



Weekly documentation of the interactions, interconnections, and complications between animal lives.



## ESSAY ONE: "THE CALL"



I recently noticed that our word for reaching out to one another is rooted in the same word we use to describe how birds speak. To each other, and to us.

A bird's *call* is also what we study to see how they mimic (elegize? celebrate?) the sounds around them. Sitting with the word longer, I notice feeling *called* is the language I use within myself to describe my intuitive leads. A call, for me, is a feeling of affirmation, a nudge, whether that leads to me turning down the not-so-usual street on a morning walk or deciding to send a photo to a friend who turned out to have just been thinking of me too or more drastic calls such as deciding to defer college so I could live as a volunteer on a farm in Maine and hike the La Sal Mountains in Utah.

My twenties were spent immersed in poetry and short stories and podcasts, so sometimes I wonder if I'm only borrowing my language from the voices I submerge myself in: Ross Gay, Cheryl Strayed, bell hooks, George Saunders, Ada Limón—the list runs long and fills not only my quoted section on GoodReads and my walls as scraps of paper, but these voices also live humming alongside each other on my double-stacked bookshelves in my tiny NYC apartment. Sometimes if I'm dealing with something I've lost language for, like a break-up or needing to quit a job, I look to the shelves and decide which title I'm being called to. Whose language will help me identify my own?

I used to be very insecure about not knowing how *original* I was, likely because I am a younger sibling so there were few things I could ever do **first** in my life, or maybe because my parents were also writers and I feared I was just dutifully following in their footsteps, that my path was not my own. Or maybe that's just the mythology artists in America are told as they face the market for making a life out of their work. But the more I studied art, books, animals, and the world around me, I confronted a paradox: an original was both impossible to pursue... and to avoid being.



## For Crow Boy

"First he imitated the voices of newly hatched crows,  
And then he made the mother crow's voice,  
Then he imitated the father crow's voice."

- Taro Yashima

To call in my language of loneliness,  
I arrive in a valley of crows. How to become more than  
the landscape? Ingesting all that's held in my beak,

I swallow corn grains from mountainside  
and return to my father's wheelchair  
tracing his hand  
over letters,  
forcing a marker  
against his thumb.

I say: write again, please. His name  
I've written in my best child cursive with too much assurance  
in not seeing what's before me.

I plead again and again, not seeing a name  
is no longer important — or words — or language  
just the sound, just what I can pluck from Earth

to hold in my hollow mouth, imitating  
until, there: a call of my own

That's why when I noticed that our description for how both human and nonhuman animals seek to find one another, or to be heard, I felt it was only right for the word to be the subject for the first essay of this new project. I'm certainly not the only one with a newsletter, or the only one to write about animals, or to examine my thinking from an ecocentric point-of-view, but *Drawing Animals* was born of a call that was uniquely my own. Acknowledging this made me want to share a poem I published a few years ago in *Stirring*, which was later shared by my hometown library. The poem centers a speaker who is facing both their grief over their father's long illness and his inability to use language to communicate anymore while they are also learning to harness their own voice, alchemizing the generational languages that came before. It also quotes from my favorite book as a child, *Crow Boy*.

During the first summer of lockdown, I was staying with my mom in my hometown. It was a weekday afternoon. I decided to clean out her tub, fill it with warm water and epsom salts, and listen to an album on my phone, which I'd delicately balanced on the nearby toilet seat. Just as I settled in the water, I heard my mom running up the stairs. She banged on the door: *Help!*

I quickly wrapped a towel around myself and ran with her down the stairs, not realizing I had no idea what danger I was running into, only that here I was running.

When we got to the foot of the stairs, the door was slung open and she pointed to the front steps. *Help me save him!* I looked down and saw a parrot, an abnormal presence for our small Hudson Valley town, although me facing a loose animal was a pretty regular occurrence. Throughout childhood, I was called upon by neighbors and family members whenever an animal escaped. I was known to run through woods and return covered in poison ivy, and the beloved lost pet.

I tried to coax the creature into my palm, but he bopped up to the railing and looked at me, head tilted to the right. I thought of a few years before when a dove had found themselves in my mom's house and I caught the bird with a bowl and a plate before her cats could get to them. Quickly, I ran upstairs to my childhood bedroom, pulled on dress, and chased after the bird with one of my her mixing bowls. For old time's sake.

But the bird flew away. Went to our neighbor's door instead.

After a communal effort (mainly our neighbor leaving treats inside an empty cardboard box), the bird was successfully brought into our home. We recorded his call, a mimicry of a ringtone, and posted the sound to missing animal sites in the area, to our local newspaper, but after several hurried phone calls with heartbroken pet owners, I realized the phenomena of escaped birds was much larger than I thought. This fact gave me pause: *Did this bird just want to be free?*

But then I remembered how my mom described him approaching our door several times, looking to come in, and how he did the same for our neighbor. I thought of the hawks that circled our block, how easy a catch he would be. The streams of cars, the house cats asleep on their porches. At this point, he was used to the protection of domesticated living, and so we committed to finding him a new life at an animal sanctuary upstate.

The surprise of the bird certainly was welcome in the midst of a tremendous loss and devaluing of life around the planet, but the encounter did make me question the ethics of pet ownership, and what we owe to the animals we have domesticated.





In 2018, I adopted my dog, a chiweenie named Ziggy. He was five, from suburban Florida, and had never been walked on a city street. I lived in downtown Philadelphia at the time and there were few moments where we did not encounter another dog. I struggled with what to do, watching YouTube videos of trainers on the different tactics I could use to harness my pet's wild energy, to retrain his instincts. Were my weekly therapy sessions or yoga classes or meditations in the morning much different?

But I resisted the idea of me being his master. The men in the YouTube videos showed how to pull on a dog's neck with the leash to deter them from lunging. They showed me how to use body language to communication dominance. These were not ways I wanted to relate to my dog.

I looked around for a humane trainer in the city and she came to our apartment with a bag of puppy treats, perfect for Ziggy's small size. We spent time on walks and in the apartment as she assessed Ziggy's temperament (a total mush when inside, a hypervigilant macho man on the street). As we sat in my living room, Ziggy exhausted at my feet from the hour of "reward" exercises we tried, using treats to bribe him into sitting, teaching him he could earn my favor, the trainer said to me, *With an older dog, you can either modify or manage. It's up to you.*

I decided to start crossing the streets. Our walks now are like video game adventures, the other dogs our Blinky, Pinky, and Inky. After years together now, if a big dog is coming down the block and there's no way to cross, Ziggy will look up at me. He'll put his paws on my shin, asking to be picked up. He calls to me, and I carry him.

## READING LIST: ABOUT PERSONHOOD

This week, I'm reading two essays on animal personhood, a term that refers to the idea of animals being given protective legal rights. Other nonhuman entities, like corporations, are given these protections under the law, but because of industrial and commercial reliance on keeping animals as property, the battle is fraught.

Proponents of animal personhood believe that formalizing animals as conscious, feeling creatures will allow for our society to radically shift how we treat them. It is with the same spirit that I am creating *Drawing Animals*, and the title was chosen to reflect that. For me drawing means many things. To draw near. To sketch, as in to try to capture temporarily and with a beginner's mind. To see. To enter battle with, willing or not. Perhaps to draw a line, to separate. To attempt to represent. Animal means to be a living organism. To have the qualities of the animal, which I believe we all do, even though that term has been used historically to marginalize and harm. The title is also a call to one of the books that radically shaped how I see the world, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer, which investigates the factory farming industry.

I was honored to host a roundtable conversation earlier this month on the topic of animal personhood with *Reckoning*, a literary magazine dedicated to environmental justice, which I will share when it's posted! We spoke as a community on how re-seeing our relationship to animals is essential for any environmental movement. We spoke about how indigenous peoples are often mythologized in inaccurate ways when it comes to relationships to land and animals, and how science fiction can help offer new visions for the future.

When we started speaking, I felt myself face the same resistance as Astra & Sunaura Taylor in the first essay I'd like to recommend, "Our Animals, Ourselves" from *Lux Magazine*, about not wanting to be seen as the "annoying vegan." But what my guests said was powerful too, how it can be difficult to have a conversation on animal personhood when global human rights are not yet honored. At the same time, I feel both can be fought for at once, and as Astra & Sunaura Taylor argue in their essay, the struggles of liberation are intricately woven together.

The second essay I'd like to recommend is a piece from *The New Yorker*, "The Elephant in the Court Room" by Lawrence Wright, which profiles the court battles over animal personhood.

I'm also revisiting the films *Gunda* and *Stray*. These documentaries are not only extraordinarily filmed, but they give a look at how animals view the world (director Elizabeth Lo of *Stray* actually followed a stray dog around Istanbul, staying at their point-of-view level with her camera and only going where the dog was already going to go) and what it means to really cherish them.

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