

Animal Disorders

Essays on Trans-Species Relationships

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Introduction

A man cages lions and tigers in his backyard. A woman's house teems with so many cats that she's lost count and doesn't even notice when one dies. A man longing to become one with bears gets devoured by one.

"Animal Disorders," I call them, these enactments, by a select few individuals, of much more widespread cultural disorders. These extreme versions of unhealthy relationships with animals capture irreconcilable contradictions and impossibilities in our approaches to (non-human) animals that we otherwise manage to repress.

More mundane contradictions abound, often unnoticed. Millions of people who condemn cockfighting will eat the carcasses of chickens that were crammed into cages and de-beaked to keep them from pecking each other to death during their short lives. Our culture euthanizes hundreds of thousands of unwanted dogs every year while spending millions of dollars on a wanted few. Researchers "sacrifice" one dog to save another. An animal rights advocate may condemn animal cruelty in research laboratories but receive radiation therapy treatments first tested out on beagles. A woman who considers herself a vegetarian feeds her dogs meat.

These are some of the everyday symptoms of animal disorders that I find myself in. What follows are personal essays exploring disordered relationships with animals on the part of myself and of my (human) culture. I would characterize myself as having a fairly representative case of early-stage animal disorder. I'm the woman referred to above, the one who considers herself a vegetarian but feeds her dogs meat. I'm not

(quite) (yet) a hoarder, and I don't live among bears or run with wolves, but just a small change in a variable or two of my life might produce a very different story.

You may hear in my term “animal disorders” the echo of other disorders, like “sleep disorders” or “eating disorders.” Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo has proposed that eating disorders—anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge eating, orthorexia, etc.—are “crystallizations of culture.” Their symptoms make manifest not just individual psyches but also cultural ailments. Eating disorders emerged historically at a time when Western culture's approaches to food, consumption, and women's bodies clashed. The individuals who developed eating disorders were primarily women responding to impossibly contradictory cultural demands: *Eat! But don't eat! Consume everything, but restrain yourself! You deserve to indulge yourself, but your worth comes from denying yourself!* Their disordered eating forms a compromise among irreconcilable desires and demands.

Such compromised conditions similarly underlie sleep disorders. We find ourselves whirling in a culture of perpetual motion and simultaneity, a fast culture of fast food for fast company, with speedy motors and instant messaging, a culture that never sleeps. We desperately need sleep so that we can perform better-stronger-faster, but who has time for sleep? So our culture proliferates amphetamines to keep us up and opiates to push us through the pain. In such a culture, it's inevitable that some people will develop insomnia and irregular sleep cycles. Some even develop a fear of sleeping. Others develop addictions to uppers or downers. Such disordered individuals are themselves symptoms of larger cultural disorders in the body politic. In their extreme and dramatic versions, they embody anxieties and untenable contradictions latent in the culture at large.

So too with animal disorders. When it comes to both domesticated and wild animals, we make ourselves oxymorons. We are a culture whose approach to our non-human kin is contradictory. As psychologist Hal Herzog puts it so eloquently in his book of the same title, “Some we love, some we hate, some we eat.” And some we love to death.

In this era of mass extinctions, we long to connect with the dying wild, even though acting on that longing may hasten the extinction. We become lovers of a “nature” that’s harmed by our consumption of it. Our culture produces a Terry Thompson, raising endangered tigers in an Ohio backyard, and then setting them free into an urban safari, as I explore in “The Other Thompson.” Or we create a Timothy Treadwell, destroyed by and destroying the grizzly bear he longs to become. Maybe we express our love for wild animals by hunting them, or seek oneness with nature by capturing its inhabitants. Or maybe we’re just nature voyeurs, viewing wilderness vistas on our screensavers while carbonating the atmosphere with our air conditioners.

We’re a bundle of animal contradictions. We’ll do anything to save some animals while casually obliterating others. We treat some animals more “humanely” than we treat some humans while killing others just for sport. We can’t seem to figure out even the legal, much less the ethical, status of animals. We can’t figure out whether domestic animals are objects we own or wards we steward. We don’t know how to value nature—or even what nature is.

Like eating and sleep disorders, animal disorders come in many forms. Indeed, there’s even some overlap between the two, such as when extreme veganism masks a fear of food. But might our “ordinary” approach to eating meat, or our acceptance of factory farms, or our alienation from the means of meat production, be just as disordered?

While mass extinction and factory farms are relatively new, animal disorders are as old as *Homo sapiens*, as timeless as myth. They are not, I recognize, merely culture-bound, but universal. Just look at the many myths across human cultures of human-animal hybrids: the elephant-headed god Ganesha, the jackal god Anubis, all those centaurs and minotaurs, fauns and satyrs, mermaids and mermen, not to mention Spiderman and Batman and Catwoman. Or look at the array of legends where humans are engulfed inside nonhuman animals: Jonah and the whale, Little Red Riding Hood. Or the many tales of becoming-animal: Actaeon, the hunter of Greek myth who became the hunted, turned by

Artemis into a deer and torn apart by his dogs; Arachne, the talented weaver who, in her hubris, challenged Athena (thereby claiming super-human powers) and was turned into a spider; Philomela, raped by her brother-in-law, who then cut out her tongue so she couldn't tell her tale, was transformed into a nightingale forever singing her lament. Myths world-wide attest to active questioning about human-animal relations.

Every human culture, I would venture, has its animal disorders. However, like unhappy families, every culture has been disordered in its own way. I sometimes wonder if twenty-first-century U.S. culture is so enmeshed in its animal disorders that it doesn't even know how to dream of recovery.

This book is not about every culture, nor does it venture to present a comprehensive view even of twenty-first-century U.S. culture. Instead, it offers my own particular versions of animal disorders over the past fifty-odd years of my middle-class American culture. I have both objectified and anthropomorphized animals, sometimes simultaneously ("Consider the Hamster"; "Pack Theory"). I've displayed hoarding tendencies ("The Other Thompson") and have benefited from animal experiments that I condemn ("Schrödinger's Dogs"). I have generated my own personal myths of metamorphosis, which I've believed while disbelieving ("The Blue Heron Returns"). While overlooking the slow violence of environmental devastation and habitat destruction, I've grieved both *with* and *through* individual animals ("Big Cats"; "The Meaning of Meat"; "For the Polar Bears") as well as *for* animals ("A Bitchuary"). The essays that follow deliver dispatches from one representative sufferer of animal disorders.

1/ Consider The Hamster

As I shuffle my cart toward the dog food aisle in the maze of a mega-pet store, a golden glow draws me to the Small Animal zone. It's the translucent yellow acrylic of a hamster hut catching the fluorescent rays. Inhaling the long-ago scent of cedar chips, I peer through a glass display case labeled *Golden Hamster, Male. \$15.99*. I spy a mound of tan fur exposed above the shallow bedding. Like many Americans of my late-baby-boomer generation, I had hamsters as a child. In 1970, keeping hamsters as pets was a fairly new phenomenon, but gaining momentum. Back then, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Now, the yellow fluorescence casts the practice in an alien light, and prods me to reconsider the hamster.

My first pet, when I was a seven-year-old girl in 1970, was my hamster Frisky. I'd wanted a dog, like the Klingers' gentle collie next door, but my brother's allergies made this impossible. At the pet store I chose a hamster over a gerbil because the gerbil's tail looked too wormy—yuck—and because my father told me that the hamster could store food in his cheek pouches, then paw it back out. Frisky was five inches of waistless waddle, earnest-eyed, and all mine. My father helped me set up the clear plastic Habitrail cage in my bedroom. The box housed a red plastic wheel and a lone translucent yellow tower. Dad showed me how to change the water bottle, food trough, and, once a week, the wood-chip bedding that filled with doll-house-sized poops. At night I fell asleep to the thrum of the

spinning wheel, and when I woke up from a nightmare the steady churning calmed me back to oblivion.

In the daytime I nudged the groggy hamster awake and cupped him in my hand to hold his warmth. I offered him a sunflower seed between the pinch of my index finger and thumb; I liked to feel the slight tug in my fingertips as he took it and to hear the crack as he busily opened the shell and extracted the meat. Sometimes I coaxed him to stand on hind legs in begging position, or covered his head to feel his soft pink paws burrowing a tunnel between my thumb and index finger. When I set him down he ran for crevices until I scooped him up again. Because he delighted in cardboard tunnels, I used way more toilet paper than I needed just to empty the roll faster. Above all, I liked to stroke his fur from head to tail-stump as he bowed under my fingers. I imagined that Frisky appreciated my ministrations, and that he and I shared a bond. Behind his delicate, hyperactive nose, his rich black eyes reflected my love, just as nature intended.

As a hamster-owner in 1970, I typified my cultural moment. Now, however, as I poke into hamster's labyrinthine journey to pet-dom, the story shifts, and I find, instead, a most unnatural history.

Hamsters hail from the Middle East and Asia. Although these elusive but prevalent desert-dwellers must have been noticed earlier, they weren't mentioned in writing until 1774, and only received a scientific name in 1839 by Englishman George Robert Waterhouse. Having acquired a specimen (probably dead, though accounts are fuzzy) from Aleppo, Syria, Waterhouse named it for the golden hue of its pelt and presented it to the London Zoological Society as a new species, the *Cricetus auratus* (now *Mesocricetus auratus*). Waterhouse's specimen can still be viewed today, as Item BM(NH) 1855.12.24.120, at the National History Museum in London.

Even after this "discovery," hamsters' interactions with human beings remained limited for nearly another century; the rodents, if noted at all, were regarded as nuisances for their ability to invade granaries, hoard husks

and seeds in their cheeks, and bury them later in underground pantries, sometimes containing upwards of 50 pounds of food. Impoverished laborers in China have actually survived famines by unearthing hamsters' hoards.

Hamsters proved themselves more useful to humans in the realm of medical research. In the 1920s, scientists discovered that the Chinese dwarf hamster was easily infected with the protozoan causing the human disease Leishmaniasis (marked by skin lesions and organ damage). They wanted to exploit hamsters as research specimens, but found this species difficult to breed in the lab. So the hunt was on for breedable hamsters.

In 1930, a Jewish biologist in Jerusalem (then under the Turkish empire) resolved to track down and breed the Syrian hamster. Israel Aharoni and his team eventually succeeded, but the attempt was fraught with problems that would recur in my own household forty years later. His team finally located, eight feet below ground in a wheat field in Aleppo, a mother and her ten pups. But once placed in a box, the mother ate one of the pups and had to be "restrained"—in a bottle of cyanide—from further infanticide. To this hapless Eve can be traced the genetic line of nearly all domesticated Syrian hamsters today.

The nine pups were then taken to Jerusalem and eye-dropper-fed into childhood. Alas, five hamsters chewed their way out of the wood-bottomed cage, and soon escaped. That left four hamsters, one of them male, who then ate one of the females. And then there were three. The researchers finally separated the remaining three and eventually got the brother to mate with one of his sisters. That litter was the first of 150 offspring from the incestuous pair, and those offspring multiplied, and the multiples multiplied. From thence came the domestic hamster tribe.

I don't think my father, himself a proud Jew and a scientist, knew that a Jewish scientist was responsible for the Syrian hamster diaspora. If he had, he would have been pleased. Of course, we didn't call them *Syrian* hamsters. I doubt that such epithet omission was confined to my pro-Israel family. *Syrian* would not have played well in the 1970s U.S. Pet store labels read *Golden* or sometimes *Teddy Bear*, and hamsters' origins and history went unlabeled. To me, it was as if the hamsters miraculously

appeared out of nowhere, or as if they were mass-produced in factories overseas, like most of my toys. It never occurred to me, as a child, to ask where they came from. They came from the store.

When the FDA formed in 1937, the agency required all commercial pharmaceuticals to be tested on laboratory animals. The demand for Aharoni's hamsters increased. The age of animal experimentation was on, and hamsters, along with mice, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs, and other rodents, were favored subjects—so much so that a whole industry arose to breed them on a mass scale. Ironically, hamsters' incestuous lineage makes them prime research subjects, as they show little genetic variation. This in-breeding also makes them particularly susceptible to the congenital heart diseases so eagerly studied in medical laboratories. Although the guinea pig bears the metaphorical weight, the hamster bears a significant portion of the actual burden of medical research.

Hamsters went from the lab to the home—sometimes literally, carried out in pockets. We still refer to them as “pocket pets.” Pet stores began selling them in the 1940s, the waning days of the caged-bird craze. Indeed, many of the early pet hamsters were kept in revamped birdcages. By the 1970s, hamsters' popularity boomed, especially as starter pets for young children. Hamster-keeping has even been characterized as a childhood rite of passage in North America. Hamsters make good first pets because they're fairly hardy, resistant to disease, relatively low-maintenance, and short-lived. With a life expectancy of approximately two years, they rarely outlive their owner's childhood, and often don't outlive their novelty. They're also very cute. And, of course, they can easily be kept in cages. They serve as low-stakes trial runs, the guinea pigs of pet-keeping.

While hamsters were first held in birdcages, aquaria, or other makeshift enclosures, the emerging pet industry quickly filled this new niche with specialty hamster merchandise. New developments in polymer technologies allowed the wire cages to be augmented with and even replaced by plastic ones, most famously Habitrail “habitats.” Frisky

began with the basic Habitrail starter cage, but I soon purchased add-ons with my allowance money. The larger cage tunneled into an annex, which gained a second wheel and a higher look-out tower.

Pet stores today carry far more colorful, whimsical, even futuristic options in accessories. The Habitrail OVO resembles a sci-fi spaceship with its multicolored, ovoid living spaces and turrets, its sleek, aerodynamic-looking wheels, and its add-on tunneling systems. Crittertrail offerings range from an all-pink one-level abode (where, I can imagine, Barbie herself might happily reside) to an “Extreme Challenge” playpen for hot-rod hamsters. You can buy a carry-case shaped like a bus, potty pens, even a four-piece Sit-N-Living Room suite, which includes a Hide-N-See television set, so that, when your hamster burrows into it, you can watch him “on television,” live and engaged.

My favorite hamster accessory back in the day was the yellow plastic bubble, sometimes called a “run-around” or “roll-about” ball. Once inside it, Frisky started scampering. In my fantasy, he would follow me around like a dog. In reality he kept running into our wood-paneled walls. I now know that hamsters have weak eyesight, and mostly just see contrasts, which Frisky was denied in his yellow translucent sphere. For this reason, today’s balls are usually clear. The new run-around tracks allow you to set up elaborate railroad-like loop-de-loops in your living room. You can also buy the balls with training wheels for extra stability. Despite hamsters’ being notoriously difficult to sex, Crittertrail offers a pink carriage for girls and a red racing car for boys. Although I didn’t have all of these extra embellishments back in the 1970s, I still managed to play out my fantasies on my hamster. As a young consumerist-in-training, I practiced accessorizing, rehearsing the American Dream of the ever-expanding house.

One day, in spite of my better judgment, I allowed my learning-disabled older brother to hold Frisky. As soon as I lowered Frisky into David’s cupped hands, the hamster tried to bolt. David squeezed the tiny body harder. Frisky bit David’s finger. David panicked and threw Frisky against the wall.

My next hamster, Squeaky, arrived with a new room for the growing hamster mansion, along with additional salt licks and wood chews. My father built a wooden maze with a removable chicken-wire cover, and we held inconclusive “training sessions.” I never let David hold any of my hamsters again. I couldn’t protect his various gerbils, mice, and rats over the years, but I could protect my hamsters, to whom I was determined to give the perfect life. I cut down old vanilla wafer boxes into hamster huts, which Squeaky then customized with his compulsive chewing. I even ate carrots so he could get the peelings. My father challenged me to think like a hamster, so I tried to imagine how it would be to see very little, but to hear ultrasonic wavelengths, and to smell everything, even the walls. I wondered at Squeaky’s ever-working pink nose, at how it could feel shapes through scent the way our fingers do through touch. Mostly, though, I related to my hamsters much like I did to my stuffed animals.

After Frisky and Squeaky came Goldie, to whom I remember reciting my speech on *tzedakah*—charity—for the temple speech contest. (I came in second place, having lost to an oratory on reconciling the Bible with Evolution.) Then came Pinky, Piglet, and finally Hamlet. The configuration of cages got more and more elaborate, expanding into a compound more than a castle. When it outgrew my bedroom we moved it to the basement. I never stopped to consider how far that locale—cold, damp, dungeon-like—was from the hamster’s natural desert habitat.

One night a hamster—I can’t remember which one—got loose. My father and I searched into the wee hours. It’s one of my most vivid memories, among an ever-dwindling collection, of my father during my childhood. I wore my purple pajamas, my dad his plaid flannel bathrobe. We each wielded a flashlight. Dad explained that the hamster couldn’t survive on his own; he’d either starve or be eaten. He needed us. So we should look hard, with “eagle eyes.” The hamster, in my prepubescent narrative, was a damsel in distress, and my father the rescuer. Vivid in freeze-frame memory is the climax of this fairy tale, the moment of victory, when my father shone the flashlight behind the General Electric washing machine and framed the hamster in a halo of light. Pinky (or was it Goldie? Or Piglet?) was saved.

Now, though, when I revisit that memory-image forty years later, it's overlaid by the images in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel of the holocaust, *Maus*. Through anthropomorphism, ironically, I come a little closer to thinking in hamster. Those panels of German cats shining flashlights on Jewish mice in their hiding places. The mice's eyes dilated in terror. What if, from the hamster's eyes, my father and I were the SS, not the Jews?

My last hamster died of thirst. It didn't take a necropsy to determine cause of death. Hamlet's neck had rigidified in a desperate outstretch, his mouth pressed to the lip of the water bottle, his last calories of energy undoubtedly used to suck for sustenance. By the time I finally remembered to trudge down to the basement to replenish his food and water, the poor critter might have been dead for days. I was thirteen years old by then, busy with tennis practice and bat mitzvah prep.

Pet-keeping, the story went, teaches children compassion, responsibility, and an ethic of domestic stewardship. That's surely what my father had in mind, though it turned out not to be the case for my poor Hamlet, and probably for many other Hamlets in middle-class, suburban homes across the land. But beyond memories of my abuse of Hamlet, an even more uncomfortable thought now gnaws at me. Maybe it wasn't just Hamlet who suffered in the end, but all of his predecessors, too, even those subjected to my outpourings of love and care. Maybe pet-keeping itself serves to naturalize imprisonment under the name of love.

Soon after I was bat mitzvahed ("batzed"), I began to question Judaism, both as a religion and a culture, and especially to question Israeli politics. I lost the certainty of my childhood, when I could use my allowance money to buy a tree in Israel and dedicate it "To the Jews who died in the Yom Kippur War." Doubts were afoot and beginning to burrow. But I retained—along with a sense of guilt as my default emotion—the teaching that we, as Jews, knowing all too intimately how casually a culture can slip into a holocaust, had a special obligation to be alert to injustice, which can come in many guises. I didn't yet understand, though,

how an ideology of injustice has, like hamsters, an uncanny ability to hide, burrowing underground below consciousness.

After I went on to college, my brother continued to keep hamsters. When I visited home one winter break I met his latest, an obese Syrian hamster so ornery that David named him Fussy. One day, my mother and I came home from a shopping trip to find, taped to the front door, a note in my brother's still child-like handwriting: "MRS Fussy just gave birth to 9 yung uns." By the time my mom and I reached the basement, Mrs. Fussy had already cannibalized one of the "young 'uns" and was working on a second.

I now know that hamsters' eating of their newborn pups when stressed is well documented; they are notorious for such infanticide, particularly in the presence of threatening foreign species like humans.

Even my brother, always fascinated with primal violence, had had enough of hamsters.

Decades later, while I've moved on to dogs, American consumption of hamsters rolls on. Some of the Greek Tragedy-like problems with hamsters as pets—fratricide, infanticide, and cannibalism—have resolved with the influx of dwarf hamsters into pet stores. These species are sociable enough to be kept in cages together without the risk of fratricide. But they're still in cages, subjected to our diurnal schedules, while their nocturnal bodies must ache to burrow eight feet underground. That's under the best of circumstances. What happened to Hamlet, or to Frisky and the Fussy family, surely isn't a rarity. An informal survey among my friends yields quite a few "sad hamster stories" (along with sad gerbil, rat, rabbit, and guinea pig tales). Googling hamster abuse reveals mistreatment in laboratories and pet stores too. One video shows a pet store employee nonchalantly scooping dead hamsters out of their display cages and into the garbage.

It gets worse. Laboratory hamsters come in different models, some genetically altered, which can be ordered in bulk from a catalog. They're commonly used in disease cytology, for which blood samples are taken by inserting a capillary pipette into the eye. The cheek pouch can also

make a good transplantation site, meaning that very un-cheek-like cells and organs can be observed growing from it. The use of hamsters in laboratory research has declined from a high of over 500,000 in 1976 to well under 200,000 a year in the twenty-first century. But that's still 200,000 Friskies a year. Or Squeakies. Or, alas, poor Hamlets.

The number of hamsters kept as pets is surely much higher. But how much better is their fate? Is keeping hamsters in cages as pets fundamentally different—as I have wanted to believe—from using them as research specimens? The lessons hamster-keeping taught me are hard to unlearn: that living things can be owned, purchased along with the other accessories in the pet store; that they're here to serve my needs; that caging and controlling them is for their own good. Is that compassion? Could hamster-keeping have naturalized animal cruelty under the name of love? And is it too big a leap to notice that the rise of factory farms and the tremendous spike in medical testing on animals coincided with the surge in caged-animal pet-keeping? Or am I going too far?

“Consider the Lobster,” David Foster Wallace’s famous essay, which inspired me to consider the hamster, begins in a journalistic description of the Maine Lobster Festival and of lobster-eating, before craftily changing tracks. Eventually, Wallace eviscerates common-sense ideology about humans’ inherent right to cook and eat lobster, and indeed any sentient living being. The essay climaxes in a series of questions about the very ethics of eating animals: “Is it possible that future generations will regard our present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Mengele’s experiments?” I find my own observations about keeping hamsters as pets lead me to some similarly inconvenient questions.

The hamster spinning on the wheel became my generation’s trope for dead-end work and an unfulfilling life. We identified with her frustration, and used her image to illustrate ours. But why didn’t we circle back and think of the hamster? Why didn’t we take the metaphor literally, and consider how the hamster herself felt about her wheel-bound, cage-bound predicament? Should we expect her to like it any more than we do? Why

didn't we ask ourselves about the ethics of pet-keeping itself? About what gave us the right to put animals in cages for our own amusement?

"It's human nature to want to keep pets," people say when I start to feel my way through this thought maze. "It's the human condition." They—we—also tend to assume that it's "the human condition" to put humans at the center of all considerations; we consider the human almost exclusively, and see this anthropocentrism as natural, as inevitable, and as so common-sensical that it's beneath noting. But the history of hamster-keeping suggests that it wasn't always seen as natural for humans to make hamsters into pets—and, indeed, it might even go against nature. Hamsters as pets arose within a specific ideology of twentieth-century consumerism, when it seemed natural to colonize, import, and own other beings purely for our pleasure. Burrowed, hamster-like, deep underneath our anthropocentric belief in "the human condition" is a much more elusive, light-averse clue into how a human becomes conditioned.

"It's just a hamster," all reasonable people would say, and yes, I know that I'm being more than a bit ridiculous, that the hamster's confinement is quite small on the scale of animal mistreatment, and perhaps not worth worrying about when more urgent abuses—the overcrowding and de-beaking of chickens on factory farms, the use of gestation crates and veal crates for large mammals, and vivisection of primates, for starters—demand our attention. But if we begin by considering the case of the hamster, and if we decide that the undoubtedly genuine enjoyment and companionship we receive from them does not justify caging them, then don't all those other instances become that much more unacceptable? Doesn't it make sense to start small?

On the other hand, if we keep digging down this tunnel, we risk stumbling upon more fundamental beliefs. Every pure and innocent childhood memory, everything we consider natural when it comes to pets and eating and clothing and habitats and human priorities, would be up for reconsideration. Even dog ownership...and here we're getting into dangerous territory, because I can't imagine a life without my dogs—the dogless life is not worth living—so I must now withdraw from this line

of questioning. That's farther than I'm able to go. As David Foster Wallace wryly concludes in his consideration of lobsters, "[t]here are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other."

Any condemnation of hamster-keeping I might voice is further muted by the recalcitrance of desire. When I stand in front of the pet store's brightly-lit hamster display, history and ethics dissolve, and I'm stirred, even now, by old longings, memories of tactile sensations of fur and warmth. One animal advocacy group says that you can enjoy animals without enslaving them; you can, for example, enjoy the squirrel in your backyard without entrapping it. But what's missing in their version is the greediness of touch. Just to hold, in your palm, a beating-hearted thing, soft and warm, furry and nervous. To smooth its angora fur with your fingertips to calm it, to feel so in touch with its slowing beats that the hamster itself becomes a heart in your hands. To feel your fingers wrap around it and call it your own.