

A HEALTHY INTEREST IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS

by Teresa Rose Carmody

On yet another too-hot October day, Marie and several others gathered at a community arts gallery to talk about writing and publishing. The event was *Be Papered*, a weekend literary festival named from a poem by Gertrude Stein and organized by a small group of experimental writers, who also happened to be editors and small press publishers with many shared connections and friends. Consider, for example, interspecies communication. Several attendees had regular exchanges with animals as pets and other guides: a lizard who appeared in a dream as the inciting image of a novel; a remembered aviary kept by an abusive stepfather that was later transformed into a performance of bird oracles; a dog officially classified as an emotional support animal and unofficially held as a familiar who warned her highly empathic human of energetic toxins. Marie was invited to speak on this animal panel, and while she had many experiences with non-human animals and frequently found them, cats especially, wandering into her writing, she didn't want to talk about this.

Because Marie was in the process of moving on and knew this would likely be the last time she addressed this particular community, with its mix of estranged and cherished friends and writers she had, in some cases, published. Thus, she wanted to create, or try to anyway, a significant moment, one worthy of goodbye. She decided to use the Platonic ideal of a teaching evaluation as her model. She would gather valuable information to mindfully incorporate into the next chapter of her life, beginning with a guided group meditation and remarks about Socrates' recurring dream and how, in his final days, he began rewriting Aesop's fables as verse. She would conclude with five very short stories (anecdotes, really) about animals—two from Aesop and three from friends not in attendance—and she would pause meaningfully after each story to ask the audience: what *is* the animal's message? She had 3x5 notecards on which they could write their responses, which she would collect and incorporate into a story such as this. She would, of course, give instructions for receiving credit (write your name) or a copy of the story (write your email), and they could choose to not participate by not writing or not returning their card.

Message: *Non-relation isn't possible (even non-response is a response).*

The event wouldn't start for another 30 minutes, but Angela already sat in the last row, waiting for change and doodling owl pictures in her notebook. It was a big deal for her to be there. One of the panelists—a poet-novelist who would probably speak either first or last, because like spots in a sentence, those were the most memorable positions—was Angela's ex-best-friend. Angela didn't particularly want to see this ex-best-friend, but she refused to be defined by her and their broken relationship, which was a main reason she came to the event. After all, Angela was also a writer in the community and if she didn't go, how would she make new friends? She glanced around but didn't see any new-friend prospects, not yet. She looked at her owl picture, which suddenly seemed cartoonish. Is that how she wrote as well? She inhaled deeply and noticed which of her many mantras surfaced: *I am worthy of love*. Yes, thought Angela, not completely with feeling. *I-mean-I-am-already-loved*.

Angela wished she could quit competing with her ex-best-friend, but there it was, the constant compare. Her ex-best-friend would probably always have more friends than Angela, for even though her ex-best-friend was somewhat reserved, she was one of those naturally popular people who exuded calmness and a solid-yet-appropriately-humble belief in their own genius, which, as Angela often noted, others sensed and enjoyed. It soothed them, like being the super hero's best friend—all warmth and no risk. Angela considered herself more intense and certainly more determined than her ex-best-friend—the reason she'd become, in her quiet opinion, the better writer—and while she might

never be the more popular of the two, she could certainly cultivate a better quality of best friend. She would rather have a few genuine friends than many superficial ones. The owl was quite good.

She heard a familiar sound and turned reflexively to see her ex-best-friend standing near the book table with two of the *Be Papered* organizers. She grimaced, then remembered to breathe.

Angela imagined her ex-best-friend apologizing for how she refused to answer Angela's calls or respond to her texts, knowing as best friends do, that this icing-out was reminiscent of the neglect Angela experienced as a child. Angela wanted her ex-best-friend to say she was sorry, so sorry, and Angela would smile and say—*you do you*—before walking away, leaving her ex-best-friend with the same ache Angela felt in her chest, the one she would assuage with a new friend or two.

Message: *My bond with you is beyond what nature can prove.*

Leon placed his bag on a metal folding chair and looked around the room, his chest slightly puffed. He was pleased that people were already showing up. A young man he didn't know slouched in front of a large bright kind-of-awful painting that hung on the gallery's east wall. He wants something, thought Leon, noticing how the young man glanced every few seconds toward the book table where Nikky and Gina stood chatting with Ana and some woman Leon didn't know. Angela sat writing in a large orange notebook, her body tense, dark hair covering her face. Leon tapped his pocket and felt his cigarettes, turning just as Angela saw him, so he missed her hello. He grabbed a bottle of water from the snack table before heading to the far end of the gallery's outside lot. He didn't want the smoke to be a bother, although every time he "smoked on the edge," as he now called it, he was annoyed for doing something Michelle would approve of. Michelle, the self-appointed poetry queen. Michelle, who knew better than to publicly proclaim her own house readings (with a designated smoking area by the compost bin) as the "best" community in town. Leon smiled at the ridiculousness of it. Nikky and Gina hadn't wanted to invite Michelle either, and because she wasn't on a panel this year, Leon bet them a beer that Michelle wouldn't show. Nikky thought she'd come, but just to the second panel, while Gina refused to wager, on principle. Of the three *Be Papered* organizers, Gina was the only one who'd been personally invited to read at Michelle's house.

Leon took a sip of water and nodded at his buddy, Frederick, who had just arrived. Frederick had been teasing Leon, in a light-hearted way, to take on a new anthology project that Frederick was calling *Experiment: West Coast*. Frederick made jazz hands every time he said this imaginary title, a gesture which always made both men smile. Frederick told Leon he was the only one who could *really* edit such a book, as he had the skills and knowledge to make something *truly* representative. Something that mattered. But Leon didn't want to add such a book to his list of problems. Because under the guise of bringing folks together, anthologies often made more enemies than friends, as the people who aren't included resent their exclusion while many of those who are included believe they simply deserve as much, so barely bother to say thank you or hello. It was a matter of politics. Leon deeply cared about his politics, which is why there wouldn't be an anthology.

“Hey,” said Leon, as he offered Frederick a cigarette.

Message: *Communication is multiple, happens on different levels. Some connections are deeper than others.*

Cathy sat in the second row, beaming and wishing her panel was first instead of second. Her topic was fascinating—she had much to say about bringing poetry to unexpected places, though she considered it foolish to conflate publishing with writing. *You're the content, I'm the platform.* Cathy smiled at this sentence, the title of her talk. She'd been organizing literary readings for more than a decade, and last year she finally launched her own creative services agency, focused mostly on book promotion and general career. She was ready to go bigger, to start a speakers' bureau, and she wanted Gina on board for social media. Gina just might agree. After all, she'd invited Cathy to speak that day, which showed more open-mindedness than some of the other writers in the room.

Because it seemed to Cathy, and she wasn't making this up, that the more she worked with larger organizations, the more some writers scorned or dismissed her as silly or lite. Museums and state art councils, transportation authorities and fashion companies—Cathy found they all wanted poetry, in their programming or on their products, and she thought: what a great way for poets to get their work, their names, into the world. Cathy believed in community and liked the feeling of making things happen, but she was done with giving away her labor for free. And care support is labor too! Cathy smiled at this sentence, which her good friend William, another perpetual caregiver, made her write on a strip of paper that she kept inside her glasses case so she would see it throughout the day. As Cathy often explained to William and others—she organized events because she genuinely believed that if you can help another, you

should. You must be the community you want to see in the world. Yet many of the writers who accused Cathy of selling out also resented her for not helping them in the way they believed they deserved. Oh, how Cathy couldn't stomach Entitlement. And its evil twin, Hypocrisy. Because like her overlooked critics, Cathy also wrote poetry; she'd just finished a series of apocalyptic villanelles that Gina had published as a chap book. But Cathy didn't expect everyone, or even anyone, to rush out and read her poems. At events such as *Be Papered*, she could feel how others wanted her to read and care about their writing, even as they stayed happily ignorant of hers.

Message: *Friendship is only possible if one is weak and needy.*

Joel arrived just as the first panelist was finishing her presentation, which for Joel felt right on time. He wasn't big on punctuality, especially for writers he'd never heard of, like the first woman or the second, and even the fourth writer—she wouldn't speak to his interests, Joel already knew. He was there for the two writers whose names he did recognize, the two who wrote fiction not poetry, which made them Joel's competition. He was new in town and wanted to see if they were any good.

Joel took a sip of coffee. It was one of those giant to-go cups; he didn't notice his own slurp. His shirt was wrinkled, which was part of his look. Plus, he hated to iron. Before coming into *Be Papered*, he'd sat sweating in his car for nearly 15 minutes, knowing full well the panel had started and eating a blueberry scone. He liked to eat in private, and not because his eldest brother used to tease him about being such a loud and gross chewer, who cared about his brother, he'd dealt with that shit. Moved on. Joel hated people who stayed stuck in babyish wounds. No, he was a sensualist, who liked to eat alone so he could better focus on the tastes and textures of his food. The soft crumbles that melted on his tongue, the sudden squirts of sweetness and a felt surge of sugar moving into his cheeks. Afterward, he liked to slowly examine his teeth, which he did that morning in the review mirror. Then he checked his twitter followers, pleased to see he was only 11-shy of reaching that month's goal. He knew that social media was a dumb way to measure one's self worth, but it honestly made him feel better to have people like or follow him. He should have been speaking on that day's panel. He cared more

about animals than most humans. When humans hurt animals, he wanted to hurt the humans more. He thought about this as he took a seat near the front while the panelist, an eco-poet-turned-memoirist, droned about her attunement with extra-sensory vibrations—God she’s the kind of person who’s thinks some humans are more evolved than others, and that dolphins and whales are the highest creatures of all. She would place him, Joel knew, in the unevolved category, and this made him happy.

Message: *Patriarchy tricks us into attacking one another.*

Marie knew her relentless self-criticism often morphed into general judgmentalism, a tired, weary, and painful affair. Why couldn't she just let others be? After all, events such as *Be Papered* were frequently the only public spaces where the community could talk earnestly about their often heady and unconventional interests, like writing as telepathic transference or rhizomatic structures and how live material (bacteria or language) creates our many scripts. These writers' imaginative wonderings became possibilities within the world they wanted to create, a world they knew possible. Or maybe possible, thought Marie, because of course the world out there was also in here, and sometimes Marie wondered why she expected something different. The world out there valued some humans more than others, some languages or ways of knowing over other languages and ways of knowing. *Be Papered* did the same. Marie felt that if she could quit focusing on lack and on how no one, including herself, was good enough, maybe she would more easily find connection. If not in this community, then the next.

Marie caught Angela's eye and smiled hello.

But oh how difficult it was for Marie to connect with the ecopoet who was speaking and fingering her long copper-colored hair. The ecopoet was presenting in that slightly-pained-yet-sing-songy voice so admired and utilized by poets, and this was Marie's first obstacle to hearing what she had to say. Marie also had difficulty with phrases such *our binarized administered bodies*—what does that mean exactly? Or *communal inter-sentient relationships*—does that suggest communing with non-humans,

or a group of humans who are communing in tandem? Maybe the eco-poet was simply trying to talk about her feelings but believed those feelings weren't good enough on their own, so dressed them in jargon and other flashy language. The eco-poet spoke around and around until there was a wall of words and not the open door, or portal, she said she wanted to create. Writing, thought Marie, will reveal both conscious intentions and subconscious beliefs.

Marie worried. What do my stories say about me?

Message: *I don't possess the hubris to imagine what a non-human is communicating. The only animal in this story this is "saying" something is the human author, who ventriloquizes non-human animals to his/her/their needs.*

The ecopoet began chanting words that humans use when grouping non-human animals: a shrewdness of apes; a congregation of alligators; a cauldron of bats; a sloth or sleuth of bears; a gang or an obstinacy of buffalo; a clowder, clutter, pounce, dout, nuisance, glorying, or a glare of cats; an army of caterpillars; a caravan of camels; a coalition of cheetahs; a murder of crows; a cowardice of dogs; a pod of dolphins; a convocation of eagles; a parade of elephants; a business of ferrets; an army of frogs; a tower of giraffes; a flamboyance of flamingos; a bloat or a thunder of hippopotamuses; a smack of jellyfish; a troop or mob of kangaroos; a conspiracy of lemurs; a troop or barrel of monkeys; a romp, a family, or a raft of otters; a prickle of porcupines; an unkindness of ravens; a colony or warren of rabbits; a crash of rhinoceroses; a dray or scurry of squirrels; an ambush or streak of tigers; a rafter, gang, or posse of turkeys; a venue of vultures; a wisdom of wombats; a zeal of zebras. This was better poetry, Marie thought.

Message: *It's normal to have inexplicable preferences.*

Right before the panel started, Angela had moved to the third row, choosing a chair not directly in front of her ex-best-friend, who, just as Angela predicted, had presented first. Angela avoided looking at her, although it seemed like her ex-best-friend tried at least once to catch Angela's eye. During her talk, her ex-best-friend said the same "writing is listening" line she'd been cooing since they'd met 8 years ago, at the start of their MFAs. Now that they were no longer friends, Angela could imagine her ex-best-friend damning her with a favorite variation: *Angela quit listening.*

Fuck her, thought Angela, visibly rolling her eyes.

She remembered her ex-best-friend's other oft-repeated line—*what is the writing that happens outside of writing?*—and realized, finally, one answer. Habitual self-righteousness: a way of trying to write the self as okay or alright. Angela exhaled and came back into her body. She tuned into the list of animal words the eco-poet was rhythmically chanting.

A small breeze moved through the room as the eco-poet lifted her hands, prophet style, and proclaimed: *Let us not be silent.* Most everyone clapped and some snapped their fingers. Angela noticed the eco-poet wore a combination of five different animal prints: cheetah, snake, zebra, leopard, cow. But no leather and certainly no fur. I like her, thought Angela, and although her ex-best-friend was already friendly with the eco-poet, Angela determined to become her better friend. She would.

Message: *There are no soft exchanges.*

Cathy snapped and smiled slightly at the eco-poet, knowing she wouldn't give her more than that. The eco-poet had asked, of course, not right when Cathy mentioned the phrase "creative services," which the eco-poet told her was a very corporate term. "It's like how we say 'language,'" explained the eco-poet, "as in, how do you language that? Corporate America has turned language into a verb." Cathy couldn't decide if the eco-poet was talking *at* or *past* her, so she widened her eyes and raised her eyebrows to see how the eco-poet would respond. That's when the eco-poet leaned in and asked Cathy if she could get her a reading at the art museum. Cathy laughed, and then Gina was there, interrupting them, saying it was time to get started and would the eco-poet please take her seat in the front.

The problem, as Cathy saw it, was that the eco-poet was too afraid to say what she actually thought. Or rather, she was conflicted, because she wanted to say something urgent about the planet and its inhabitants, but she also wanted to be seen as an exceptionally intelligent human being, who knew how to use obscuring language. Or, thought Cathy, maybe the eco-poet's astrological chart is filled with more air signs than earth. Maybe she's all water and air, so her communication feels like a heartfelt spray, impossible to hold onto. Cathy continued to smile. She would complement the intellectual quality of the eco-poet's talk. The eco-poet would like that, thought Cathy, and there's a beautiful harmony, a service, really, in actively perceiving people as they want to be perceived.

As for herself, Cathy couldn't stand for people to not see her as caring, and thus went to great lengths to show how much she cared. She often gave presents, she called them surprises, little things she picked up here and there or made herself, like the three small succulents she'd grown from clippings and brought for Leon, Gina, and Nikky. To thank them for organizing the event. She had placed the plants in the middle of the snack table, a nice bit of decoration among the water bottles and bowls of pretzels and nuts. They were, as Cathy hoped, an immediate conversation starter—with the ecopoet, yes, and before that with some sad slouching young man, who asked her if she was William's friend, before confessing that as William's former student, he had the biggest puppy-love crush on William and his writing.

“Is William coming?” asked the young sloucher.

“No,” said Cathy with alarm. “He's out of town.”

Fiction

Message: *Friends lie.*

Angela closed her eyes for Marie's guided meditation. "Imagine an animal," Marie said. "Don't overthink it. Let it be whatever animal wants to arrive." Angela saw a raccoon. Marie said to look at the animal while noting the feeling in your body. Angela noticed a nervousness and a sliver of shame. She remembered, then, an experience from her early days at art school. She was more than ten years older than most of the students in her cohort, so she regularly lied about her age and also said she was single when technically she still had a boyfriend, one she was slowly breaking up with because she was gay. She'd met Piper that first week of school, and ran into her again that weekend at a punk show. Piper was in a locally famous band, not the one playing that night, but one Angela knew about as she had seen their posters—on campus and in one of the cooler record stores. She was a little surprised when Piper began talking to her, and even more surprised when Piper remembered her as a writer and suggested they meet the following afternoon at a café so they could write together. Angela later realized this was a maybe-date, which would explain her nervousness and the flushed feeling she couldn't name. But like many people, Angela lacked self-awareness, especially at that point in her life, when she was barely out to herself, and every time she tried to flirt with a woman, she regressed to early adolescence, as in middle-school. At the café, Angela had been writing in her journal one minute and then, for a reason she still doesn't understand, she put some of her fingertips on her chin and raised her arms to create frames around her eyes with her index fingers and thumbs—as if she, Angela, were a

raccoon, that's how she imagined herself—and she sat looking at Piper through her finger-made frames as Piper began shifting uncomfortably in her seat. She definitely freaked Piper out. A “serious weirdo.” That's what Piper later called her, according to a mutual friend. Yes, thought Angela, she certainly was. And then Angela became friends with her now ex-best-friend (who will remain unnamed), and as she became more serious about her own writing and more socially entwined with her cohort, she quit punk shows for poetry readings. Angela discovered that she loved experimental writers. They were smart and socially-awkward and generally stumbling in their small talk. Many of them were slightly paranoid and self-obsessed. They liked words and had opinions about so many dead people and none of them felt like they had read enough of the right things, although all of them were ridiculously well read.

Fiction

Message: *Karmic reactions are inescapable.*

Leon and Frederick sat apart from the others, near the fan, in two chairs they'd pulled from the last row and placed near the door. Despite the fan's whir, Leon could hear Frederick's sharp inhalations and for a moment the sound distracted him from the guided meditation and his own breath. Leon liked to jokingly call himself a "mindful failure," which annoyed some of his new-agey friends who warned him about self-talk and negativity. This amused Leon as he was far luckier and more laid-back than several of his so-called positive-thinking friends. Not that meditation wouldn't help him—Leon believed the science, he wasn't a fool. The brain is changeable, plastic, he wanted the neurological shifts. But when he tried sitting still he found it difficult to concentrate, to clear his mind. Though that wasn't right either, he knew that, that trying to clear his mind was like trying to balance a bicycle while standing still. You have to just sit, he told himself. Focus on your breath. In and out and there was so much to do, he needed to ask Frederick what he thought of the story-essay. Part of him hoped Frederick would pass. The story-essay, Leon had decided, could be a big-seller, and if Leon published it himself, he could better market it. And keep 100% of the funds.

Leon was one of the few poets who didn't shy away from money and sales, which made him a good publisher of other people's poetry. That's where he'd put his energy for the past several years, and he really did enjoy showing off what the community could do. But he sometimes missed the feeling of writing and had begun to worry, increasingly so, that his own practice was slipping away, so that by the time he returned

to it, started his next big project, writing might not return to him. He didn't mention this to anyone but Frederick, who very kindly invited him, a month or so later, to write a pamphlet that Frederick would publish. Frederick could be so considerate. Frederick, who was sighing and tapping his foot. Leon knew that Frederick cared about him, but would never ask him about his feelings. Frederick preferred to not talk about such things. That's for writing, Frederick might say. So Leon wrote. It felt good.

Marie was presenting now, something about dreams as a legitimate source of information. Leon was still friendly with Marie, even as she was on the outs with Frederick and a few others. Truth be told, he never got Marie. She used to curate a reading series, but every time she invited Leon to perform, he felt her prefatory disappointment, as if he were only there because her first choice had fallen through. Logically, he knew this wasn't the case; she always asked way before the publicity was generated and he performed too frequently for Marie to not like his work. But there was some niggles there—maybe she didn't understand his writing and that's why they couldn't connect. Frederick thought Marie had a victim mentality, but Leon didn't get that feeling either. There wasn't enough of a charge between them for there to be an issue, maybe it was as simple as that.

Marie handed Leon two index cards. "For you," she smiled. "And Frederick."

Fiction

Message: *Distrust of apparent variation in someone*

Joel played along with Marie's little writing game. It was an interesting approach to collaboration, but who knew if Marie was someone he'd want to be associated with, so no, he wasn't going to write his name. Also, it was a weird mix of animal stories. More about humans than animals and there was something unsettling about them, though not in a necessarily interesting way. Because as they continued, Joel began to feel a strong sense of something unsaid. God, he hated that feeling, the creeping uncertainty and increasing tension. Mama's going off her rocker again, and Joel nearly groaned aloud. He hated thinking about his mother. He wanted Marie to stop.

And then he was down the rabbit hole, sitting with his older brothers and laughing as Mom threatened to check herself into Pine Rest, the mental home. She'd been saying that for years, and they'd started sassing back. "Over laundry?" they'd ask. "Over a messy room or a failed pot roast? Get a life, Mom, they would say." They sounded remarkably like their father, who'd been dead for many years. When Joel was in the 11th grade, his mother did go to Pine Rest. She stayed for one month. His brothers were at college, so it was just him and his step-dad. They never mentioned his mother during her absences, and when she returned, she got the house back in order, even as she seemed more docile than before. If anyone asked, she said she'd been visiting her sister. She said this so frequently that Joel began to wonder if there was sister he didn't know about, and so he finally asked himself. To which his mother laughed and said, "Maybe."

Message: *We like to keep secrets, secret.*

It was time for a break. Marie tucked her papers into her bag and glanced at the bodies around her, some standing now. Some turning around. She reached the bathroom queue just behind the eco-poet, who didn't so much as glance at Marie, though they'd just paneled together. The eco-poet was using her notebook to fan herself. Marie sighed and shifted her posture. Her back felt damp. She stood a little taller and said the eco-poet's name.

"That was great," Marie said, her voice high and false. The eco-poet smiled with her mouth closed. "I especially liked the words for groups on non-human animals," continued Marie.

"Ah, yes," said the eco-poet with a shrug. "Categorical foils."

"Ok," said Marie.

"The list is in my new book," said the eco-poet, after a pause.

Marie nodded. "I'll have to check it out." When the eco-poet didn't say anything, Marie continued, "The book's here, right?"

"Yeah," said the eco-poet. "\$15. I would give you a copy for free but I'm practicing self-care by giving more value to myself and my work. I promised I'd charge." She glanced toward the restroom door which was slowly opening. "It was long gestation anyway," said the eco-poet. "Over 10 years."

"Oh no... I'll totally check it out," said Marie, who already knew she would neither buy nor read the book. So why was she talking about it. God, sometimes she annoyed herself. The eco-poet disappeared into the restroom. Marie sighed again. The eco-poet wouldn't have spoken to

Fiction

her otherwise, that's right, Marie knew she had to talk first. There's nothing wrong with being nice to people, and she did like that list of words, even if it was copied from the internet.

Message: *Reproduction is the ultimate stinging joke.*

Joel gravitated toward Nikky without thinking. She was the person there he was most familiar with, as they both used to write for the same online indie blog. The site had been a big deal in its day, and a certain affinity still lingered among its writers. Nikky greeted Joel pleasantly and introduced him to a dark-haired woman, Angela, who loudly complimented him on his writing. Joel shrugged and said the blog was a good time while it lasted. There was a sticky pause as no one mentioned the blog's founder, a somewhat-famous experimental fiction writer who had shut down the venue among allegations of sexual harassment and abuse. Not from the other blog writers, most of whom identified as male, but from two or three women he'd dated, who said he was not-unlike the rapey protagonists in his writing. Joel was pretty good friends with the blog's founder and thought the women were probably not-wrong in their allegations. He was a bit of a creep, his friend. But people like what they like, Joel had said while advising the blog's founder to please sit quiet and let it blow over, don't publish an open letter arguing that readers love these guys in fiction, but have a boner-for-purity when it comes to "real" life. But the blog's founder prided himself on not shying away from controversy, so of course he published the letter, which included a paragraph naming his literary "fathers": Hemingway, Bukowski, Nabakov, Barthelme, Calvino. Tear those monuments down first, he wrote, with a slight hint that his detractors, especially his exes, mostly envied his success.

And then came the “Campaign for a Year without Rape in Literature,” which responded to far more than the blog founder’s letter. There were signatures and circulated names, more debates and accusations—are we talking about rapey-authors or depictions of rape in general, and why only a year, and what is rape, and what’s wrong with these women, and are they even women, because at a certain point, a conservative syndicated news and opinion site began covering what they called “the controversy,” and their readers, avid commenters so many of them, had their favorite, if unoriginal, word when referring to groups of female humans with opposing political views: Dumb Sluts, Angry Beavers, the classic Feminazis, and No Class Twits.

Joel hated those guys so much. Evil orange-loving dittoheads who parroted the leaders’ words while insisting they could think themselves. Sometimes, Joel jumped into one of the comment section, just to ridicule and burn their asses. Fuck them sick fucks.

Fiction

Message: *We're the same as humans.*

By the time Cathy found Gina, she was surrounded by people Cathy didn't know, including the slouching young man who liked William. Fans, that's what they seemed. Gina was telling a story about an artists' residency she'd been to that summer. The other residents, including a fairly famous novelist, were afraid of mice, and as Gina was remarkably un squeamish, she became the official mouse-catcher, she said, which really meant releasing dead mice from sprung traps, and not looking too closely at their fine fur, their perfectly formed paws.

Cathy nodded along with Gina's story, and when the young sloucher laughed too loudly at one description of the fairly famous novelist, the others laughed nervously as well.

Everyone wanted to know what the fairly famous novelist ate for lunch.

"Oh," said Gina with an expression of surprised remembering. "One of the residents knew you." Everyone looked at Cathy, her suddenly wide eyes.

"Caren Byrd," said Gina. "She said you set up a reading for her several years ago."

Cathy nodded vigorously and asked how Caren was, all the while trying to remember who Caren could possibly be.

Gina laughed as she started telling a story about the fairly famous novelist, who barely ate during the daylight hours. "He said he wrote better on a slightly empty stomach, but was a complete gluten after sundown. He definitely loved his alcohol, gin and dry red wine. He had a

thing for Caren, who was recently married and definitely not giving back.” Gina laughed. “He’s a bit of a dog.” Gina paused. “Caren was his first choice, but he didn’t waste time.”

Everyone leaned in, Cathy included.

“No,” laughed Gina again. “He and I are just friends.” She touched her neck. “But I did get his number.”

“Have you called him?” asked the slouching young man.

Message: *This is a human-animal message. It shuts out the ecological holism very much present.*

Frederick experienced aggression. Marie sensed anger. Ana experienced anxiousness. Leon felt ashamed. Leon noticed bashfulness. Ana was touched with boredom. Marie noticed cautiousness. The eco poet had confidence. Joel experienced confusion. Nikky noticed curiosity. Nikky had depression. Joel sensed determination. Angela suffered disappointment. Angela held disbelief. Frederick suffered disgust. The eco poet sensed ecstasy. Gina perceived embarrassment. The eco poet was aware of rage. Ana suffered envy. Nikky perceived exasperation. Gina suffered exhaustion. Frederick was touched with fear. Nikky was aware of frustration. Leon perceived grief. Marie felt guilty. Frederick held happiness. Gina was aware of hope. Leon suffered hurt. Joel noticed indifference. Nikky sensed interest. Ana suffered jealousy. Angela sensed joy. Gina was touched with loneliness. Nikky noticed love. The eco poet sensed lovingness. Cathy felt miserable. Cathy experienced optimism. Leon was aware of the overwhelm. Frederick felt pain. Joel experienced puzzlement. Leon experienced regret. Joel experienced relief. Joel noticed sadness. Marie was touched with satisfaction. Gina experienced shock. Cathy held shyness. Gina noticed smugness. Frederick felt sorry. The eco poet experienced stubbornness. Joel was aware of stupidity. Ana felt surprised. Leon experienced suspicion. Cathy perceived thoughtfulness. Marie noticed withdrawal.

Message: *You can't control the outcome of your genuine nature.*

Leon found Frederick near the snack table, talking with Ana Falu. The two of them had become quite the collaborators, so much so that for awhile it seemed they were dating, a suggestion they both greeted with a sly smile. Those who were closer to Ana knew she was asexual.

“Oh, hello,” said Ana, making room for Leon.

“What’s going on?” Leon said. He leaned forward grab a handful of pretzels from the snack table.

“We were talking about Marie’s presentation,” said Ana.

“The great enlightenment meets co-opted labor,” added Frederick. He and Ana laughed while Leon shrugged. He was less sensitive, he guessed.

There was an awkward pause.

“Hey,” said Leon with a sudden brightness. “Great talk.”

“Thanks, Leon,” said Ana, her voice low and clear.

“Tuning in, tuning in,” said Frederick. Leon and Ana waited as Frederick slowly nodded his head. “Ah yes,” he said, “a great talk.”

“Oh!” said Ana, catching sight of someone in the other room. “I have to go but Frederick, you’re so strange.” She smiled and patted his shoulder.

Leon watched her walk away. He felt disappointed.

Frederick began humming a Marx Brothers song.

Leon took another handful of pretzels.

“So,” said Frederick, crossing his arms over her chest. “How about January for your pamphlet?”

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Leon frowned and nodded.

Message: *Maternity and survival are mutually exclusive in the forging of friendship.*

As Cathy searched the internet, Caren Bryd slowly became familiar. Years ago, when Cathy's initial reading series was just gaining traction, poets she didn't know began contacting her for readings in the city, and Caren Byrd was one of these. Cathy had set up a Sunday afternoon event for Caren and her friend, another white woman, at one of the trendier bookstores. Cathy wasn't sure why she agreed to their request, except for her familiar sense of obligation—she had a habit of imagining herself asking for help, then giving the response she'd want to hear—so she said yes to these two women and asked for copies of their books. Cathy can't remember anything about the poems except that they were lyrical with line breaks and just long enough to fit one poem per page. Reading them, she'd felt slightly thirsty. Still, she introduced the poets by talking about the beautiful necessity of their words and even used the breathy tone poets prefer for flattering each other. Afterward, the two poets thanked Cathy and left with some local friends for dinner at a nearby restaurant. They didn't invite Cathy to join them. Or send a thank you email, or offer to host a reading if Cathy came to their East coast town. Cathy organized events because she believed that stories and poems are the webs that weave us together. This happens with the stories we tell ourselves, too.

Message: *Without an understanding of context, hypocrisy and sincerity can seem twins.*

To be clear: Marie didn't consider the eco-poet to be a bad writer of a bad book. What is a bad book, anyway? It's much healthier to focus on what moves us, so another way to say this is: Marie wouldn't read the eco-poet's book because she didn't like it enough to want it on her shelf, and her shelves were already filled with so many books she actually wanted to read. As Marie didn't identify as a poet, she rarely felt compelled to do more than attend the poets' readings, where she would hear enough to gain a general sense of their writing. Please understand that Marie was glad for the eco-poet and for her railing against environmental racism and the devaluing of non-human species. You can be glad for someone even as you don't want to be their friend or read their books.

On the panel, someone had mentioned a story written by one of Marie's ex-friends, and as Marie washed her hands, she glanced uneasily at her own reflection. Among her intimates, Marie often said that this ex-friend's choice of a husband had marked the beginning of their friendship's end. Then Marie would list his flaws and minuses, while assuring her listener that the ex-friend was as manipulative as she was manipulated. Marie had examples. She'd discovered them the weekend of the wedding, which involved three days of festivities, and Marie had driven to each of these with the same two other friends. During the long car rides, they'd compared notes and stories, and by the end of the weekend, their tongues had shaped the bride into a monster, though they'd smiled for the cameras, and hugged her, and were, in effect,

horribly fake. Which was, of course, their judgement of her. “I’m sorry,” mouthed Marie, as she closed her eyes and imagined the face of her ex-friend, who wasn’t at *Be Papered*, who had, unsurprisingly, fallen out of step with this particular community several years before.

Message: *The fact that more than we think is true doesn't preclude friendship.*

Joel stepped outside just as Nikky began circulating with a five-minute notice. The air was hot; he squinted in the too-bright sun. He wanted the beef jerky he'd stashed in his glove compartment, and wanted to eat it in peace. An amorphous "they" used to accuse the blog of being a boy's club, but the cliquishness of the *Be Papered* set made him feel like the boys' blog had a brightly-colored welcome mat at its virtual door. The conversation with Nikky and that other woman had been nothing more than awkward, though he saw their faces brighten when Frederick said hello. The car was warm; he took a bite of jerky and relaxed into its salty greasiness. "So delicious," he said aloud, as he flipped down the car visor and pushed open the mirror cover. He liked to watch himself chew. It wasn't a particularly pleasant image, but that's what he liked about. He could taste better. His teeth looked too small for his head. When he was younger, he used to eat tuna sandwiches in front of the bathroom mirror and that's when he discovered how difficult it was to contain your own spit while chewing with your mouth open. His mother chewed with her mouth open, even when others were present.

Frederick, he'd decided, was a pompous ass. Frederick had greeted Nikky and the other woman with an exaggerated wave, but barely glanced at Joel, who'd introduced himself nonetheless.

"We share a publisher," said Joel, in case Frederick didn't recognize him. "I really liked your last book."

"Thanks," said Frederick. And after a pause, "Connections, connections," as if that's all Joel cared about.

Joel had gone a bit foggy. He mumbled “right,” or something similar, and leaned back to get a better look at Frederick, who was rather tall.

“I’d heard you moved to town,” said Frederick.

Joel had nodded. Everyone felt uncomfortable.

Frederick turned toward Nikky and the other woman, and began making empty comments about the afternoon.

Joel listened.

It became clear from their talking that most of them, including the speakers, had gone to the same art school. Had even, in many cases, been in the same cohort or class. How boring, thought Joel. No wonder the panel had felt like a circle of back patters, as opposed to a circle jerk. This crowd was too tame to actually bare their genitals.

At the blog, they’d at least tried to engage strangers. They weren’t open to unsolicited submissions, that was true, but they were serious about the conversation in the comments area. If someone wanted to challenge, learn more, offer another perspective—they were all in for a generally very respectful discussion, dissent welcomed. That was the ethos of the now-tainted founder, and at their peak, their comments section had been full of arguments, blusterings, affections, and of course the occasional troll. But once the accusations started, a number of women (at least they said they were females but online who knows) shouted down any comment, even the most banal, in all-caps. So they closed the comments section down.

Joel was suspicious of public-displays of piety, and had refused to sign both the “Campaign for a Year without Rape in Literature” and another open letter that began circulating shortly thereafter, advocating for freedom of speech while also denouncing a number of rapey-men, including the founder, his friend. We are, wrote the letter writers, refusing binary thinking.

Nikky signed that one. She also sent a personal email to Joel, confessing a feeling of *have to*, she couldn’t explain why. She had written to Joel, he knew, because he was the person who initially hooked her into the group as a featured writer. For a minute, Joel had thought about publishing the email as proof female hypocrisy; then again, what would that prove? That women are entitled to be human, too?

Frederick, Joel realized, didn’t want Nikky and that other woman to think that he, Frederick, was sexist.

“What a cowardly ass,” said Joel, looking himself in the eye.

Message: *To bury awareness is an unattractive personality flaw.*

The second panel began and Leon tuned out almost as soon as the man began talking. He needed to think about this Frederick situation, if he should go ahead and let Frederick publish his story-essay. Frederick had been very enthusiastic, calling it his favorite of Leon's writings. Leon knew the story-essay was very good. He'd felt a thrilling hum while composing, a sense that, with the right positioning, it could become something more. Something big. Maybe giving it to Frederick was a waste. Because Frederick would publish a small edition of only 100 copies, priced at \$7 each, as that was his standard practice, and this suddenly felt like damning the story-essay to an early grave, before it had the chance to live. And while Frederick had a policy of splitting proceeds, he needed to recoup publication costs first, which meant that even if the pamphlet sold out (and Frederick's pamphlets rarely did), Leon would only receive around \$100.

Leon believed his story-essay worth far more than that. Or it could be, if it had the right frame. The right platform.

The room paused as Gina turned off the overhead lights. The speaker had a slideshow of poems he'd installed throughout the city. Sometimes the poems stayed wheat-pasted up, and other times they washed away with the tide or wind or an intervention from a passer-by. It wasn't a new idea and the poems were decent enough, certainly clever, so Leon was surprised that he was so annoyed, even angry. There was something sanctimonious in the speaker's voice, like this was real poetry because it wasn't for sale, when the fact is, thought Leon, you can make

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money from art. You just need to know your niche, your market. Money itself, thought Leon, is neither bad nor good.

Message: *Patience, generosity, and the ability to be harmonious is possible when you can't see the unexpected gifts of life coming.*

Angela looked at the eco-poet's email address, written on a sticky note in purple pen and carefully placed on the title page of her book. The eco-poet's handwriting was fabulously loopy. Angela smiled. They'd had a nice conversation, and when Angela mentioned that her first book was coming out next spring, the eco-poet invited her to read in her city, and to stay with her, too. Angela had always wanted to visit Portland. Yes, she would definitely make the trip.

Angela closed the eco-poet's book to listen to Cathy, who was just beginning to speak. She enjoyed Cathy's enthusiasm, though she had to admit it was an acquired taste. Cathy was so bubbly, so relentlessly positive, that for the longest time, Angela couldn't believe it wasn't an act. Angela and her ex-best-friend used to refer to Cathy as "our punctured Polyanna," for while Angela and her ex-best-friend didn't have the details of Cathy's childhood, they assumed she'd suffered all sorts of trauma, as is bound to be the case when someone, like Cathy, like Angela, doesn't fit the culture's idea of "norm." Cathy was saying that poetry already exists all around us, so there isn't an *unexpected* place to bring it. Rather, we need to embrace our own openness, see ourselves as language, that when we bring two unlikes together, we've entered the poetic frame of mind. Poetry's already-all-around-us space.

Angela turned to see her ex-best-friend (Ana, okay she'll name her), and something drained away—a tightness or a position. A fear. Cathy was talking again, saying the word *activist*, *activist* in her ever-up-beat pitch, and Angela glanced again at Ana, who was sitting so erect and at

attention, so stone-faced still Angela could see something just beneath the surface. She's proud of herself, thought Angela, and before she could move fully into the next logical question, she realized its answer. Ana felt triumphant in her "boundary setting," that's the term she would use when she later described it. Ana was doing what she needed to protect herself from an emotionally suffocating monster. Oh, thought Angela, that monstrous me.

Angela did not wish harm as much as she felt a keening sadness.

Message: *You don't love me, I won't talk to you.*

Cathy stood in front of the crowd, not talking but peering with a certain measure of intensity and not quite a smile on her face. Somebody sneezed. “Gesundheit,” she said. To her right, a man laughed while on the other side of the room came the sound of an escaped sob. She started her phone’s timer for 68 seconds and looked in that direction, breathing into her heart’s center. The space began to feel longer, bigger, as she gazed, one by one at every face in the room. So many agreed to her unspoken instructions, their eyes meeting hers, though what she read there shifted with their postures, their level of shared familiarity, the almost visible voices in their heads. This one wanted approval, was trying to please her. This one didn’t reveal but didn’t look away. These ones refused, allowed themselves to be distracted, yawned in ambivalence. These ones wondered what would happen, got bored, closed their eyes, followed her gaze as it moved through the room. Cathy could hear the other panelists sniff and shift in their seats.

Cathy’s phone trilled harp sounds. She turned it off before pushing aside her prepared remarks.

She smiled again, bright and calm. “In conclusion,” she said: “There was once a girl who kept a table with only three legs. I say only, because in the corner where the fourth leg should have been, there was nothing but air. In other words, this was not a nice three-legged table, made that way by design, with a carefully crafted equilibrium triangle extending from its center. Rather, this was a table made from necessity and life, from what happens with wear and the wearying years. The girl

wasn't very old. She'd just gotten her period for the first time, a relief because if anyone were to ask her, which no one probably would, she could finally say yes. She menstruated! The girl referred to her table as a platform, especially when speaking to her dog, a small black terrier called Chalmette."

Cathy paused, pressed her lips together, swallowed. "The girl used her table or platform for all sorts of activities. Painting and writing letters. Eating and playing solitaire. And as long as it was the girl who sat at the table, and not someone like her sighing mother or slightly older cousin with bad breath, the table with the three legs magically stayed upright and stable, available for use."

Cathy paused again to gather her papers. She peered at nothing.

"My question," she said, "is simple: What makes this girl's three-legged table stand?"

Message: *Don't feed us like pigs!*

Joel didn't return to *Be Papered*. It was lame, he decided, but if he went in and said this to anyone, they'd accuse him of being ableist and end the conversation there. He probably was. Because wasn't that common knowledge: that if you live in an ableist, and racist, and sexist, and homophobic society, then you're that too? Stands to reason, and he was happy he could think.

Joel wished things could go back to how they were, when writing conversations were about writing and not a constant performance of virtue-signaling. Dwelling on your shortcomings made them worse, he thought, like how if you're convinced you'll never amount to much, you won't. And most of these *Be Papered* writers were better people than poets, so maybe they should work on that.

He turned on his car and checked his phone. His wife had texted about dinner. He sent her a "thumbs up," and thought for a moment about which store would be best for sweet onions, flat bread and cheap wine. Last week, he'd been talking at the bookstore about his wife, when his co-worker stopped him to say, "Your wife, your wife, she has a name. What is it?"

"Miranda," he'd shot back, but his hot flash of defensiveness quickly passed as his co-worker smiled. "Like the *warning*, or the *rights*."

Message: *I want it both ways—always.*

Leon decided to email Frederick but first needed a few beers, beginning with one from Gina because he'd won the bet about Michelle. She'd sent an apology about sadly missing *Be Papered* since it coincided with her bicycle-activist-artist event, where she was a key presenter. "Classic Michelle," Leon said to Gina, who seemed to agree, or at least didn't argue.

Leon opened another beer and reviewed his plan. He'd tell Frederick that he wanted to self-publish the story-essay as a part of a new chapbook series called *Experiment: West Coast*. Frederick should send him a piece for the series, or Frederick could collaborate with Ana Falu, whatever he wanted. Leon would explain that his story-essay was a manifesto for the series—that's why he needed to publish it, rather than Frederick, he hoped Frederick would understand.

Leon felt pleased with himself.

Why edit an anthology when he could publish an unbound series of West Coast writers, and people like Michelle can't or won't get mad about who's included because doing so might spoil their chance of making it in. It's good to cover all bases.

Message: *Family dinners are really awful for animals too.*

That night, Angela dreamt or read about raccoons. They aren't as solitary as people think; some even say they're homo-social. The males often live with unrelated males in stable groups of four or less, while females live in what is known as fission-fusion societies, splitting apart and coming back together depending on the activity and the season, so the size of the group keeps changing. So change is their stable factor. The thing Angela couldn't understand was herself as a danger, the one from whom Ana needed protection. In her dream or in the book, the raccoon was hungry and looking for something to eat. Or searching for a place to nest. Or curious about that strange new smell. In her dream or in the book, the raccoon wanted to play, and not knowing how else to initiate contact, she grabbed another raccoon's food. In her dream or in the book, the raccoon stopped and looked in the direction of an owl's hoot. Or maybe it wasn't an owl, but the sound of an other-worldly creature. The animal-us.

When she woke or quit reading, Angela began drawing a raccoon in her notebook. RACCOON, she wrote beside her drawing, which looked, yes, a bit cartoonish. With a purple pencil, she colored in its mask. Cartoons are fine, she decided.

Message: *Found agreement with another's narrative.*

The morning after the event, Marie walked with her dogs around the neighborhood. She had thought community meant belonging, but this morning the word *vulnerability* rang in her ears. Every animal must navigate the possibility of harm. Worms and moles dig underground tunnels, and rabbits generally wait for nightfall before leaving their nests. Bees will swarm a predatory wasp, while chameleons fade into their backgrounds. For monkeys, the group is the protection, just like there's protection in being the top gorilla or submitting to the alpha. Humans gossip, project images, try to control how others see them. They attack, get busy or buy houses, focus on saving or spending money while calling each other variations of *good* or *bad*, *best friend* or *wife*.

In front of the house, Marie squatted and the dogs turned toward her, pressing their heads into her body as she rubbed one's belly, the other's neck.

They paused there together, sensing a thrum just beneath, an ache, a quickening.

Above her, the hot sky filled with smoke.

Message: *You can force anything to believe in regimentation.*



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