

# Animals, Animals, Animals

*by* Jessica Breheny

Crea grew up above a pet store and now she dreams of cats. There are too many of them to name, a slinking mess of calico, tabby, tortoise-shell, black and white. There are more each night. They whisper to her, words made of hissing mewls. During the day, the things that happen are familiar because the cats said them — a woman, walking by a bouquet of birthday balloons at a park, pops one with her lit cigarette while talking on a cell phone; a man, wearing a fedora with a feather and an eight of diamonds in the band, flaps his arms at a flock of ducks; a nine-hundred dollar rent check bounces. There is a pattern to these things the cats tell her, and she is supposed to follow it.

Like the cats, everything is multiplying — bills, dishes, phone calls she is supposed to make, return. She feels herself teeter-tottering between the left side of her head and the right. The left feels sunken in, separate and unfamiliar. In the mirror, her face looks normal, but she can feel her face is broken. Her whole head is broken. Brokenhead.

She has been driving around all night, a game with the temperature gauge (speed up, it goes down; idle, it goes up). If she had any money, she would get this fixed. If she had a working car, she might be able to get a job that would pay enough to fix the car. And so on.

It is late and the fog has come in off the bay. The light from the streetlights is watery. The air is briny. Across the street from her house is a table of stuffed animals, a FREE sign taped to it. There are bears, horses, elephants, squirrels. There are animals with string activated voice boxes, animals made of worn-away plush, felt, flannel. Their eyes are so blank and sad. It is cold out, and the

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animals are damp from the fog. She rescues an elephant and a bear. Shameful, a thirty six year old woman feeling sorry for stuffed animals when there are people dying in wars and real animals becoming extinct, and if she feels so bad, why doesn't she sign something or write a letter or chain herself to a tree? She just goes to bed, a little drunk.

The stuffed elephant and bear are silent and safe. In her bedroom, all the sounds, like sirens and the barn owl's hoots, happen outside. She loves this feeling of the world happening around her while she is safe inside. Her neighbors, who live in the Airstream in the field behind her house, just had a baby. The baby's mother birthed her in the trailer while Crea slept just yards away, and the idea of the baby, first curled and wet in her mother's womb, and now perfect and sleeping against her mother's breast, makes Crea feel safe and sleepy.

But when she sleeps, there is no baby. There are no silent stuffed animals. The cats are there. They are not cats you might know in their plush toy purring form, with anthropomorphic names like "Little Man" and "Adelle." These are no cartoon cats, singing and romancing each other in Paris. They don't play with jingling plastic balls or catnip mice made of cardboard and rabbit fur. They are the parts of cats humans can't know. They are the cats with the opaque animal eyes, the kind that chewed a mouse whole in your bedroom once during a storm, the kind that broke the wing of a mourning dove and brought it to you still alive out of what you thought was love.

Crea can only make out dream sentences from what the cats say: "String rug about galore;" "Drawer into lamplight windowpane hilarious limb;" "Run crab grabber fantastic." But later she'll remember. When the bill collector, Robert Albuquerque, calls and threatens to have her put in jail if she doesn't pay her Visa bill, she'll remember the cats told her all about this. She'll tell Robert Albuquerque there's no such thing as debtors' prison anymore, and then she'll hang up. She will be proud that she knows this, a little something she remembers from her community college history class.

But then she'll wonder: is there? Because the problem is the cats. This is *their* story. She is realizing that. What is written in textbooks might not apply.

Cats have been disappearing in the neighborhood. There are LOST signs everywhere with photocopied pictures that are hard to see. PLEASE HELP US FIND CANDYCANES. MITTENS, WE MISS YOU. \$100 REWARD FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE RECOVERY OF PAGAN.

It is early summer, and the blackbirds are nesting everywhere -- in the stoplights, the eaves of gas stations, the hollows of old fruit trees. She walks down the street to buy ground meat at the grocery store that sells piñatas and Virgin Mary clocks and smells like raw chicken. A blackbird swoops down on her head. She runs. The wings in her hair are like an angry mouth. Somebody laughs from the passenger side of a moving car. Her neighbor, the one with giant dreadlocks, who never speaks and lives in the basement of the front house, rides by on his bicycle, weaving in and out of the bike lane. He doesn't seem to notice her running. The bird swoops again. She covers her face and runs into the grocery store. Through the glass door, she can see a blackbird perched on a power line. Another circles the intersection. There are twigs in the yellow light of the stoplight.

She is on her way home with her ground meat, and the birds are making the wrong sounds. A raven on a power line clicks like a cicada. A mourning dove coos in the rhythm of a rooster — coo-coo-cooooo ... coo-coo-cooooo -- in defined syllables, not the burbling soft dripping sound they usually make outside her window in the mornings.

When she gets home the FBI is in her driveway. The cats told her about this too, she's sure. She has seen this before — the black Ford SUV, the men, surprisingly young, the kind of men she'd see at Trader Joe's buying cereal. They are there to search her dreadlocked neighbor's house. He is not back yet from his bike ride. The FBI men

wear plastic gloves and masks and fill the SUV with papers that they put into clear plastic bags. One man smiles at her and waves a gloved hand.

“Do you know the man who lives here?” he asks.

“He's my neighbor,” she says. “I've never talked to him.” Which is true.

Another FBI man comes out of the apartment with a teddy bear the size of a two-year-old child. It was one of the free animals from across the street. The man turns to put the bear in the SUV, and Crea sees that on the face is pasted a magazine cut-out of the face of Drew Barrymore. The man returns to the house and comes out with a basket full of dead blackbirds. In the sunlight they are not black, but the blue of dusk.

“Do you know where your neighbor is?” the smiling FBI man asks her.

“On his bicycle,” she says, pointing in the direction on the market.

The man shakes her hand. The plastic glove is powdery. He hands her his card.

Later, even after she has washed her hand several times, it will still smell like latex. Later, the cats will tell her to wake up. The moon will be almost full. She'll walk down the driveway in her nightgown and try her neighbor's door. He will have been arrested by then for sending baking soda to the U.N. building and claiming that he has sent anthrax for the sake of Drew Barrymore, whose memory has been erased by the cats who run the World Health Organization. Her neighbor's door will be locked, but there will be no crime scene tape. She'll look through the window, and in the moonlight she'll see her neighbor's apartment, a carpet of papers the FBI didn't want, plates of food rotting on the sofa and the floor, and in the corner, the back corner, where she can barely see them, will be the cats. She'll know it's them because of the way they speak: “Picture cup's pusillanimous balcony temperature;” “Sway light with electricity flower.” She will strain to listen and to see, pressing her face into the windowpane, hearing the nightbirds sing the wrong songs, and she will sing them, too, and the cats will come to her at

the window, birds, still alive, in their mouths, and she will see it is not the cats who are speaking, but the birds in the cats' mouths. She will open the window and climb inside, and the cats will circle her, rub against her legs, and she will take the birds, their fragile skeletons and wings full of movement, into her hands, and the cats will let her take them, whole and unharmed, a gift. The birds will fly away through the open window. The cats will mewl and the baby in the Airstream will cry.

She will tell the cats -- their mouths now empty of birds -- "Go home," and they will. They will slink through the open window, and walk down the moonlit driveway to wherever it was they came from.

