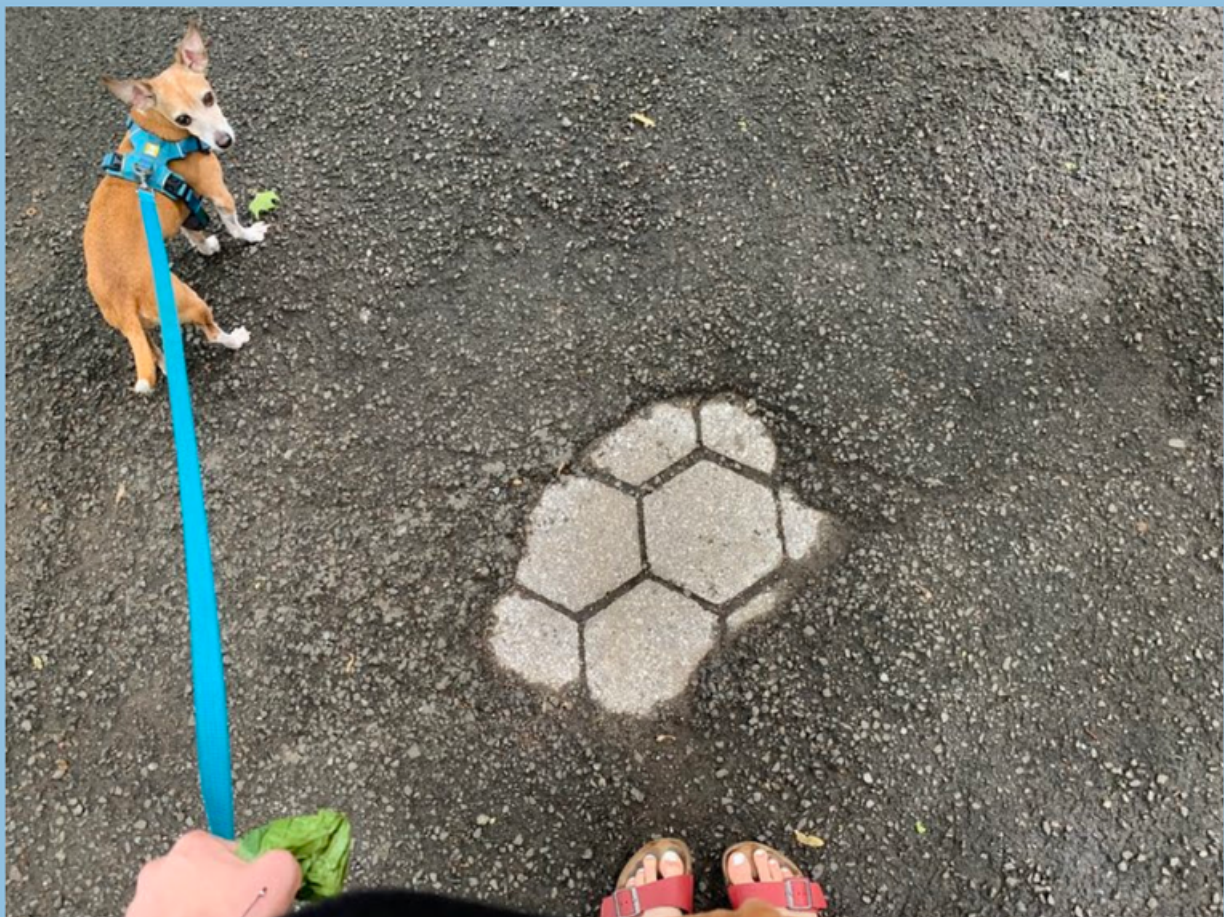




*Drawing Animals* is a weekly newsletter featuring an essay on our interconnection with animal life, an anthropomorphized doodle, and a short list of recommended readings related to the week's theme. Expect musings on a bird call's relationship to intuition, earth worms, myths about the land, and how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



## ESSAY FOUR: "TURTLE LOVE"



We spent the afternoon walking the aisles of a Fishtown super-mega-corporate grocery store, dancing to the loop of Dua Lipa's "One Kiss" and Drake's "In My Feelings," enjoying the drama that was 2018 pop love and heartbreak, but insistent that this summer it would *not* be us. We were happily single. For once.

My friend A. and I shared a pattern of not taking much of a break between relationships and now that we'd claimed our place in the world as writers by jumping on the assembly-line that is the American MFA in Fiction TM, our chosen summer jam was Jamila Woods' "Holy."

*I'm not lonely, I'm alone  
And I'm holy by my own*

It felt true.

Besides, I wasn't someone who ever successfully had a "summer love." I didn't understand the casualness. My love always grew, became something too meaningful to part with, something I refused to release even if that love came in the form of people who were...kind of not loving me.

"Summer of self love," I told A. as we finished filling the cart with fresh vegetables, tofu, and coconut milk. She was going to cook us her favorite vegan curry from London. We were going to set up on her living room couch with our laptops until her roommate got back from his boxing match. Like the turtle attached to their shell, we were autonomous with our dream. Self-determined. Free. We shook on it.

A. was one of the few vegans I knew in Philadelphia and someone who got equally excited at the discovery of vegan cream cheese at a coffee shop or a cheesesteak made from seitan. When a professor gave away peppers after a literary event at school, we nearly cried. Stood outside as the students cleared out, holding our red plumage defiantly to the sky.



"I mean, there are other kinds of love than romantic," I said as we walked down to Penn Treaty Park where we sat by the water, soaking up the newly breaking heat before making our way to her apartment. I was supposed to have moved on from the topic of love, to use the walk home to exchange story notes before we edited the pieces we wanted to send out. Even now, I'm supposed to be writing an essay about turtles.

There were other kinds of love, to name just a few of the species:

- Eros — romantic
- Philia — affectionate
- Philautia — self-love
- Agape — divine/unconditional
- Storge — familiarity
- Pragma — enduring
- Ludus — playful
- Mania — obsessive

I've been reading Natasha Lunn's *Conversations on Love: Lovers, Strangers, Parents, Friends, Endings, Beginnings*, and in the essays and interviews, she reflects on the hierarchy she'd viewed love through, that the only love that mattered to her in her early life was erotic love. She writes: "The searching was a constant distraction, as if talking to a friend at a party and looking over their shoulder at who might be coming through the door next. Except, instead of a conversation, I was missing my life."

A. looked up from the two mallards quarreling at the tree in front of us. I wondered if Drake knew male ducks were called drakes (according to a recent Urban Dictionary entry, he might now), but the females don't get a special name. They are simply called ducks. Maybe, for the sake of the parallelism, we can call them kikis, which, given the word's origins, might be more fitting.

It was unclear if Drake was harassing Kiki, or if they were recovering from a mutual misunderstanding, or breaching the distance of an unspoken longing, or simply declaring that it was time to go back to the water, to get away from the nosey humans.



We followed the mallards down to the river, ignoring the possibility of that final reason for their quacking, and instead found ourselves staring at the otherwise empty water. The Delaware River region is a natural habitat for bog turtles, the smallest turtles on the continent. Since they love the sunlight, spotting a bog turtle is often a sign of spring.

But out of the nearly 300 species of turtles, in this area you're more likely to see a painted turtle. In 1997, bog turtles were listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Soon after, they became endangered in neighboring states. The tiny creatures are often hunted, collected, or killed off by river pollution. Turtle shells are still sold as decorative items.

Where we stood at the Delaware River was also the site of slave trade in Philadelphia, the first capital of the nation on the continent first named Turtle Island by the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples. In their stories, the creation of the world is often imagined on the back of a turtle's shell, making the turtle symbolic of life force, fertility, and ecological health with similar associations in the mythology of China and Japan.

A few years ago, Kateri Tekakwitha, the daughter of an Algonquian woman who converted to Catholicism and the Mohawk chief of the Turtle clan, was canonized by the Catholic Church. She lost her parents and sibling to small pox, surviving the disease with partial blindness herself, and is now known as the patroness of the loss of parents, ecology, and environment—to mixed reception. Many Indigenous peoples went to Rome for the ceremony, others invoked the legacy of violence and subjugation in Catholic residential schools. Kateri Tekakwitha struggled herself with her Catholicism throughout her lifetime. From where was her love? From where was her connection to the divine?

The shared need for story, to understand our origin, brings us to language, which brings us to symbols and containers. I think again of Gary Snyder, this time *Turtle Island*: "But the poem was born elsewhere, and need not stay. Like the wild geese of the Arctic it heads home, far above the borders, where most things cannot cross."

Animals are not aware of our borders, instead respond to their environmental cues. If there is food, they come. If it is hostile, they do their best to leave—or adapt. "As a kid that wanted only to draw pictures of butterflies and look at the oak trees out the window," writes Ada Limón. "I realized that the establishment of nations didn't have much to do with the fauna and flora at all."

The algae blooms near the shore likely meant we wouldn't be seeing any turtles, like we had hoped. I first learned about eutrophication—what seemed to be happening with the thick layers of green scum floating by us—in my high school botany class where my teacher took us for trips down to the Hudson River. We stole afternoons from the school board measuring the effects of too much nitrogen and phosphorus, likely runoff from lawn fertilizers and warming temperatures. When a body receives too much, even of a nutrient, it might suffocate. Too much of what you think you need can kill off what else wants to grow. Blocks out the sun. Eventually, the poetic-sounding algae bloom turns into a dead zone.

That class was also where I first met a turtle. The teacher had rescued a box turtle from a former student who'd bought the baby as a souvenir in Times Square, not realizing the responsibility, how they needed room to climb and explore, how large turtles could grow.

My teacher kept him in a tank in the back of the room. One day, thinking myself kinder than the student-tourist, I reached my hand in the tank to pet the turtle's head. I felt a pinch, blood trickled down my pointer finger. I stared back at the grumpy, toothless grandpa who had bitten me with his beak, feeling embarrassed that I'd assumed he would be receptive to my touch. His life began as a trinket and was now being lived out in a noisy tank, though luckily cared for by a kind teacher who knew how to restore and replicate his habitat. Why had I assumed friendliness from a creature? Why had I projected that my desire for communion was reciprocal? What kind of love from the turtle was I seeking? Was it love?

Perhaps what I saw in the turtle was a recognition of myself, and so the familiarity I assumed was a soul recognition. I think back to my teenage self and how outward focused I could be at times, or as Natasha Lunn goes on to describe, I was focused "on receiving love, instead of giving it; on waiting for it, instead of building it...I could not see the role I played in my own loneliness."

“Are you working on your novel today?” A. asked as we left the park and walked to the row house.

“No. I’m just frustrated a bit with the characters,” I said, remembering a comment a writer had left in a letter on a draft about the female friendship in the book possibly turning into a romance. He was prone to only writing about women in his stories who his narrator could sleep with, and so I knew the gaze I was responding to was not my own, but it still bothered me. “I think it is harder to write the depth of friendship between two women without it becoming eroticized, without being distorted,” I said. “And now I feel like I’m writing their friendship defensively, thinking like, do others still really only believe women can be ditsy, shallow friends or enemies of each other?”

In my lifetime, my friendships outlasted my romantic partnerships, and held me, at times, in more intimate ways. Friendship, and writing, was where I learned how to reveal myself. And those friendships and forms of expression can become challenging to patriarchal systems.

If true friendship is acknowledged between women, it risks being sexualized by an external gaze. Turned into a joke, like William’s recurring lesbian digs about the intimacy of the lifelong female friends shown in the sitcom *Girlfriends*, or the annoying letter I received from a fellow writer. Still, movies like *Late Night* or *Frances Ha* prove alternative imaginations around intimacy are possible.

As the sweet potato fattened with turmeric and ginger, we got writing. We had two hours left to work before I needed to walk back to where I lived on the other side of the city, to make it to a free nightly yoga class on Race Street Pier as the sun set over the troublesome, beautiful river.

—

After we ate, I decided to take the river walk home. I felt called to stop again at Penn Treaty Park. I sat in the grass. Took off my shoes.





I laughed, noticing some movement on a log ahead of me. I stood, walking barefoot through broken twigs and bits of dried leaves. There I found two turtles on a log where before we had thought they couldn't survive. Thought humans strong enough to eradicate *all* life.

"This is the summer of self love," I nearly said to them, full of both longing and adoration for their unmistakable display of companionship.

But then I looked at my phone. It was only the last week of May. Still spring. There were a few weeks left for them to sneak their affection.



And forty minutes for me to make it to class. I put back on my shoes, waved goodbye, and walked on...



...to claim an affection of my own.

# COLLABORATION: HOWL

I'm deep in the work of new interviews for upcoming letters. In the meantime, I'm excited to offer a different kind of collaboration opportunity this month, one where YOU can get involved.

I'm starting a monthly "[howl](#)" (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.



"To say it is mindless is missing the point."

- Camille Dungy, "Characteristics of a Life"

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Each Tuesday, a fresh newsletter is published. The project is fully funded by donations.

Join for a free monthly "howl" starting on June 26th at 8:30 PM EST. We share stories of the animals in our lives, learn from each other, and close the evening with a guided writing/art making prompt.



[www.julianaroth.com/drawinganimals](http://www.julianaroth.com/drawinganimals)

## READING LIST: SUMMER LOVE

I quoted a few times from Natasha Lunn's *Conversations on Love*, which is a beautiful anthology and collection of interviews. Her newsletter that eventually became the book was one of the inspirations for this space.

But a foundational love book is bell hooks' *All About Love*. For those curious to sit more with grief, what may be on the other side of love—or our fear in loving, I recommend Kevin Young's poetry anthology, *The Art of Losing*. If you're feeling the summer heat and want to get back to creating yourself, check out *The Creative Fire* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés.

I will be leading a bi-monthly reading group of *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*. We will meet 11-12 PM EST on Fridays starting June 24th. Register for free [here](#).

I finally scanned in a new zine I created at the end of last year, *Catalog of Pleasure* (about a woman and her dog after the end of a relationship), which is available as a download for \$8. Learn more [here](#).

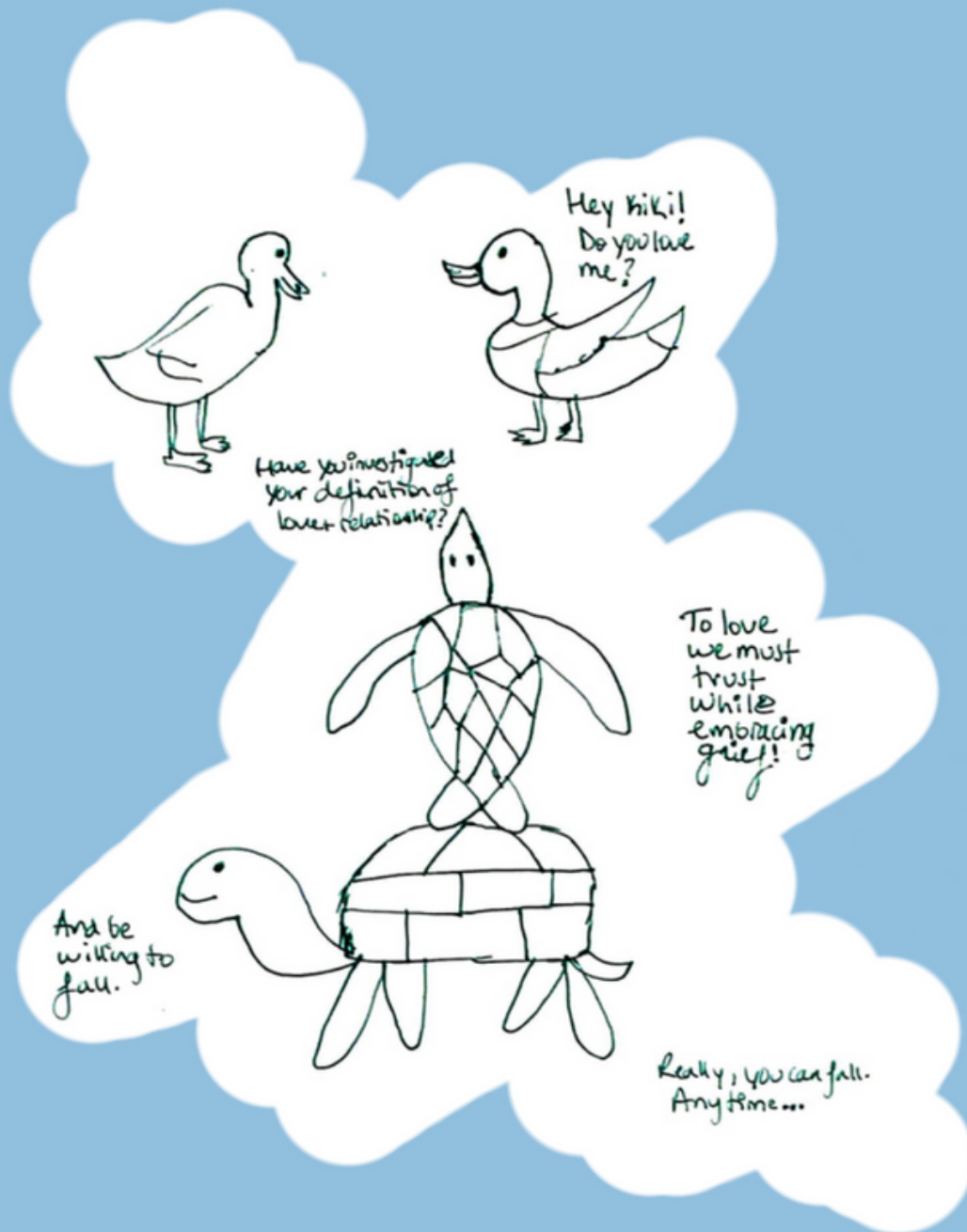
You can also check out a bonus doodle & a new poem at the end of the letter :).

## SUPPORT THE WORK

VENMO: @Juliana-Roth

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

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



## + ANOTHER DOODLE!?!

*I found these in a sketchbook from high school and felt they fit this week's themes perfectly! Hope you enjoy some true love this week. If you do, let me know what flavor you get :).*

Do you know  
of the love  
that I want?



There is only one  
love that we all  
want.

NEW POEM ON THE BLOG

## Turtle Sweet

I didn't want to know

how they used their thick

gelled bodies, the meat a stale

marshmallow, which isn't much

better with its ground hooves and—

what I want is the nibbling

of seaweed floating through a

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