
ANIMAL GRATITUDES

PATRICK COLEMAN

We were supposed to get freezing rain, so we drove to the art museum on our Monday holiday. Before the freezing rain it had been snow, and it had been snow for a long time. You were mad at me for not listening while you told a story, and you were right to be. The windshield was dirty and there was folk music. It felt like a bad movie, and I asked what our lives in winter would be like as a movie. Sad people driving around, sharing deep-sounding thoughts, worried about the future. Every scene of deep, sad thinking or speaking would be interspersed with five seconds of spotting road kill: *Oh, squirrel! Poor cat. Possum. Jesus, I don't even know what that was.* This is how we would make a movie of our lives, making the dead animals along the road the punctuation marks to a joke of right now. As we laughed, which at our speed took place over about two hundred yards, there: two dead deer. But sometimes, like we said about our movie, we would look expectantly and say, *Oh God*, but then say: *Carpet! Oh. Thank God. It was carpet.*

The man who hosts the exercise videos knows not what he says. He compared one move to a scene from *Deliverance*. I don't know what kind of exercise that would be, but I'm not doing it. While I was working out and laughing, I heard you fighting the cats. They don't like it when I shut the door. When I came out, you were upstairs talking to your grandma.

248 She's doing better now.

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I dragged the trashcan to the curb in a snowstorm and a caught a coyote loping across the road. It was big enough to be a husky, but it vanished easily into the gray stalks of the hay field. The usual road into work was frozen. First trying it and failing, then taking the long way, we saw the carcass of a deer, just behind that field's fence-line tree.

Tonight, I went out to our landlord's shop to turn on her faucet; it's pipe-freezing weather. The snow was blue with moonlight. In the woods just behind the barn one coyote howled, then another, until there were fifteen, twenty at least—some voices deep and hollow-chested, others obviously pups', yips becoming barks, maybe snapping at their siblings. A chorus of hunting. I was in my bathrobe, and the clutter in my mind fell away. My body knew what to think about that sound. Even as my mind imagined seeing them, putting them into the context of a food chain, I had been made ready to run. Then I remembered Louis, the barn cat, and worried it was his body they were howling over. But in the shop, unperturbed and sleeping on an old yellow chair, was my orange friend. He knew they weren't coming after him. He wasn't going to worry about it until they did.

This morning, one cat left the bed when I did, and the other stayed with you. Part of me stayed with you and the cat in bed. Part of me made coffee and worked in the office with a cat on my lap. It is so good to get twice as much out of these singular patches of time. The cats help. When I woke you and the cat, it felt like I was coming in to wake myself up, too. The sleeping cat stretched, yawned and leapt onto the rug. You rolled over for ten more minutes. The other cat made its *I want to be held* meow, and I picked her up and slung her on my shoulder. These animals divide our love into loves—scatter it, in a way—but stitch it together, too. Ten minutes

passed and I woke you again, with exactly the same desire to crawl back
in and raft our way into the world, cats hemming us on both sides. 249

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