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Pet Grief

OUR ANIMAL HOSPITAL in D.C. had five rooms with an identical layout: a chair by the door, another against the opposite wall, and an examination table in the center. No matter which room we were shown into to wait for the veterinarian, my seal point Siamese, Algernon, trotted back and forth between the door and the wall. At each end, he rubbed his head on a chair leg.

I crouched on the floor, chanting, “Defense, defense,” and waving my arms. Algernon kept coming, so I crab-walked backward, moved out of the way at the last moment, and as soon as his head touched the chair leg, called out, “Two points for Algernon!” We turned around and headed for the other chair, Algernon prancing forward and me retreating. Both baskets were his to score on, and if he barreled into me, no fouls were called. Only when he stopped in the middle and reversed his course did I announce, “A big turnover,” and reach above his head to tap the chair leg. “Finally, two points for me.”

The veterinarian would open the door, see us playing, and laugh. Algernon, who had a wedge-shaped head and a long tail curled at the tip, resembled a monkey in a dark brown mask, vest, and boots. He had Feline Inflammatory Bowel Disease, a chronic condition similar to

Crohn's Disease in humans, so I took him in for frequent checkups and treatments.

Algernon played chair basketball with me at every veterinary visit until he suddenly went blind in March, 2010. His sight was unlikely to return, but cats rely more on their other senses, and Algernon learned to navigate around our apartment and clamber onto the arm chair in the living room to sleep with Ernest, the blue point Siamese. With their legs tangled together, my two cats looked the same as they had for years. They were both ten.

The morning Algernon fell over on his side and couldn't get up, I took him to the hospital before driving to my teaching job, an hour away in Northern Virginia. My class didn't meet until evening, but I had appointments throughout the day. Algernon seemed to be feeling better, so I planned to visit him—maybe even take him home—when I got back to town. It was April Fools Day and also the first day of the Cherry Blossom Festival. Although I canceled my class and headed back in the late afternoon when Algernon's condition worsened, there was a long line of cars trying to get into the District. I was stuck on the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge when the veterinarian called. I didn't get to say goodbye to Algernon because I didn't believe he was dying.

The average life expectancy of an indoor cat is just fourteen years, compared to a human's seventy-nine years in America. We are the ones with multiple cat lives. I was twenty-two when I got my first cat, Dorian, and forty when he died. Dorian's successor, Oscar, was with me only three years because he had a congenital heart defect. After that, I somehow believed that getting two cats—Ernest and Algernon—would ensure double longevity, but it turned out to be more like burning the candle at both ends. Ernest died from pancreatitis three months after Algernon.

That's how, in October 2010, having already spent four cat lives at fifty-three, I found myself crying in the car every Wednesday night. Driving the same route home after my evening class, I couldn't help

but go over the bad decisions I'd made on the day Algernon died. My apartment was ten minutes from the animal hospital. If I had faced the seriousness of the situation and stayed home, I could have been there in time and Algernon could have heard my voice among the voices of the strangers trying to help him in ways he couldn't possibly understand. Instead, I had handed him over and hurried away. The last thing I said to him was a promise I didn't keep: "Don't worry. I'll be back after school."

The view from the bridge—the Washington Monument ahead and the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial off to the sides—was familiar and yet unreal: one of those sights I knew from postcards long before I saw the real thing. Grief, too, was personal and generic at once, each instance so different and exactly the same. It was no use being told that I had done the best I could for Algernon. I didn't care whether or not that was true. I wanted him back, and now Ernest was gone as well, and I didn't know how to start feeling even remotely like my normal self.

Although humans have kept company with dogs for 32,000 years and cats for 9,500 years, there was little help until recently for grieving pet owners. In 1980, the animal hospital at the University of Pennsylvania became the first in the United States to employ a full-time social worker for their human clients. Other veterinary clinics soon followed, and veterinarians started collaborating with mental health professionals to study the impact of their clients' grief.

They soon discovered that people who had been in psychotherapy when their pets died were no better equipped to deal with their grief than others. Since therapy sessions tended to focus more on problems than on pleasures, few clients discussed their pets with their therapists until a crisis occurred. When their pets got sick or died and the clients confessed how upset they were, many therapists assumed that the clients' distress was a symptom of other "more serious" problems. The majority of people who lost their pets reported that they received

better support from their pet-owning friends than from their therapists or their families.

These findings led Susan Cohen, the director of counseling at the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan, to start a pet-loss support group in 1982. Nearly sixty people attended the monthly meetings during the first year, adding their pets' pictures to the group scrapbook and sharing their stories. Animal hospitals and humane shelters across the country added their own support groups. By 2010, pet-owner's grief, or "pet grief" as it became known, had a national website that provided state-by-state listings of support groups.

One of these groups met at an animal shelter in Fairfax, Virginia—the city in which my university was located—every third Wednesday of the month. According to the website, the group's leader had conducted grief-counseling workshops around the country and appeared on numerous television news programs. My Wednesday class ended at 7 p.m. At 7:30 p.m., I could be crying in my car overlooking the national mall or attending a meeting with a trained professional.

In my thirties when I was married and living in Green Bay, Wisconsin, I signed up for individual counseling to sort out the advantages and disadvantages of getting divorced and moving on alone. After the counselor helped me understand that I was more afraid of the process than the result of a divorce, I didn't have a reason to stay married or to continue our appointments. Free to go anywhere on my own, I found a job on the east coast, where I felt more at home. Until my cats died, I had never found myself crying about the same thing over and over, stuck in the traffic jam on the bridge in my memory—overlooking the tidal basin cherry blossoms at sunset—while the car sped through the empty lanes after dark in an entirely different season. Even when there were situations that upset me, it didn't usually take me six months to see that they weren't so bad compared to other people's problems or to

move on to some new preoccupation of my own. But now, talking to friends, ordinarily a source of comfort and perspective, was only making me cry. I needed help.

Still, as I tried to envision the meeting I was about to attend, the only images I had of support groups came from TV shows like “The Wire” and “The Sopranos.” But Fairfax is not Baltimore; like most of northern Virginia, it is safe, bland, and nondescript. The stretch of suburban highway between my university and the animal shelter had a dozen nearly identical office complexes, motels, and strip malls, with a mega-pharmacy and a fast food restaurant at every intersection. It was as though I was driving the same block over and over. After a couple of miles, I started thinking that there might be some similarities between the support group I was going to and the class I had just left.

In the writing workshop I taught on Wednesday nights, students took turns submitting their essays and stories for group critique. They received conflicting suggestions from their peers and from me, and no matter whose advice they followed, their work often got worse before it began to improve. If the class was going well, though, students learned more from discussing each other’s writing than from having their own writing “workshopped.” By considering the strengths and weaknesses in their peers’ work, they improved their knowledge of the craft of writing. Maybe this knowledge didn’t help them immediately with their project, but that wasn’t the point. We met to share our understanding, even if none of us could put all of it into practice every time we sat down to write.

The website for the support group mentioned the importance of people sharing their stories. Like my students, I would learn more by thinking carefully about other people’s experience than by trying to fix my own. I shouldn’t expect anyone, including the counselor, to offer handy tips to make me feel better. Good classes didn’t result in easy

answers; they left us with questions that might, over time, lead to deeper understanding. I told my students that their writing would continue to be muddled until, after multiple revisions, they suddenly had a draft that made sense. Until then, they had to be patient and open-minded, but they should also cultivate their analytical ability to promote discussion and constructive criticism. To learn something from the people I was about to meet, I, too, needed the right mixture of respect and skepticism, politeness and honesty.

The shelter was a one-story building with a chain-link fence in the back. Two cars were parked in the lot, and a woman in a beige suit with a knee-length skirt was getting out of one of them. I caught up with her outside the door.

“Are you here for the pet loss meeting?” she asked me. A petite woman in her sixties, she had the wan appearance of a smoker and a voice to match. Her platinum blond hair was cut close to her face, emphasizing her cheek bones.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Welcome,” she said. “I’m Kathy. I lead the group.” While I was shaking her hand, she reached out with the other hand to press the buzzer on the security box. “Hey, it’s Kathy,” she barked into the intercom.

A young woman in a navy blue uniform opened the door and then walked to the only other car parked in the lot and drove away. The building was dark except for the fluorescent light above the now-unattended reception desk. I had been feeling guilty in advance about seeing animals waiting to be adopted, but they must have been behind a locked door or in another building. I heard no barking, meowing, or shuffling and clicking of paws as I followed Kathy into a room near the reception area and waited for her to turn on the light. The room had a yellow linoleum floor and was twice the size of the seminar room I had just come from.

Kathy pointed to the black plastic chairs stacked against the wall. “Do you mind setting the chairs in a circle? I should go and watch the door.”

“How many chairs do we need?”

“Maybe twelve? You never know with this group.”

The door buzzer went off as I was completing the circle of chairs. Kathy returned with a heavyset woman in a flannel shirt, a gray button-down sweater, and baggy jeans. The woman’s attire was as pointedly frumpy as Kathy’s suit was businesslike. In my long black coat, black dress, and tall boots, my hair pulled back in a ponytail, I, too, looked like a parody of myself: an aging hippie academic. Kathy seated herself in one of the twelve chairs and the other woman settled immediately to her left. I dropped my backpack on the floor, sat down, and realized I had placed myself clear on the other side of the circle. We were like characters in a one-act play. There were no voices or footsteps in the hallway. If more people were expected, Kathy would have stayed to watch the door.

“Let’s get started,” she said, nodding to the other woman before addressing me across the empty circle. “This is Jane. She’s been in this group for a few years and she now comes to help me with the program.”

“I lost my favorite dog three years ago and this group saved my life,” Jane explained. She had a wide serene face and shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair. “So I come back to help other people in the same boat.”

“Why don’t you start the meeting,” Kathy said to me, “by explaining why you’re here?”

The room was completely quiet. Nothing like this had happened since my senior year in college when I went to my American literature class—which had only five students—the morning after a big campus party. The professor waited ten minutes for the others to show up and canceled the class when they didn’t. I wasn’t going to get the same break now.

So I talked about how Algernon had died in April and Ernest in July after spending three days in and out of the animal hospital, throwing

up and coughing and refusing to eat. Finally, he had to be placed in an oxygen tent. When I visited, the technician turned up the oxygen so I could unzip the nylon tent and put my head and hand inside. Ernest was alert enough to press his head against my hand. I petted him and told him that I wanted him to get better. "But if you can't," I managed to say, "I'll understand. I'll always love you." The test results had come back showing that he had pancreatitis and a lung infection. I left to let him rest and to receive antibiotics through an IV. A few minutes after I got home, the veterinarian called to say that Ernest had died. If I had stayed a little longer, I could have been with him at the end. Once again, I had walked away as though the situation weren't already a crisis and there would be another chance.

Algernon had wanted to live to the very end, dragging himself around the apartment after he went blind, clawing his way up to the chair, but that's because Algernon loved being a cat. Ernest was more like a fairy-tale prince trapped in a cat's body: picky, sensitive, stubbornly indignant. His pale gray markings resembled a velvet jacket; his narrow face with a long nose could look sweet one moment and disdainful the next. He once spent the whole afternoon and evening inspecting the quilt a friend had made for our bed. For hours, he was huffing, sniffing, and pawing at the interlocking ladder pattern as though he expected to find one misplaced quarter-inch-wide strip of fabric. At midnight, he finally leapt off the bed and headed for his food bowl. I was half afraid that Algernon would start up in his place, but of course Algernon just crawled under the new quilt into my arms and fell asleep. Five minutes later, when Ernest hopped on the bed and settled in his usual spot on my legs I was so relieved I could have wept. That was our relationship in a nutshell: Ernest showed his devotion to Algernon and me by setting an impossibly high standard and acting like he was the only one capable of maintaining it.

After I talked about Algernon and Ernest, Kathy asked if this was the first time I'd lost my pets, so I told her about Dorian and Oscar. She gasped when I said that Oscar had died at three.

"No wonder you're feeling so terrible," she said. "You've lost your two cats while you were still mourning the loss of your last cat. I'm going to ask Jane to tell her story. You might find some help in it."

Jane plunged into her anecdotes without giving background information, but in time I figured out that she was married, that she and her husband owned two houses, and that they traveled between the houses with their Maltese terriers. They currently had three dogs; her favorite, Butchie, had died three years ago.

"My most important advice to you is Write Everything Down," she said. "You always think you'll remember, but you won't. I have notebooks all over both houses. Whenever I remember something about Butchie, I jot it down."

"Some people find it helpful to write a letter to their pets," Kathy interjected, "especially if they didn't get to say good-bye. You should try that with the cat who died before you could get to the clinic. It's never too late to do a ritual to let him go."

Kathy gave me more advice: accept that my cats are never coming back, let go of any anger I feel toward them for dying and leaving me alone, and know that it's not unusual for people to be grief-stricken for months, even years. "You've lost so much," she said. Then she asked Jane to talk about her spiritual experience.

"I'm not one of those New Age-y people," Jane began. "I'm a very practical person. I was surprised by what happened to me." A few months after Butchie's death, she said, she started seeing blue-and-yellow butterflies in her garden. Butchie had worn a blue collar and yellow was Jane's favorite color. She had never noticed butterflies like these before. Now they appeared among her flowers, always when she was thinking about

Butchie. “So I knew he was okay,” she continued, “but when I had an animal communicator in to help one of the other dogs, who had arthritis, I asked her to tell Butchie that I appreciated the butterflies but wanted more concrete signs that he was okay. The animal communicator said she’d relay the message and I would get three signs from Butchie.”

A week later, Jane heard a dog barking in the special way that only Butchie barked. Then one summer evening at dusk, she saw a white Maltese standing on the other side of her pool. Her three dogs were next to her and there were no other Malteses in the neighborhood, so the dog she saw could only be Butchie. By the time she realized this, he was gone. But on Thanksgiving, she was in the kitchen holding a large bowl of salad she had made, when she felt a dog bump her leg and push his head against her knee. Over the bowl’s rim, she observed her three dogs sleeping near the fire in the living room. She could still feel the dog’s weight against her leg, but she couldn’t see under the bowl. As she slowly lowered the bowl to the kitchen table, the invisible dog pressed his head harder against her leg for a second. Then the weight lifted and he was gone. The other dogs continued to sleep. None of them had stirred in the few minutes that Butchie had been with her.

“So now I know Butchie is okay,” she concluded.

“Some people believe that our pets are still with us,” Kathy said, “while others believe that only humans have souls and animals don’t, so our pets are just gone when they die.” She paused and waited for me to say which of these beliefs I held.

Although I didn’t believe in God, I hadn’t ruled out the possibility that the dead were with us in some abstract, molecular form. I certainly didn’t think that only humans had an afterlife and our pets just died. I could have emphasized our common ground, but the way Kathy presented the two choices annoyed me. If she’d wanted an honest answer, she should have asked me before Jane told her story.

“It’s arrogant to assume that humans continue to exist after death and animals don’t,” I said. “We can’t be that special.”

Kathy was smiling and nodding in encouragement.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure that we all cease to exist. When we die, we’re gone, we become nothing. I don’t believe my cats are still around. I don’t expect to be around, myself, after I die.”

Kathy sat up straighter and didn’t say anything for a long time. When she recovered her speech, she said, “If that’s your view, then grief for you is going to be very different.”

Different from what, I wondered. Over the years she’d been working as a counselor, Kathy must have encountered other agnostics and atheists. People who didn’t believe in God or an afterlife had pets and grieved for them, too. But maybe they—we—didn’t come to support group meetings because opening up to strangers required the most arduous faith of all.

Kathy proceeded to recap her advice—write everything down, do a ritual, accept that the cats are never coming back, let go of my anger, know that overcoming grief takes time—but with the repeated disclaimer, “Of course all this is going to be different for you.” Isn’t everyone’s grief different, though? Otherwise, what would be the point of comparing our stories? I should have asked but didn’t.

Outside the shelter’s door, I thanked Kathy and said good-bye.

“You’re doing really well,” Jane said as we crossed the lot toward our cars, which were parked side-by-side. “Most people who come to this meeting can’t sleep or eat. They have a hard time holding their jobs. I was like that for a couple of years after Butchie died.”

Her eyes looked sad. She was trying to be kind. I should have apologized for my earlier comments. To insist that we all become nothing was to imply that the three signs she’d received had been illusions. I should have said that I respected or admired her faith. Only, that wouldn’t have been true.

Every night of my life with Ernest and Algernon, I knew which cat was sitting on my chest without turning on the light. If I had gone blind instead of Algernon, I could easily have told who was purring into my ear or licking my face. Of course I, too, longed to feel my cats' heads pressing against my knee one more time, but I couldn't imagine asking for a sign or proof that they were "okay." Ernest and Algernon were not okay and never could be again: that's what death means. An "animal communicator" is someone who claims to understand your pets, dead or alive, through her psychic powers. Jane believed that this stranger with no veterinary training could tell more about her dog's arthritis than she could from observing him daily. In contrast, I found it utterly ludicrous to write a letter to Algernon that he couldn't have read even while he was alive.

Like most pet owners, I talked to my cats as though they were people, assuming they understood the gist—the essential intent and the underlying attitude—of what I said from the tone of my voice and my body language. Algernon clung to me that last morning when the veterinary technician entered the room to take him to the in-patient area. As I unwrapped his paws from around my neck and told him that I was coming back after my class, I'm sure I sounded scolding and dismissive, as though he had nothing to worry about and he shouldn't act so scared to be handed over and put into the cage where he was going to die. In my eagerness to pretend that we were having a normal day, I had belittled and betrayed him. No ritual could change that now.

So I thanked Jane, got in my car, and drove away.

Hal Herzog, professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, surveyed 109 students and discovered that 75 percent of them believed that people went to heaven, while 57 percent and 56 percent, respectively, thought that dogs and cats did as well. The other animals on the questionnaire he distributed—fish, rats, snakes, mosquitoes and other insects, etc.—would also be admitted, according to between 45 percent

and 49 percent of those who were asked. One student speculated that fleas and ticks might cross through the pearly gates by clinging to her dog's coat. Asked how predators and prey would get along in heaven, she explained they could easily coexist since the dead had no need for eating.

The students in the survey were predominantly white, southern, and Protestant, so their views weren't diverse. Still, Christians aren't the only people who picture an afterlife. But trying to imagine the afterlife of our pets—wondering what happens to the fleas on the dog's coat—reveals the absurdity of this whole effort. All we can say for certain is that after our death we will no longer be who we once were. Not only our need to eat but everything else—including our desire to understand how we could exist for eternity without eating—will also cease. Surely, that is the biggest heartbreak: to not be here anymore to think through or care about anything, and to accept that the dead no longer have that ability.

Although Kathy kept reminding me that my cats were never coming back, she, too, seemed eager to believe that we could be visited by our pets' spirits or reunited with them after our own death. Maybe she thought it was healthier for her clients to hold on to some hope. The brochure she handed me at the end of the meeting featured "Rainbow Bridge," a story about a green meadow located "this side of Heaven" where all the pets who died can "run around and play together" while they wait for us. When we die, the story promises, we will be reunited with our beloved animals as, side-by-side, never to be parted again, we cross the bridge into heaven. Most resources about pet grief feature this story and show the same picture of a rainbow connecting two white clouds, which can be purchased as an accessory—a porcelain pin, for example—or a poster.

Kathy must have concluded that my grief would be "different" because she understood the difficulty of devising a ritual without reli-

gious symbolism. But my main objection to “Rainbow Bridge” isn’t its religious overtones or its appalling, flowery language. It’s that whoever wrote the story obviously knew nothing about cats. Ernest and Algernon were indoor cats. Even if they could get used to being outside in their afterlife, they wouldn’t want to “frolic” in a noisy meadow with millions of other cats, dogs, birds, rabbits, iguanas, and a host of small creatures—pocket pets—that they wouldn’t be allowed to chase, capture, and, ideally, eat. If I needed a make-believe story to console myself, I would rather write my own.

I have doubts about death rituals even for humans: the viewing of the body, the wake or “visitation,” with food, drinks, and receiving lines, special coffins for burial. In Green Bay, there were occasional news stories about hard-core Packer fans who’d arranged to be buried in football-shaped coffins lined with Green and Gold satin. Cemeteries had mausoleums that allowed bodies—sealed away from dirt and worms—to decompose more slowly, though even this option wouldn’t preserve all the soft tissue you’d need if the mass resurrections predicted at the Second Coming were to be a literal event.

If there is comfort in gathering the family and friends to remember the departed, it’s because human relationships have a public component. The people who come to console you are those who knew you and the deceased as members of their community. Ernest and Algernon, on the other hand, never left our home except to go to the vet. Although they helped me host occasional dinner parties, the part they played—keeping me company while I cooked, sitting on the laps of the guests—was through me and for me. My friends saw the cats as twin moons orbiting around me. In truth, Ernest was the sun, I was the earth, and Algernon was the moon. Either way, we were our own galaxy.

The farewell letter Kathy advised me to compose wouldn’t have given me “closure.” On the contrary, it would only have connected me back

to our lost galaxy. Write Everything Down and Do a Ritual. The two activities, always mentioned in tandem, are the two hands on the clock of eternity, circling its face in a perpetual motion of remembrance. Whenever Jane picked up the notebooks scattered around her two houses to jot down the smallest details she remembered about Butchie, she was retreating from her present life with the other dogs and her husband to be alone with Butchie's memory. Like someone who steps into a chapel in the middle of the day, she was seeking refuge in a quiet, timeless place to say a prayer, a prayer against forgetting. Each word she wrote was an act of devotion. Even though Butchie was gone, Jane was determined to hold onto her love for him. That was something I could have respected and admired.

Still, I am skeptical of the simple equations people make between writing and not forgetting, writing and honoring the dead, writing and understanding, writing and feeling better, writing and any one thing. No matter what writing is meant to do, it also does the opposite. Whether it is a grocery list or a journal entry, when I write something down to "remember," I'm actually giving myself permission to forget. I can't hold the whole grocery list or an entire day's events in my head. I have to let the list or the notebook do the remembering for me.

Besides, the writing whose purpose is *to* remember is only the first step toward the writing I attempt *because* I remember. I throw away the grocery list after I get home and put away the food. I only re-read old journal entries for information. What was the name of the café I visited with my aunt in Osaka? Was I really jet-lagged the entire eight weeks I spent in Japan in my thirties, or do I just remember it that way?

By the time I'm drafting an essay, I no longer try to Write Everything Down. On the contrary, I strive to Forget Everything That Doesn't Matter. Revision after revision, as I struggle to get to the essence of the experience, I'm dismantling and discarding the details that first claimed my attention, the thoughts that seemed important for a while. I have to

recall, reconsider, record, and then erase the words that turn out to be extraneous. After I'm finished, I remember the written version better than the actual event. The purpose of writing is to transform the memories, permanently, into words. To end up with a handful of words I can keep, I have to let go of the original event and its memory.

But before writing leads to truth, or understanding, or feeling better—if it ever does—there is a lot of confusion and feeling worse to get through. I can't compose a letter to the dead as a ritual. How can I say good-bye to Algernon when I wish he had never died? I wouldn't write one word about Algernon or Ernest if my silence could bring them back.

When I finally got to the animal hospital that April evening after Algernon died, my close friend and neighbor, Gail, was waiting for me. I had called her from the road. The two of us sat in the examination room with Algernon's body and cried, and Gail talked me into requesting the cremation of his remains.

A woman from the crematorium telephoned me the next day and directed me to their website so I could choose the box in which the ashes would be returned to the animal hospital. I was relieved to be alone to view the pictures of the tiny decorative boxes, which were ridiculous and pitiful and oddly moving all at once. When the box was delivered to the animal hospital along with the clay paw print the woman at the crematorium had taken before the cremation, I couldn't make myself go to pick them up, so I sent Gail to do it.

The wooden box was dark brown with a gold ribbon and silk flowers. I put it on a shelf in the foyer next to Algernon's picture. Gail made me a drink and we unpacked the small cardboard box containing the clay paw print. The round disk, wrapped in plastic, had four indentations where Algernon's claws had gone in. It was accompanied by instructions for decorating it further (with the pet's name or stenciled

flowers, etc.) and then baking it in the oven to set the print. In the decades I'd been making bread and desserts, I had never burned anything, but all I could think of was the batch of cream puff shells that my seventh-grade home economics class had turned into lava rocks. It didn't help that the disk was almost exactly the size of a sugar cookie.

"Gail, I just can't," I said.

"Don't worry," she said. "I can. I'll write Algernon's name on it."

Gail works as a collections manager at the American Indian Museum and handling fragile objects is what she does every day. She applied gold leaf to the disk for Algernon and found a small wooden stand to put it on. And three months later when Ernest died, she did all these things for me again.

I have no desire to linger for eternity. To continue forever as myself, a limited being in the infinite universe, would be a punishment. I'm not afraid of being nothing after I die when I remember that I was nothing before I was born. We go from an eternity of not existing to another eternity of not existing. It's like Algernon pressing his head against one chair leg, crossing the room, then touching the other. Back and forth between the two gates leading nowhere, he demonstrated the brevity of the span and the enormous energy he had to explore the small space.

On what would have been Ernest's fourteenth birthday in December 2013, my friend Stephen helped me install a platform-style bird feeder in the window next to my desk. The feeder is the size of a small baking pan, and Stephen had designed a board with brackets to hold it in place behind a planter filled with rocks. The arrangement elevates the feeder and makes it look like an altar or a miniature proscenium.

A few days after Ernest's birthday, I saw a blue jay in my window for the first time. In the spring, when mocking birds returned, they came on cold days when the berries and insects they preferred were hard to find. The others, all regulars, are: mourning doves, house sparrows, house

finches, cardinals, gold finches, chickadees, titmice, Caroline wrens, downy woodpeckers, hairy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, red-bellied woodpeckers. Among the few birds that are abundant in the area but never at my window are robins. Robins are not seed-eaters, so they are not attracted to bird feeders. Though they forage on the ground around our building, our window on the third floor is too high to see them.

The only birds Ernest ever watched with interest were a pair of robins nesting outside the bedroom window of an apartment we occupied when he was four. They were so persistent and territorial, flying in and out to feed their young, the male singing to declare his dominion over the air space Ernest considered his own. Till the two fledglings finally left, Ernest was glued to that window. The parents might have returned a few weeks later to lay the second clutch of eggs, but by then we had moved away, so Ernest never saw robins up close again. Now, as I observe the daily drama of bird life—the pair of cardinals at dawn and at dusk, the doves jockeying for position, the red-bellied woodpecker perching on the side and hissing at them—the robins' absence is the silence around Ernest's disappearance. Even in a ritual, I cannot give him what he wanted. Outside our window, wings continue to beat against gravity. Feathers and hollow bones rise into the air. I am still watching.