



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



ESSAY TWO: "THE OTHER"



These past weeks I've been preparing for my two summer writing courses. In one, we will study animal lives and in the other, the city as biome. When I was feeling stuck on how to introduce the idea of "the other" in a new way, the other as in someone or an idea we have of someone outside of ourselves—often the subject onto which we may project (or recognize) our fears or desires—it reminded me of the fallacy of anthropomorphism. This is something many of my writing teachers told us *not* to do as students.

And the impulse to resist assumption is good. How could we ever know what another truly thinks or feels? *How* they think or feeling?

At the same time, one of my favorite lines in poetry is in Ross Gay's "To the Fig Tree on 9th & Christian": "yes I am anthropomorphizing / goddammit." Without knowing the city, I moved to Philadelphia for my MFA in 2016 and found myself living just a fifteen minute walk from the space imagined in the poem.

The year after I graduated, I stood on the corner with my boyfriend at the time—just a few months before our relationship would end though I could feel it already starting to happen. We were with his friends from a film he was working on in the city, waiting in line for breakfast at a restaurant they'd all been wanting to try. I thought I should explain to everyone why I was smiling so much about where they'd picked to eat, but decided not to share when prompted. "I just really like this spot," I said, glad to have a secret for myself. Glad for the affirmation that I was still engaged in my own sort of listening.



But even as I strove to be a *good* writer, I couldn't help but use my own meaning making and interpretation in conversation with the nonhuman animals and objects around me. For a while, I thought doing so was just fun, but as I began to notice more how much our world discards life that is *other*, I realized this practice might be a form of protection, preservation.

Historically, treating someone, or a whole peoples, as the Other has been a mechanism for controlling or committing harm against them. In her essay in *The Nation* after the re-election of George W. Bush, Toni Morrison outlined the plan of dictators:

1. Select a useful enemy—an "Other"—to convert rage into conflict, even war.
2. Limit or erase the imagination that art provides, as well as the critical thinking of scholars and journalists.
3. Distract with toys, dreams of loot, and themes of superior religion or defiant national pride that enshrine past hurts and humiliations.

And in her later book, *The Origin of Others*, she wrote that the exact opposite (coming close to Others, empathizing, recognizing ourselves in each other) is how we reduce our separations, how we come more fully into knowing all of our parts, but that this self knowledge also risks our own estrangement. “The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one’s racialized rank is to lose one’s own valued and enshrined difference,” she writes.



Feeling unrooted from the known self is confronting. Perhaps that’s why we seek to control that which we feel we can’t know, like our land and animals.

Just in time for all of this wondering and negotiating what it is we do when we anthropomorphize (build empathy or make assumption?), I had an essay, “An Invisible Language,” come out with one of my favorite astrologers, tarot readers, and writers, Michelle Tea, and her project, [This is Your Magic](#). You can read the full on their site, but I’ve excerpt a bit below to close out this week’s letter.

An Invisible Language

Yes, animals feel. Yes, they can talk to us. So, what do they have to say?

By Juliana Roth

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Illustration by Andy Pham

I carried the black-and-white film still with me as I moved throughout my twenties, sorting the artifacts of my life over ten times as I transitioned to yet another home. And another. About halfway through my decade of relocations, the framed photo went missing: Jimmy Stewart as Elwood P. Dowd, in a top hat, smiling with abandon at the portrait balancing on the ledge of a fireplace of him and his púca, Harvey, a 6'3" rabbit. To me, this moment demonstrated the greatest best friendship, a photo destined for a locket. To the community observing Elwood, he'd lost his damn mind.

Púcas, meaning ghost in Irish and in particular those spirits that incarnate a domesticated animal body, are often described with foreboding: don't trust the animal who speaks. Yet many see the púca matching the intention of the person encountered. Some have positive experiences with a púca in whatever form they take and others...not so much. As a lifelong vegan and protector of animals, I challenge the idea that animals aren't already imbued with their own spirit. To me, it speaks to an anthropocentrism in our thinking that would be helpful to eliminate.

As a person who wants to believe deeply in a karmic and divine balance, I do like the idea of intention mattering and that the encounter with a nonhuman animal may simply be a mirror to reflect back one's own energetic state. I like the reverence for animals inherent to the púca myth, that we shouldn't take beings for granted just because we don't understand their way of speaking. And, in the case of the movie Harvey, I like Elwood P. Dowd and his whimsical adherence to fantasy, his faith that what's unseen is worthy of attention, that other modes of perception are often written off too quickly as insanity. To me, the film is ultimately about what it is to write, to create. To take one's vision seriously. And to love all the animals around us.

READING LIST: SEEING THE OTHER

This week, I'm reading Camille Dungy's poem "Characteristics of a Life," *Mother Earth: Through the Eyes of Women Photographers and Writers, A Sierra Club Book*, Alice Walker's *Am I Blue?*, and Linda Hogan's *Dwellings*. All of these pieces challenge the way we might have been trained to see the world through our media, culture, and are asking me new questions about how I think about the idea of home.

I am also offering **3 mailed copies** of my zine *Love* for \$2, which also gets you a PDF. Learn more [here](#).

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VENMO: @Juliana-Roth

PATREON: patreon.com/drawinganimals

COLLABORATE: julianarothauthor@gmail.com

