knowledge is somehow, at its best, meant to both free us and inspire us to live and serve each other better. What is the role of the environmental writer in shaping what this looks like?*



## SUPPORT THE WORK

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COLLABORATE: [julianarothauthor@gmail.com](mailto:julianarothauthor@gmail.com)

*Got an animal lover in your life? Forward them this letter!*



## + A NEW POEM

*I've exchanging daily poems with my friend Kayla for the month of June and I'm finding the themes of the letter appearing in my writing. Here's a new one.*

SAT, JUN 11

### Fish Screen

I watch the fish float my screen

pretend I am underwater

and then realize I am not

pretending I am underwater

I am watching their scales

with two fans going

I clean the air, I smell

as close to odorless as

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