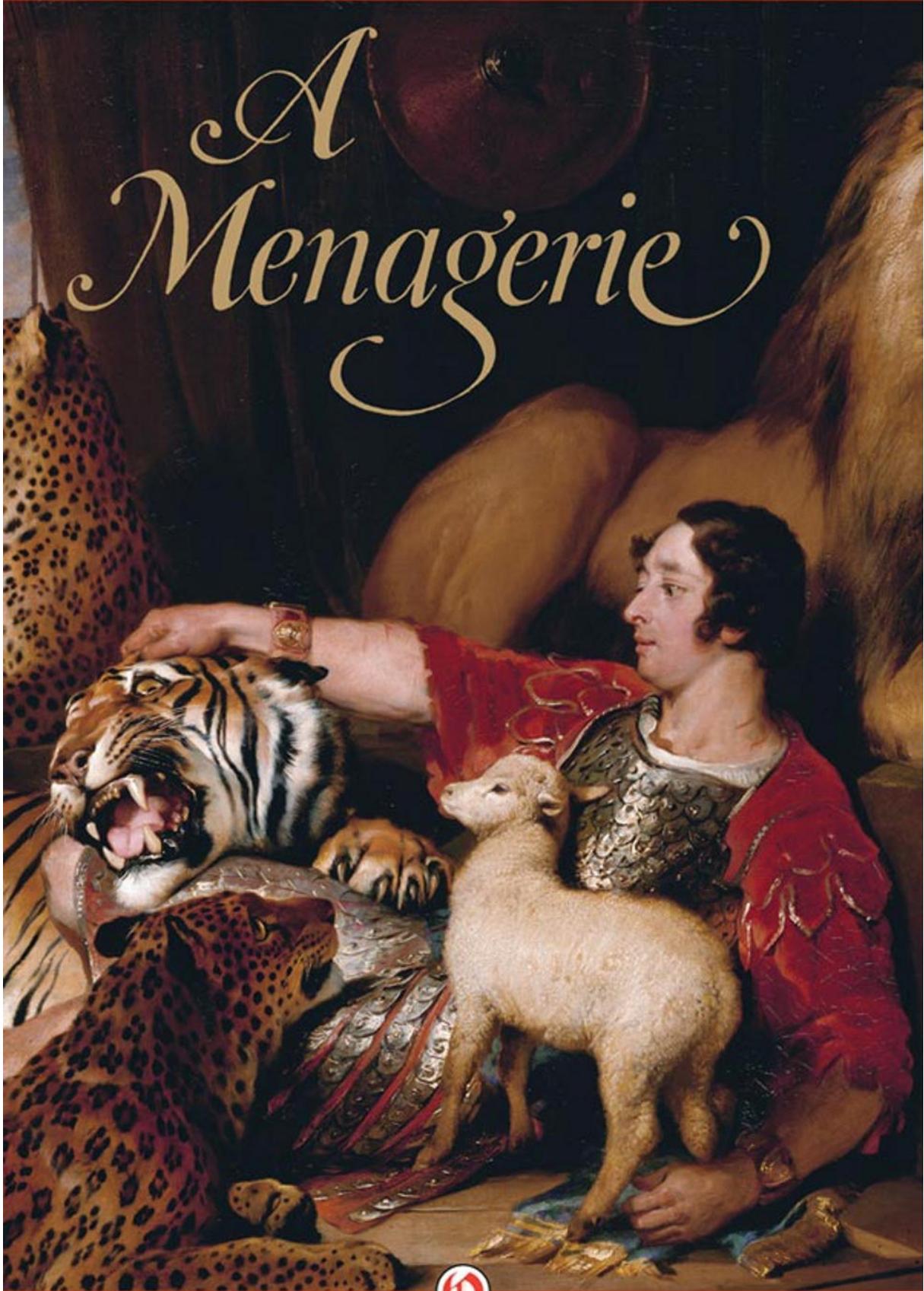


# A Menagerie



CONJUNCTIONS:61, A Menagerie

# A Menagerie



# **A Menagerie**

**Conjunctions, Vol. 61**

**Edited by Bradford Morrow and Benjamin Hale**

**CONJUNCTIONS**

# CONJUNCTIONS

## Bi-Annual Volumes of New Writing

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# EDITORS' NOTE

A CIRCUS LION GETS LOOSE in a small town in the Midwest. A rhinoceros languishes in his pen on the Boulevard du Temple as the French Revolution rages outside. B. F. Skinner's research pigeons are conscripted to guide WWII aircraft. An eyewitness offers a true account of hunting for okapi with the Mbuti people in Uganda. A medieval monk journeys to the Holy Land in search of a unicorn. From snow leopards to kraits, lemurs to lions, okapi to eels, pigeons to dogs, rhinos to wolves, giraffes to squirrels, gators to crocodiles, cats to cows, *A Menagerie* gathers writings about the vast world of our fellow beasts who occupy the earth, oceans, and sky.

Sharing a deep interest in animals and having both worked on books in which they play central roles, we decided to approach a number of very different authors with the simple proposal that they write about an animal of their choice. The choices—not only of subjects but of forms in which the works are composed—were more diverse than either of us expected, resulting in a literary bestiary of delightful range. Ben arranged an interview with the great animal scientist Temple Grandin, and Brad discovered his previously un-transcribed conversation about animals with William Burroughs from many years ago, making this menagerie anthology all the more diversified.

We hope readers who have a like-minded love for animals will enjoy this collection of fictions, nonfictions, poems, documents, dialogues, observations, fantasies, speculations, dreams, and zoologies.

—Bradford Morrow & Benjamin Hale  
November 2013 New York City

# A Permanent Member of the Family

**Russell Banks**

I'M NOT SURE I WANT TO TELL this story on myself, not now, some thirty-five years after it happened. But it has more or less become a family legend and consequently has been much revised and, if I may say, since I'm not merely a witness to the crime but its presumed perpetrator, much distorted as well. It has been told around by people who are virtual strangers, people who heard it from one of my daughters, my son-in-law, or my granddaughter, all of whom enjoy telling it because it paints the old man, that's me, in a somewhat humiliating light, or maybe humbling light is a better way to put it. Apparently, humbling the old man still gives pleasure, even to people who don't know him personally. I half expect to see a version of the story appear, drained of all sadness and significance, in a situation comedy on TV written by some kid who was in a college writing workshop with my granddaughter.

My main impulse here is merely to set the record straight, get the story told truthfully once and for all, even if it does in a vague way reflect badly on me. Not on my character so much as on my inability to anticipate bad things and thus on my inability to protect my children when they were very young from those bad things. I'm also trying to reclaim the story, to take it back and make it mine again. If that sounds selfish of me, remember that for thirty-five years it has belonged to everyone else.

It was the winter following the summer I separated from Louise, the mother of my three younger daughters, the woman who for fourteen turbulent years had been my wife. It took place in a shabbily quaint village in southern New Hampshire where I was teaching literature at a small liberal arts college. The divorce had not yet kicked in, but the separation was complete, an irreversible fact of life, my life and Louise's and the lives of our three girls, Anthea, Caitlin, and Sasha, who were six, nine, and thirteen years old. A fourth daughter, Vickie, from my first marriage, was then eighteen and living with me, having run away from her mother and stepfather's home in North Carolina. She was enrolled as a freshman at the college where I taught and was temporarily housed in a studio I built for her above the garage. All of us were fissioned atoms spun off at least three different nuclear families, seeking new,

recombinant nuclei.

I had left Louise in August and bought a small abandoned house with an attached garage a quarter of a mile away that felt and looked like the gatehouse to Louise's much larger, elaborately groomed Victorian manse on the hill just beyond. Following my departure, her social life, always more intense and open-ended than mine, continued unabated and even intensified, as if for years my presence had acted as a party killer. On weekends especially, cars rumbled back and forth along the unpaved lane between my cottage and her house at all hours of the day and night. Some of the cars I recognized as belonging to our formerly shared friends; some of them were new to me and bore out-of-state plates.

We were each financially independent of the other, she through a trust set up by her grandparents, I by virtue of my teaching position. There was, therefore, no alimony for our lawyers to fight for or against. Since our one jointly owned asset of consequence, that rather grandiose Victorian manse, had been purchased with her family's money, I signed my half of it over to her without argument. It had always seemed pretentiously bourgeois to me, a bit of an embarrassment, frankly, and I was glad to be rid of it.

Regarding the children, the plan was that my ex-wife, as I was already thinking of her, and I would practice "joint custody," a Solomonic solution to the rending of family fabric. At the time, the late 1970s, this was seen as a progressive, although mostly untried, way of doling out parental responsibilities in a divorce. Three and a half days a week the girls would reside with me and their half sister, Vickie, and three and a half days a week with their mother. They would alternate three nights at my house one week with four nights the next, so that for every fourteen nights they would have slept seven at the home of each parent. Half their clothing and personal possessions would be at my place, where I had carved two tiny, low-ceilinged bedrooms out of the attic, and half would be at their mother's, where each child had her own large, high-windowed bedroom and walk-in closet. It was an easy, safe stroll between the two houses, and on transitional days, the school bus could pick them up in the morning at one parent's house and drop them off that afternoon at the other. We agreed to handle the holidays and vacations on an ad hoc basis— postponing the problem, in other words.

That left only the cat, a large black Maine Coon cat named Scooter, and the family dog, a white part-poodle mutt we'd rescued from a pound twelve years earlier when I was in graduate school. A neutered female unaccountably named Sarge, she

was an adult dog of indeterminate age when we got her but was now very old. She was arthritic, half blind, and partially deaf. And devoted to everyone in the family. We were her pack.

Louise and I agreed that Scooter and Sarge, unlike our daughters, could not adapt to joint custody and therefore would have to live full-time in one place or the other. I made a preemptive bid for Sarge, who was viewed as belonging not to either parent alone, but to the three girls, who were very protective of her, as if she were a mentally and physically challenged sibling. Despite her frailty, she was the perfect family dog: sweetly placid, utterly dependent, and demonstrably grateful for any form of human kindness.

Scooter, on the other hand, was a loner and often out all night prowling the neighborhood for sex. We had neglected to castrate him until he was nearly three, and evidently he still thought he was obliged to endure mortal combat with other male cats for the sexual favors of females, even though he was no longer capable of enjoying those favors. He had long been regarded by Louise and the girls and by himself as my cat, probably because I was an early riser and fed him when he showed up at the back door at dawn looking like a boxer who needed a good cutman. And though neither of us overtly acknowledged it, he and I were the only males in the family. He ended up at my gatehouse down the lane not because I particularly wanted him there, but more or less by default.

In keeping with the principle of dividing custodial responsibilities equally between ex-husband and ex-wife, since the ex-husband had been claimed by the cat, it was decided that the dog would stay at the home of the ex-wife. She insisted on it. There was no discussion or negotiation. I balked at first, but then backed off. Keeping Sarge at her house was an important point of pride for Louise, I saw, the one small tilt in her favor in an otherwise equitable division of property, personal possessions, and domestic responsibility. It was a small victory over me in a potentially much more destructive contest that we were both determined to avoid, and I didn't mind handing it to her. Choose your battles, I reminded myself. Also, claiming Sarge as her own and not mine was a not-so-subtle though probably unconscious way for Louise to claim our daughters as more hers than mine. I didn't mind giving that to her either, as long as I knew it was an illusion. It made me feel more magnanimous and wise than I really was.

Back then there were many differences between me and Louise as to reality and illusion, truth and falsity, and a frequent confusion of the causes of the breakdown of

the marriage with the symptoms of an already broken marriage. But I'd rather not go into them here, because this story is not concerned with those differences and that confusion, which now these many years later have dwindled to irrelevance. Besides, both Louise and I have been happily remarried to new spouses for decades, and our children are practically middle-aged and have children of their own. One daughter is herself twice divorced. Like her dad.

At first the arrangement went as smoothly as Louise and I had hoped. The girls, bless their hearts, once the initial shock of the separation wore off, seemed to embrace the metronomic movement back and forth between their old familiar family home, now owned and operated solely by their mother, and the new, rough-hewn home operated by their father a few hundred yards down the lane. With a swing set and slide from Sears, I turned the backyard into a suburban playground. It was a mild autumn with a long Indian summer, I recall, and I pitched a surplus army tent among the maples by the brook and let the girls grill hot dogs and toast marshmallows and sleep out there in sleeping bags on warm nights when there was no school the next day. Back in June, when I knew I'd soon be parenting and housekeeping on my own, I had scheduled my fall term classes and conferences for early in the day so that I could be home waiting for the girls when they stepped down from the bus and came into the house. With Vickie living over the garage—although only sleeping there irregularly, as she now had a boyfriend at school who had his own apartment in town—my place that fall was like an after-school summer camp for girls.

The one unanticipated complication arose when Sarge, the beloved old family dog, trotted arthritically along behind the girls as best she could whenever they came from their mother's house to mine. This in itself was not a problem, except that, when the girls returned to their mother's at the end of their three or four scheduled nights with me, Sarge refused to follow. She stayed with me and Scooter. Her preference was clear, although her reasons were not. She even resisted being leashed and went limp like an antiwar demonstrator arrested for trespass and could not be made to stand and walk. Within an hour of the girls' departure, Louise would telephone and insist that I drive the dog "home," as she put it. "Sarge lives with me," she said. "Me and the girls."

Custody of Sarge was a victory over Louise that I had not sought. I had never thought of her as "my" dog, but as the family dog, by which I meant belonging to the children. I tried explaining that it appeared to be Sarge's decision to stay with me and assured her that I had done nothing to coerce the dog into staying and nothing to

hinder her in any way from following the girls up the lane when they left. Quite the opposite.

But Louise would have none of it. “Just bring the damn dog back. Now,” she said and hung up. Her voice and her distinctive Virginia Tidewater accent echo in my ears these many years later.

I was driving a Ford station wagon then, and because of her arthritis poor old Sarge couldn’t get into the back on her own, so I had to lift her up carefully and lay her in, and when I arrived at Louise’s house, I had to open the tailgate and scoop the dog up in my arms and set her down on the driveway like an offering—a peace offering, I suppose, though it felt more like a propitiation.

This happened every week. Despite all Louise’s efforts to keep Sarge a permanent resident of her house, the dog always managed to slip out, arriving at my door just behind the girls, or else she came down the lane, increasingly, on her own, even when the girls were in their mother’s custody. So it wasn’t Anthea, Caitlin, and Sasha that the dog was following, it was me. I began to see that in her canine mind I was her pack leader, and since I had moved to a new den, so had she. If she didn’t follow me there, she’d be without a pack and a proper den.

There was nothing that Louise and I could do to show Sarge how wrong she was. She wasn’t wrong, of course; she was a dog. After about a month, Louise gave up, although she never announced her capitulation. Simply, there came a time when my ex-wife no longer called me with orders to deliver our family dog to her doorstep.

Everyone—me, Sarge, the girls, I think even Louise—was relieved. We all knew on some level that a major battle, one with a likelihood of causing considerable collateral damage, had been narrowly avoided. Yet, despite my relief, I felt a buzzing, low-grade anxiety about having gained sole custody of Sarge. I wasn’t aware of it then, but looking back now I see that Sarge, as long as she was neither exclusively mine nor Louise’s, functioned in our newly disassembled family as the last remaining link to our preseparation, prelapsarian past, to a time of relative innocence, when all of us, but especially the girls, still believed in the permanence of our family unit, our pack.

If Sarge had only agreed to traipse up and down the lane behind the girls, if she had agreed to accept joint custody, then my having left my wife that summer and fall could have been seen by all of us as an eccentric, impulsive, possibly even temporary, sleeping arrangement, and for the girls it could have been a bit like going on a continuous series of neighborhood camping trips with Dad. I would not have felt quite

so guilty, and Louise would not have been so hurt and angry. The whole abandonment issue would have been ameliorated somewhat. The children would not have been so traumatized, their lives, as they see them today, would not have been permanently disfigured, and neither Louise nor I might have gone looking so quickly for replacement spouses.

That's a lot of weight to put on a family dog, I know. We all lose our innocence soon enough; it's inescapable. Most of us aren't emotionally or intellectually ready for it until our thirties or even later, however. So when one loses it prematurely, in childhood and adolescence, through divorce or the sudden early death of a parent or, more usually, war, it can leave one fixated on that loss for a lifetime. Because it's premature, it feels unnatural, violent, and unnecessary, a permanent, gratuitous wounding, and it leaves one angry at the world, and to provide one's unfocused anger with a proper target, one looks for someone to blame.

No one blamed Sarge, of course, for rejecting joint custody and thereby breaking up our family. Not consciously, anyhow. In fact, back then, at the beginning of the breakup of the family, none of us knew how much we depended on Sarge to preserve our ignorance of the fragility, the very impermanence, of the family. None of us knew that she was helping us postpone our anger and need for blame— blame for the separation and divorce, for the destruction of the family unit, for our lost innocence.

Whenever the girls stepped down from the school bus for their three or four nights' stay at my house, they were clearly, profoundly comforted to see Sarge—her wide grin; her wet, black eyes glazed by cataracts; her floppy tail and slipshod, slanted, arthritic gait as she trailed them from the bus stop to the house. Wherever the girls settled in the yard or the house, as long as she didn't have to climb the narrow attic stairs to be with them, Sarge lay watchfully beside them, as if guarding them from a danger whose existence Louise and I had not yet acknowledged.

Vickie wasn't around all that much, but Sarge was not attached to her in the same intense way as to the three younger girls. Sarge pretty much ignored Vickie. From the dog's perspective, I think she was a late-arriving, auxiliary member of the pack, which I hate to admit is how the three younger girls saw her too, despite my best efforts to integrate all four daughters into a single family unit. No one admitted this, of course, but even then, that early in the game, I saw that I was failing to build a recombinant nuclear family. Vickie was a free radical and, sadly, would remain one.

Mostly, when the children were at school or up at their mother's, Sarge slept through her days. Her only waking diversion, in the absence of the girls, was going for

rides in my car, and I took her everywhere I went, even to my office at the college, where she slept under my desk while I met my classes. From dawn to dusk, when the weather turned wintry and snow was falling, if I was at home and my car parked in the driveway, Sarge's habit, so as not to miss an opportunity for a ride, was to crawl under the vehicle and sleep there until I came out. When I got into the car I'd start the engine and, if the girls were with me, count off the seconds aloud until, fifteen or twenty seconds into my count, Sarge appeared at the driver's side window. Then I'd step out, flip open the tailgate, and lift her into the back. If the girls weren't there I still counted, but silently. I never got as high as thirty before Sarge was waiting by the car door.

I don't remember now where we were headed, but this time all four daughters were in the car together, Vickie in the front passenger's seat, Anthea, Caitlin, and Sasha in back. I remember it as a daytime drive, even though, because of Vickie's classes and the younger girls' school hours, it was unusual for all four to be in the car at the same time during the day. Maybe it was a Saturday or Sunday; maybe we were going ice-skating at one of the local ponds. It was a bright, cloudless, cold afternoon, I remember that, and there was no snow on the ground just then, which suggests a deep freeze following the usual January thaw. We must have been five or six months into the separation and divorce, which would not be final until the following August.

Piling into the car, all four of the girls were in a silly mood, playing with the words of a popular Bee Gees' disco song, "More Than a Woman," singing in perfect mocking harmony and substituting lines like "bald-headed woman" for "more than a woman," and breaking each other up, even the youngest, Anthea, who would have just turned seven then. I can't say I was distracted. I was simply happy, happy to see my daughters goofing off together, and was grinning at the four of them as they sang, my gaze turning from one bright face to another, when I realized that I had counted all the way to sixty and was still counting. That far into it, I didn't make the connection between the count and lifting Sarge into the back of the station wagon. I simply stopped counting, put the car in reverse, and started to back out of the driveway.

There was a thump and a bump. The girls stopped singing. No one said a word. I hit the brake, put the car in park, and shut off the motor. I placed my forehead against the steering-wheel rim.

All four daughters began to wail. It was a primeval, keening, utterly female wail. Their voices rose in pitch and volume and became almost operatic, as if for years they had been waiting for this moment to arrive, when they could at last give voice together to a lifetime's accumulated pain and suffering. A terrible, almost unthinkable thing had

happened. Their father had murdered the beloved animal. Their father had slain a permanent member of the family. We all knew it the second we heard the thump and felt the bump. But the girls knew something more. Instinctively, they understood the linkage between this moment, with Sarge dead beneath the wheels of my car, and my decision the previous summer to leave my wife. My reasons for that decision, my particular forms of pain and suffering, my years of humiliation and sense of having been too compromised in too many ways ever to respect myself again unless I left my wife, none of that mattered to my daughters, even to Vickie, who, as much as the other three, needed the original primal family unit with two loving parents in residence together, needed it to remain intact and to continue into her adult life, holding and sustaining her and her sisters, nurturing them, and more than anything else, protecting them from bad things. When the wailing finally subsided and came to a gradual end, and I had apologized so sincerely and often that the girls had begun to comfort me instead of letting me comfort them, telling me that Sarge must have died before I hit her with the car or she would have come out from under it in plenty of time, we left the car and wrapped Sarge's body in an old blanket. I carried her body and the girls carried several of her favorite toys and her food dish to the far corner of the backyard and laid her and her favorite things down beneath a leafless old maple tree. I told the girls that they could always come to this tree and stand over Sarge's grave and remember her love for them and their love for her.

While I went to the garage for a shovel and pick, the girls stood over Sarge's body as if to protect it from desecration. When I returned, Vickie said, "The ground's frozen, you know, Dad."

"That's why I brought the pick," I said, but the truth is I had forgotten that the ground was hard as pavement, and she knew it. They all knew it. I was practically weeping by now, confused and frightened by the tidal welter of emotions rising in my chest and taking me completely over. As the girls calmed and seemed to grow increasingly focused on the task at hand, burying Sarge, I spun out of control. I threw the shovel down beneath the maple tree and started slamming the pick against the ground, whacking the sere, rock-hard sod with fury. The blade clanged in the cold morning air and bounced off the ground, and the girls, frightened by my wild, gasping swings, backed away from me, as if watching their father avenge a crime they had not witnessed, delivering a punishment that exceeded the crime to a terrible degree.

I only glimpsed this and was further maddened by it and turned my back to them so I couldn't see their fear and disapproval, and I slammed the steel against the ground

with increasing force, again and again, until finally I was out of breath and the nerves of my hands were vibrating painfully from the blows. I stopped attacking the ground at last, and as my head cleared, I remembered the girls and slowly turned to say something to them, something that would somehow gather them in and dilute their grief-stricken fears. I didn't know what to say, but something would come to me; it always did. But the girls were gone. I looked across the yard, past the rusting swing set toward the house, and saw the four of them disappear one by one between the house and the garage, Vickie in the lead, then Sasha holding Anthea's hand, and Caitlin. A few seconds later, they reappeared on the far side of the house, walking up the lane toward the home of my ex-wife. Now Vickie was holding Anthea's hand in one of hers and Caitlin's in the other, and Sasha, the eldest of my ex-wife's three daughters, was in the lead.

That's more or less the whole story, except to mention that when the girls were finally out of sight, Scooter, my black cat, strolled from the bushes alongside the brook that marked the edge of the yard, where he had probably been hunting voles and ground-feeding chickadees. He made his way across the yard to where I stood, passed by me, and sat next to Sarge's stiffening body. The blanket around her body had been blown back by the breeze. The cold wind riffled her dense white fur. Her sightless eyes were dry and opaque, and her gray tongue lolled from her open mouth as if stopped in the middle of a yawn. She looked like game, a wild animal killed for her coat or her flesh, and not a permanent member of the family.

I carried the body of the dog to the veterinarian, where she was cremated, and brought the ashes in a ceramic jar back to my house and placed the jar on the fireplace mantel, thinking that in the spring, when the ground thawed, the girls and I would bury the ashes down by the maple tree by the brook. But that never happened. The girls did not want to talk about Sarge. They did not spend as much time at my house anymore as they had before Sarge died. Vickie moved in with her boyfriend in town. By spring the other girls were staying overnight at my house every other weekend, and by summer, when they went off to summer camp in the White Mountains, not at all, and I saw them that summer only when I drove up to Camp Abenaki on Parents' Weekend. I emptied the jar with Sarge's ashes into the brook alone one afternoon in May. The following year I was offered a tenure-track position at a major university in New Jersey, and given my age and stage of career, I felt obliged to accept it. I sold my little house down the lane from my ex-wife's home. From then on the girls visited me and their old cat, Scooter, when they could, which was once a month for a weekend during

the school year and for the week before summer camp began.

# Handling the Beast

**Sarah Minor**

8000 BCE, THE BLACK PÉRIGORD of southwestern France: A cave system is forming. At the end of the last ice age, water seeps into fissures in the high cliffs along the Vézère River. What begins as the slow drip of melting glacier soon becomes a subterranean river that carefully slices 250 meters of branching passages within the limestone bluff, opening what will later be known as La Grotte de Lascaux. The extensive cave paintings preserved within show that early *Homo sapiens* crept inside by widening the entrance to this grotto during the Upper Paleolithic period, and used the protected walls of its interior not for shelter but as canvas upon which to create the first known art.

(Of the four hundred figures depicted at Lascaux, only one is anthropomorphic. One semihuman figure with a birdlike head rests, angular, perhaps fallen, before an eviscerated bull with innards dangling from its open belly. Human figures are rare in cave art from this period. When they exist, their bodies are disguised with wild appendages, roughly rendered as compared to their nonhuman counterparts. The legacy those first conscious beings left to speak for them is not one of written texts, complex shelters, or machines, but representations of the wildness outside of them. At the moment they hopped the crevice spanning the animal and human brains, they began to imagine, to create art, to grapple with the beasts they had been. Some prehistorians theorize that the Lascaux paintings reflect how, in the first moment humans developed the gray matter, the wherewithal to make art, they also recognized that it made them different, and thus drew the other creatures repetitively as their first expressions of mankind's loneliness, a consideration of separation, of the animal still inside of them, a nostalgia for wilder days.)

1869 CE, the French Caribbean: Aesop's fables are being translated into Creole. Through volumes like *Fables créoles dédiées aux dames de l'île Bourbon* (Creole fables for island women), colonists in the Seychelles are impressing French culture

upon native island peoples via literature. Most of the stories these books hold are *beast fables* or *beast epics*, short texts that contain speaking animals and their sly scrutinies of human behavior. Beast fables were passed in oral tradition long before Aesop's recording of them. These fables are especially evident in the bestiaries of medieval Europe, illustrated volumes describing various real and mythical animals that served as symbols in the visual language of Christian art of the period. Bestiaries exist as a kind of collection of beast epics related to religious teachings, a cataloging of animals and the ways humans can learn by their example.

(It wasn't that our species was without the physical capabilities for art making before the Upper Paleolithic; one of the main benefits of bipedalism was its freeing the hands for activities other than forward motion. The Neanderthal could plod upright, bowlegged, could raise a high flame, craft hand tools—but she did not bury her dead, did not, as far as we know, leave any record of representational art. With a sharp blooming in her species' cranial capacity came the advent of a “creative explosion” that marks the birth of *Homo sapiens*, the first artists, and their newly vast imaginations. *Homo sapien* pressed five toes into the Dordogne River sand, a burier of grave goods, a self-adorned, a grinder of manganese pigment created for art alone.)

157 CE, Bergama, Turkey: Galen of Pergamon eviscerates an ape before the High Priest of Asia. He then fully mends the damage to the primate's body, winning himself the post of physician to the priest's gladiators, human men hired to battle the formidable beasts brought to Bergama from the untamed corners of the continent. Both men and beasts were kept in cells off the stone corridors below the floor of massive arenas where Galen sometimes worked. Ever the student, Galen referred to the wounds of his patients as “windows into the body.”

Following his post as physician, Galen would become one of the most prominent researchers of antiquity. He performed countless animal dissections in his research, primarily of the tissues of the Barbary ape. Galen produced the first detailed drawings of the inner musculature of an ape's hand, which contains all of the structures present in humans, differing only in the tapering of the ape's slender wrist and fingertips, and in the proportional development of muscles rendering the ape's thumb only partially opposable. These drawings served as a model for the crude surgical processes of many ages that followed.

(When one studies the cave art at Lascaux, it becomes clear that the natural formation of the wall was considered as a primary influence of a figure's placement upon it. Often an existing rock shelf became the ground on which a painted herd ran; a sharp cleft gave dimension to the tucked neck of an equine. We can imagine the earliest human artists planning their work the way their successors would in millennia to come, by skimming palms along the inner rock faces, tracing grooves with fingertips in search of spines, a sinuous flank. When the first artists grazed these pigments to stone, it was not their own likenesses, but those of the creatures around them that they drew. These animal figures were layered, stacked in lines or packs suggesting procession or stampede. They were dusted with patterns, empty to suggest whiteness, heavy bellied, bent. None were captured in stillness. These first attempts at representation proved detailed enough that humans living thirty-five thousand years later could identify and catalogue 605 of the 900 depicted species, and counting.)

1994 CE, outside Montignac, France: I step across a threshold of limestone into the slick chill of French subterranean. My damp palm is wrapped in my mother's long fingers. A hard pool of sunlight at the entrance quickly fades as we descend farther into the rock face and my mother ducks her forehead down toward mine. I let her lead me forward blindly and tilt my head back to gaze beyond the brim of my sun hat where flat figures are streaming slowly overhead. *Fais attention*, she warns, practicing our French. Our flashlights skip across the sharp ceilings in a flickering that recalls torch light, that stretches and plucks at those painted skins until I am sure they are tugging across the rock in the darkness, somewhere swimming beneath. I remember wondering how the images had been placed there and why we didn't just take them back out into the light with us. I remember guessing that we had shuffled miles into the dark, that the black passages opening in the swoop of yellow beams were endlessly descending into the earth.

(The musculature of a hand cannot be dissected without a hand. Nor can its tunnels and crevices be detailed and recorded without the precise crafting and then wielding of a pen. Thirty-five thousand years before Galen of Pergamon pressed fingerprint to fingerprint, split the skin of gladiator or ape, Paleolithic artists and dissectors of southern France commanded the same manual precision in their own renderings, in their excavations of anatomy. We know this because they left finger bones behind. Today, we can guess at the contours of flesh that once encased the marrow of the first