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## Animals as Aperture: How Three Essayists Use Animals to Convey Meaning and Emotion

In 1903, the noted naturalist John Burroughs published an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* titled “Real and Sham in Natural History,” which sparked a literary showdown between naturalists and writers. Burroughs called writers like Jack London, Ernest Thompson Seton, and others, “nature fakers” for what he claimed was a portrayal of animals in fiction in a sentimental and anthropomorphic fashion. He went so far as to call it “yellow journalism of the woods” (299).

The role of animals in nonfiction that I examine here is very much apart from Burroughs’s claims and the vast genre of ecocriticism. Animals have a rich tradition in fiction, but their presence in contemporary nonfiction is rarely considered in the same way. Yet essayists employ animal counterparts to convey deep feeling and provide deeper meaning about themselves and the subjects they are writing about. This essay is emphatically not a dive into ecocriticism; rather, it is a close study of how authors of nonfiction use animals as a prism through which they can show readers their secret selves and amplify the narrative. Using animals as a literary device in this way, Charles G. D. Roberts said, “frees us for a little from the world of shop-worn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self” (29).

For Jo Ann Beard, Edward Hoagland, and Abigail Thomas, among others—animals are devices that allow each writer to focus the lens of self on a beast in order to illuminate human nature. This type of reverse-anthropomorphism allows the author to show very human feelings using animals as the foil.

Many times, when we ascribe animal behavior to human feelings, it is said that we are “projecting.” In her recent book, *Animal Madness: How Anxious Dogs, Compulsive Parrots, and Elephants in Recovery Help Us Understand Ourselves*, Laurel Braitman, a historian of science at MIT, explored the scientific concept of animal emotions. Can animals feel sadness, for example and can they be depressed? The answer is yes, and it’s important to acknowledge it early on here because it is a literary argument that has simmered since the “nature fakers” debate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However Braitman says in her TED Talk, “anthropomorphizing well...is based on accepting our animal similarities with other species,” meaning that we should acknowledge our human/animal “shared generalities, not unfounded projections.” Of course humans and animals can’t know exactly how the other thinks or feels, but we *can* operate from a base set of emotional commonalities.

In “Lament the Red Wolf,” from his 1988 essay collection *Heart’s Desire*, a compendium of thirty-five essays over twenty years, Edward Hoagland writes about the use of animals in literature this way:

Animals used to provide a low life way to kill and get away with it, as they do still, but, more intriguingly for some people, they are an aperture through which wounds drain. The scapegoat of oldentimes, driven off for the bystander’s sins, has become a tender thing, a running injury. There, running away—save it, save it—is me: hurt it and you are hurting me. (80)

When a wound drains, it means the wound is healing. In Hoagland’s view, an animal can be the lens through which we heal our wounds. Jo Ann Beard, during a lecture she gave at the Bennington Writing Seminars in January 2014, said, “Whether a writer is writing about a weasel, or a moth, or a dog, they are really writing about so much more than that.” Using animals as muse, these writers elevate their essays to parable, the universal required of nonfiction. If an

aperture is a hole or an opening through which light passes, it therefore makes sense for these essayists to use animals to shine a light on human nature.

### **Consider the Moth: A Meditation on Humanity**

If we are to start small in the animal kingdom, let it be with insects, briefly, and more specifically with the seemingly fragile moth.

Virginia Woolf's "The Death of the Moth" and Annie Dillard's "The Death of a Moth" both convey the human struggle between life and death. Woolf's moth thrashes about in a window-pane and slowly dies; Dillard's burns over the flame of a candle the author was reading by, transfigured into something far beyond its earthly abdomen and thorax. Dillard writes,

She burned for two hours without changing, without swaying or kneeling-only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burnt out his brain in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly my feet.

Both essays are powerful meditations on humanity that use an insect to carry the message.

### **Of Amphibians: What Turtles Can Teach Us**

Edward Hoagland's "The Courage of Turtles" is, on the one hand, about suburban development squeezing out the animal habitat Hoagland enjoyed as a child. On the other hand, it is also about Hoagland's personal struggle with the disappearing landscape of his childhood and his finding a place where he feels most at home.

When he wrote "Courage" he was about thirty-six years old and had already spent time with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus and in the Army. He was living on the Lower East Side in New York City and was about a year away from buying the remote Vermont

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farmhouse where he would spend many summers and eventually settle. “Courage” takes us through Hoagland’s happy, if not lonely, boyhood and introduces us to the animals he spent time with on Dr. Green’s Pond, then on Taggart Pond, and Mud Pond, in New Canaan, Connecticut. As a boy at the ponds he played with big water snakes and otters, foxes and minks. He kept dogs and goats as companions before moving on to the huge cats and elephants he worked with during his years with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus. Hoagland was a stutterer and, in interviews, talked openly about his feeling of isolation because of his impairment. More importantly he talked about how animals became his constant companions because he felt so alone. In an interview in *The Burlington Free Press* (June 26, 2011), Hoagland said:

If you can’t talk to people you spend a lot of time with your dog, who you are able to talk to. You become very close to pets, and perhaps become an observer of wildlife. And you strengthen your natural intuition and your so-called sixth sense, your second nature, which other people don't need for happiness or survival.

Although animals can’t speak, we talk *to* them and *for* them. Although they do not have language, we share a common one. They provide a place to park our anxiety and our fears. And they comfort us, especially when we are lonely and seeking a connection. John Steinbeck writes:

A writer out of loneliness is trying to communicate like a distant star sending signals. He isn't telling or teaching or ordering. Rather he seeks to establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing. We are lonesome animals. We spend all life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel— ‘Yes, that's the way it is, or at least that's the way I feel it. You're not as alone as you thought.’

These animals quenched Hoagland’s loneliness and in the essay he tells us why he chose a turtle as the emblem of his lost boyhood: “I was allergic to fur, for one thing, and turtles need minimal

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care...They are personable beasts. They see the same colors we do and they seem them just as well..." (30. Hoagland is openly nostalgic about wanting to return to the company of the turtles on the ponds where he spent his boyhood. For him it seems the turtle represents a specific time in his life—the safety of home, the innocence of childhood, the solace of a mother - which he doesn't yet want to walk away from. Perhaps this next passage is as much about returning to the womb as it is about the nature of turtles:

they rock rhythmically in place, as we often do, although they are hatched from eggs, not the womb. (A common explanation psychologists give for our pleasure in rocking quietly is that it recapitulates our mother's heartbeat *in utero*.) (30)

Hoagland sees himself in the turtles, perhaps as representing his natural state—guarded, dogged, and determined. He describes the turtles as if they are human:

Turtles cough, burp, whistle, grunt and hiss, and produce social judgments ... They pee in fear when they're first caught, but exercise both pluck and optimism in trying to escape, walking for hundreds of yards within the confines of their pen, carrying the weight of that cumbersome box on legs which are cruelly positioned for walking. (30)

Hoagland clearly empathizes with the turtle when he writes of the "cumbersome box on legs, which are cruelly positioned for walking," perhaps describing his own tongue that is cruelly positioned for talking.

Like the turtles, Hoagland too is enduring an environment (New York City) that feels artificial to him and just as he is trying to escape the city (while the turtles are trying to escape their cardboard boxes), he doesn't yet know just how he will do it. When he describes a turtle he rescued from Mud Pond to live with him in the city, he compares that turtle's predicament to the human condition. Hoagland writes: "It's like the nightmare most of us have whimpered through,

where we are weighted down disastrously while trying to flee; fleeing our home ground, we try to run” (31). He feels trapped like the turtle in that box.

The climax of the essay comes when Hoagland decides, after living for years in New York and seeing all manner of turtles in captivity, that he will finally rescue one. He finds some sad-looking turtles in a box on First Avenue “creeping over one another gimpily, doing their best to escape,” and he decides to rescue a diamondback terrapin. A diamondback is a tidewater turtle, he explains, which needs seawater to live happily. Hoagland becomes quickly exasperated with the turtle “thumping interminably against the baseboards,” (33) and carries it in a paper bag to the Hudson River. We follow Hoagland, thinking he is trying to set the turtle free. We empathize as he considers for a moment he’s made a mistake after he throws the turtle into the “bottomless” river where the “the waves were too rough for him, and the tide was coming in, bumping him against the pilings underneath the pier.” Hoagland has just spent pages and pages of this essay lauding the characteristics, the persistence, the grace and the courage of these turtles before delivering his final line that lands like a punch to the gut: “But since, short of diving in after him, there was nothing I could do, I walked away” (35). What is Hoagland really walking away from? His vanished childhood, a habitat that no longer fits him? The turtle is hero to Hoagland’s anti-hero. It is nature set in direct contrast with humanity. Hoagland is showing us that nature will keep trying, but we humans give up and walk away.

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## Monkeys, Coyotes and Squirrels

Just as Hoagland's turtle—in a non-sentimental way—serves as a lens into his life at that particular time, so do the animals Jo An Beard employs in her essay collection *The Boys of My Youth*. She charts her life story in essays that use creatures as touchstones in a triumph of animal amplification. For example, in the preface of *The Boys of My Youth*, she introduces us to herself as an infant in this way: “Here's one of my pre-verbal memories: I'm very little and I'm behind bars, like a baby monkey in a cage.” In “Coyotes,” she illustrates her feelings about intimacy and relationships through the actions of a coyote and its pack. Animals anchor this collection and they are intended to give the reader a glimpse into Beard's own nature.

Of particular note is “The Fourth State of Matter,” which weaves together strands of Beard's life at the time of the 1991 shootings of her friends and colleagues at a physics lab at the University of Iowa by Gang Lu. Lu was a grad student who had failed to have his doctoral thesis approved and blamed Christopher Goertz, who was Beard's friend, a noted physicist, and Lu's advisor. Lu went on a shooting rampage, killing four faculty members, including Goertz, and wounding others before taking his own life.

Beard opens “Fourth State” the way every writer is warned not to—with a dream sequence, one that is reminiscent of Annie Dillard's tomcat beginning to *Pilgrimage at Tinker Creek*. Beard writes, “The collie wakes me up about three times a night, summoning me from a great distance as I row my boat through a dim, complicated dream. She's on the shoreline, barking. Wake up.” Beard is in a half-conscious state (as if she were pre-verbal again), it foretells another more complicated “awakening,” and she invokes an animal—this time, her dog—in the very first sentence as if the collie is speaking directly to her. Beard's “awakening” is in fact, both physical and metaphorical, reinforcing that she feels trapped and helpless; like a monkey in a cage. That Beard uses the term ‘pre-verbal’ is telling because it describes both a helpless human baby and a

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pink-chested primate prone to flinging poo. This monkey reference is likewise reminiscent of Hoagland's turtles "bumping around in a box." Both narrators feel trapped. Both narrators use animals to show that they feel that way. She is managing to hold it together while juggling a dying collie, an AWOL husband and a pending divorce, a squirrel invasion in her spare bedroom, and, ultimately (although we don't know it just yet), the shooting death of Goertz by Lu.

While Beard's care of her dying dog is a dominant thread of the essay, her consideration of the squirrels is like a thready pulse; emblematic of her heightened state of anxiety. She shares an intimate bond with the dogs who bring her solace, but the squirrels just make her feel nuts, in the same way her soon-to-be ex-husband does. She writes: "There are squirrels living in the spare bedroom upstairs. Three dogs also live in this house, but they were invited. I keep the door of the spare bedroom shut at all times, because of the squirrels and because that's where the vanished husband's belongings are stored."

Later she writes: "I'm fine about the vanished husband's boxes stored in the spare bedroom. For now, the boxes and the phone calls persuade me that things could turn around at any moment."

But Beard is not fine. The reader feels her wretchedness at being alone marriage-wise, but also the paradox of possibly wanting that for herself. The squirrels are chirpy little hustlers that represent Beard's jangled emotional state. They are a metaphor for her marriage—feral and frenetic. Squirrels are invaders that move into a disrupted habitat by preference, they cause destruction and chaos, both of which how the author feels herself personally. The squirrels also foreshadow the destruction and chaos to come, caused by Lu. Beard says she holds faint hope that things will turn around with her husband, but we readers suspect things won't. The squirrels must go, so she calls in a girlfriend, and tells her that about the squirrels, saying, "a family of squirrels is living in the upstairs of my house and there's nothing I can do about it."

## One Dog is Never Enough

While Beard braids the death of her collie with the tragedy of Gang Lu's rampage, she uses animal empathy (or the lack of it) to examine the problem: Lu's inability to see the humanity in an animal translates into an inability to see humanity in humans. Or to use Braitman's concept from earlier, Lu lacks the capacity to acknowledge our "human/animal shared generalities." Abigail Thomas focuses the lens in a different direction.

In Thomas's memoir *A Three Dog Life*, Harry the beagle breaks his leash and runs into traffic while Thomas' husband, Rich, is walking him through New York City. Running after Harry, Rich, her third husband (and arguably the love of her life), is hit by a car and suffers a traumatic brain injury. He lives in a facility for patients with TBI and Thomas must learn to live alone with her three dogs and without her husband. Thomas weaves chapters about her own struggle, her husband's struggle and the solace she finds in her three dogs, to draw a complicated portrait of healing through the use of animals as sympathetic characters.

In the chapter titled simply "Comfort," Rich has been in the hospital for more than two years and while there are rare moments of comfort between them, she struggles to wrap her mind around what happened and he struggles to wrap his mind around anything:

If you were to look into our apartment in the late morning, or early afternoon, or toward suppertime, you might find us together sleeping. . . . After a little bit Harry starts to snore, Rosie rests her chin on my ankle, the blanket rises and falls with our breathing, and I feel only gratitude. We are doing something as necessary to our well being as food or air or water. We are steeping ourselves, reassuring ourselves, renewing ourselves, three creatures of two species, finding comfort in the simple exchange of body warmth.

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Instead of being a repository for ill feelings and blame for her husband's tragedy, Harry becomes a source of warmth, affection, and solace for Thomas. As readers we need no explanation of how protective a pack of dogs can be of each other and Thomas is part of her dog's pack. She writes, "I watch my dogs. They throw themselves into everything they do; even their sleeping is wholehearted. They aren't waiting for a better tomorrow, or looking back at their glory days. Following their example, I'm trying to stick to the present."

"Guilt" is the fulcrum chapter of *A Three Dog Life*. She writes:

"Yesterday I found a mole on the carpet, tiny pink snout, pink paws. I was glad it was dead and not lingering, grateful that dogs don't kid around. I scooped it up with a piece of cardboard and threw its body in the trash.

"I don't know why I didn't think to touch its soft fur or feel the little weight in my hand.

I wish I had."

By writing she is "grateful that dogs don't kid around," she is gently telling us that she feels her husband is suffering unnecessarily. She is letting us know that she has come to an understanding about death and the idea of impermanence. She is foreshadowing for the reader that she is preparing herself for that final goodbye. Harry, the beagle, could be demonized, or worse, euthanized. But Thomas seeks him out, forgives him, and together, they find comfort in each other. We see the author begin to forgive herself in the gentle arc of the book, but first she forgives their dog.

## Conclusion

In using animals as the aperture through which they see the world, these authors crack open their emotional state for the reader and convey loneliness without being whiny or confessional. In fact,

using animals as a literary device may be the very reason these works have such staying power. As Steinbeck said, they “establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing.” And, finally, to paraphrase Hoagland: We write to heal our wounds, but we rarely do so alone.

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