

## To Dream as You

Neither of us meant for you to come with the post. I heard you before I saw you. Your foot tasted the invitation below you. Your shell push-scraped the BELCO bill above. I lifted the envelope, and there you were sliming up the local post-mark. I was smitten. A storm raged without. So I googled what you might like.

Sometimes I think I shouldn't have. Probably you could stick to walls as well as our concrete walls stick to our limestone roof. Should I have put you back outside? Or waited as I did for the storm to fly away? At the time it seemed right. Your diameter was a centimeter. Coincidence brought you close, making me "response-able" to you.

"Response-able." The word is a dream of Donna Haraway's. Her books dream of nonhumans and humans living and dying "response-ably" together. I think *response-ability* means being capable of responding and taking responsibility for what happens to each other. To be response-able, I had to dream as you. To dream as you was to be response-able.

So I learned you liked your lettuce slightly stale. As you liked your paper. I heard you before I saw you; you were a decomposer. To dream as you I must enjoy mushy paper with my whole body. I must experience time as a spiral measured by the growth of my shell. I must push my eyes out of my head and suck them back in at the slightest sound. To move is to taste, to touch is to bleed

transparent slime which like a virtuoso I must cultivate, configure, and cherish. I know you can hear what I can't hear. To move is to hear through your foot which is your stomach. You know so much I don't know. What Bermuda tastes like when it's stamped on an envelope, when it's a wall or hibiscus. How to walk with your tongue. It's hard to learn not to want to possess anything. Except the shell one must secrete for oneself.



It's difficult to know what empathy is beyond that empathy is difficult. Empathy is a struggle. A struggle to understand that I can't fully understand. Empathy is the novelist's lifelong struggle. Philosophers try to characterize it: Kathie Jenni and Lori Gruen, for example, who specialize in animal ethics. Jenni says empathy is my coming to feel something similar to what you feel. Gruen says "entangled empathy" is "a type of caring perception" that intently pays attention to another being, their experiences, and their expressions, sensing that we "are called upon to be responsive and responsible in [our] relationships" with them. Both philosophers agree that empathy is a process and a skill which involves perception, cognition, and emotion. To empathize with you, I must sense that you're in the grip of feeling. I must take the trouble to learn to recognize or imagine what you in particular might feel in your situation. And I must myself feel something. I must let myself be affected by you in your situation.

Hearing you cry out in distress distresses me. You're frightened of the storm, so I am too.

Or I'm not frightened of the storm because I know my concrete house. So hearing the storm's wrath and observing that you're no bigger than my fingernail, I may not feel like sliming for the nearest postbox with due haste. But knowing that you're probably in distress, though I couldn't hear you cry out even if you could, distresses me in my own way, compelling me to google how you might be comforted. Not because I pity you, not out of sympathy, but because your situation, our shared situation, our coincidence, distresses me differently than it distresses you. And yet we both share *this* distress.

I wonder if empathy's a kind of resonance. When I play B-flat on my piano, the B-flat strings shiver and the aluminum blinds rattle on the nearby window. Both are moved, strings and blinds. Staggered by the same blow, my striking B-flat, they're moved differently. Each is distressed in its own way. But because they are together and attuned to one another, the blinds are stricken as the piano is and because the piano is.



Kathryn thought the tapes had drowned in a long-ago flood. But there they were in her basement. She'd just come back from interviewing sheep and goats in Maine. Her daughter Elizabeth was preparing to leave home for a place of her own. By coincidence the sheep had just endured their annual wrenching, the lambs taken from the ewes. Kathryn happened to record them crying out to one another, straining to hear one another from a distance. A week later, she found the tapes. Home movies by her husband John. John had died of cancer many years before.

All these concatenations of presence and absence, dread and loss. Kathryn tells me it was the sheep who inspired her to make a requiem for John. He was the cameraman, so his image wasn't on the tapes. Only his voice.

In Kathryn Eddy's quadraphonic sound installation, *Requiem for Lost Souls*, we hear her recordings of the bereft lambs and ewes, audio from John's home movies, and recordings of Kathryn and grown-up Elizabeth speaking of loss and despair. The women's words overlap, all the voices overlap, the living and gone collaging, coinciding with one another and with the ewes' and lambs' spectral calling, every sound haunted by every other. Convergences are not without meaning. Just existing side by side is a connection, an opportunity for response-ability. The human lost souls don't just cry out for each other. They cry out to the sheep with whom their voices collage: *We feel as you feel. We know you feel as we feel. We know it's complicated.*

Few humans can imagine a more crushing, more complicated loss than the loss of their families. Yet Kathryn coincides her own widowing and her parting

from her daughter with what agriculture calls “sheep weaning.” She places the most shattering tragedy humans can imagine in side-by-side correspondence with a systematic agricultural routine, a simple slamming of gates in which the humans involved convince themselves that nonhuman grief isn’t grief—or it is but it doesn’t matter. Meanwhile, grief is expected from human animals to the point where if a woman didn’t grieve for her dead husband, people would worry. Instead of polarizing us and them, Kathryn made John’s *Requiem* because of them. Her sounds reach out to the sheep with ghostly empathic arms. Her *Requiem* gives grief a polyphonic, phantasmic, multispecies body. I hear grief, for all who grieve, collapse time and make it seem to last forever, making distance seem unreal and insurmountable.

“Who am I to say that a nonhuman animal’s loss is not devastating to them?” Kathryn says. “Their reactions may be different, but that doesn’t mean they’re any less valid—and this doesn’t threaten the validity and enormity of my loss in any way.”

She endures what they endure. But differently. She connects their loss with hers. But she doesn’t conflate them. She refuses to consume their loss with hers.

But empathy is tangled. Widowing as weaning, sheep as widow and orphan—what if it’s too much, too hard, and you just can’t? Some can’t bear it when reality is violent and violence is nonexclusive. They react by getting offended, and in general when we feel offended it becomes next to impossible to feel anything else. Self-righteous indignation drowns out everything, particularly empathy for anything that takes part in the offense.

Or the opposite: empathy as a kind of bleeding, unleashing a flood of resonant fellow-feeling. You hear a dead man reminisce about a birth while sheep mothers scream for irrecoverable children. You internalize the anguish of the lost. What if that’s unbearable in another way? With the screams of another inside you, in your ears, you might well succumb, Jenni says, to “empathic distress . . . even vicarious trauma”—and freeze up. Empathy’s “impulse to help” collides with paralyzing empathic anguish, “overwhelming subjects into inaction.”

These are risks that empathic art must take. Risks we must take in listening. Tune in and bear the cost.

But maybe there's no cost. Maybe you don't hear *Requiem* as I do. Listening to art isn't like mistaking a zoo elephant's neurotic swaying for a dance. Art thrives on being heard or looked at differently. We don't even need to agree on what it is. In fact, empathy with nonhumans has to be a little rude to categories. Including *human* and *nonhuman*. *Emotion* and *instinct*. *Expression* and *noise*. You can't dream as another if you're stuck in your own notions. Courage against categories is a chance for empathy.

But sometimes empathic feelings which ought to undermine stubborn categories risk encouraging their stubbornness. *I'm sure I feel as you feel, I quite understand because my sort of feelings and the terms in which I understand apply to everybody who is anybody*. Such overconfidence is always a danger, it's a way of becoming wrapped up in oneself.

Anthropomorphism: ascribing human feelings, thoughts, and antics to nonhumans. The risk of anthropomorphism is anthropocentrism: persuading yourself that if even snails feel as humans feel, want what humans want, and express themselves as humans express themselves; then human feelings, wishes, and expressions must be the only real kind. So if things don't scream like us or bleed like us, they don't suffer. But anthropomorphism can be a critical strategy too. The artist lynn mowson proposes "strategic anthropomorphism as a way of destabilizing anthropocentrism" by "extending our empathy and creative imagination to our fellow creatures."

It takes work to decentralize anthropocentrism while skating its edge. Art teeters there whenever it has anything to do with nonhuman animals. Empathy can also be hard work. It requires recognizing that others feel and imagining what they feel to the point of being emotionally involved in it. It takes going out of your way to learn about how others feel. Shutting up and paying attention while they express themselves. Making the effort to feel something about all of it, something that makes you respond with care. Jenni says, "the more unlike us a suffering being is, the harder we must work to enter imaginatively into that being's world . . . While we can never completely succeed—while we may achieve only incomplete and fragmentary experiential 'glimpses' of the misery of sensitive beings . . . the 'experienced insight' that