

“The Mark of the Bird”

Charlie often wondered if Lex would’ve left her room sooner, had it not been for the freshly painted wall across the street. In their living room, a pair of french doors opened up onto their patio – and if you were to sit on the couch, you’d have a perfect view of the smeared, bird-shaped gap in the paint on the concrete wall across the street that Lex’s beloved parrot had made.

At first, he tried to reassure himself – how important could the parrot really be, if she’d never even bothered to name it? He had noticed when they first met that it was always “my bird, my bird.” He chalked it off to their lack of familiarity and on their third date, he asked Lex over a dimly lit dinner what her bird’s name was.

“My Bird.”

“My Bird?”

“My Bird.”

Charlie wasn’t sure what to say, but she continued, “it’s a wild animal anyway, so it wouldn’t have a name, right?” She looked like she wanted to back up into herself.

“That makes sense,” Charlie had thought about his cat, Gus, who was no wild animal. Though to him, a name was something you gave to something you love.

He was sure he had blown it with Lex, but there he was just a few years later, living with her and Gus and her nameless macaw. She had hesitated to move in with Charlie out of fear that his cat would pose a threat to her bird. Both refused to separate from their pets, putting their plans to move in with each other off for a few months until Charlie was able to convince Lex of

his cat's peaceful nature – something he wasn't entirely confident in. The couple pooled their money and bought a small house together in a town they discovered hardly too late was half-dead. To Charlie's relief, Gus and the bird lived together without a problem for two blissful years, until one morning when Lex put on her heaviest boots.

Charlie often left open windows and doors on beautiful mornings like this one, almost involuntarily. He felt there was a sort of pleasantly imprisoning quality to the house, though it was like a tunnel. From one end to the other, it pushed its inhabitants past the bedroom, the bathroom, through the open kitchen and living room towards the french doors, and the backyard. Streets surrounded it on both ends, and two houses neighbored it so closely that the gap between them was too narrow to fit through. They worried they'd have no privacy, but quickly realized these houses were empty. There was seemingly no one else living on their block.

Neither animal ever attempted an escape. In fact, he and Lex seldom left the house themselves. After breakfast Charlie had stood in the yawn of the french doors, taking in the thawing April air and examining the wall across the street. Someone must've painted it in the night, a rosy reddish-pink. He contemplated what for, briefly, before heading inside to shower. A cool breeze travelling backwards through the house told Lex the doors were open. She didn't usually wear shoes in the house, but she was rushing out when she tripped over the cat.

"Oh my god, Gus, I didn't see you there!" She apologized laughingly as he darted between her legs with a low howl.

She stumbled a few steps forward, slamming the thick soles of her boots down on the toe of the parrot, who had stood watching the ordeal from the floor in a silence broken by the dreadful crunch of breaking...bone? Nail? Lex couldn't tell, didn't want to think about it. She shuddered. The bird burst up towards the ceiling in a flurry of sound and feathers. Lex let out a

pleading yelp, her arm stretching out towards the bird as it shot through the doorway in a panic. Headed to the fence at the end of the property, it barreled across the yard towards the concrete wall – suddenly pink — and smacked into it with a squelch that echoed through Lex’s head, smearing the paint into a horrible, parrot-shaped memorial. It peeled off the wall and fell to the sidewalk with an empty thud, and she wished she would’ve just chosen a name, because there was nothing for her to scream as the bird’s body hit the wall.

She stood staring at the imprint it had left, a document in paint of its final movements, her eyes like wet hot suns. The concrete was gray there, the paint wiped clean off, leaving her scarlet macaw half-pink on the ground.

The heat of the day reaching into the living room turned to fever on her skin. She moved into it, and stepped through the french doors. She passed through the yard, her boots smashing the grass back into the dirt. When she reached the fence, she gripped the splintery top rail with both hands and hoisted herself up over it. No cars were coming anyway, but her eyes didn’t move from the bird as she crossed the street to the wall, crouched down, and lifted it. It was warm, still beating. She stood, the paint-stained feathers turned her fingers pink and she looked away from her hands to see the marking it had left on the wall right in front of her, brought to life by a small divot in the concrete where its eye would be. They were face to face.

Driven by the heat of terror rising in her chest, Lex turned and fled back into the house. She staggered past Gus, who was sprawled carelessly in the sun on the kitchen floor, past the bathroom where Charlie was only *just* turning off the shower, and into the bedroom. She slammed the door behind her with her foot and threw herself into bed, fingers still clenched around feathers.

Something had happened while Charlie was in the shower. When he emerged from the bathroom, the bedroom door was closed, lights off. The only sign of life was Gus, rolling in the warmth. He crossed the hallway to the bedroom door and turned the knob.

“Lex?”

The room was black. As his eyes adjusted, he could just make out a figure on her side of the bed, which the blankets had all been pulled taut in pursuit of. There was something else there too, though, a small dark mass on his side of the bed. He squinted.

“Lex,” he said, quieter this time, “what the hell happened?”

He stepped into the room and left the door ajar, so that a beam of light rolled over her body and revealed a familiar pink to Charlie, and a much more familiar red. He stood there for a moment, pondering. That couldn’t be good. Resting a hand on Lex’s shoulder, he reached over to his end of the bed and poked it, the mass, it shifted limply. He shuddered. *That’s a dead bird.* There was a *dead bird* in his bed — on *his* side of it. He was gearing up, searching for the words to describe the terror of this, the filth of it, that was the place where he rested his head each night...it had been marred by a wild animal’s carcass, which, to make matters worse, was *wet*, it had been desecrated – Lex let out a soft sound, and he jumped.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. What else could he say?

He should be concerned, he should do something – he *was* concerned. But shocked and at a loss for a solution, Charlie slipped back into the hallway and opted to go about his day like normal, only quieter. He washed the dishes, swept instead of vacuuming, took a long nap on the couch with Gus. Around dinnertime, he threw together two sandwiches and brought one to the bedroom. Without stepping past the doorway, he peered through the frame to steal a glance at Lex. She lay still on her back. He was afraid she’d see him. He didn’t know what he’d say to her,

how she'd respond to him, and he couldn't tell through the dark whether her eyes were open or closed, so he reached his arm around the wall and tenderly set the plate down on the bedside table beside a day-old glass of water.

He laid his head on the couch that night, on the end closest to the hallway so he could peer around the corner if he needed to see the bedroom door. It was still open and gawking at the living room. He draped a throw blanket over himself and wriggled into a comfortable position as Gus curled up at his feet. Charlie was dozing off to the cat's gravelly purr when he shifted a bit to the side, just barely, and saw through the french doors, under the lamplight across the street, the marking the bird had left on the wall. A pang of sadness, turned to remorse, rang through him and he turned again to lay on his back.

He slipped into a routine of prudently tending to Lex's inanimate body, to the best of his ability. For every meal he made himself, he left something waiting for Lex on the nightstand and removed the previous meal, always untouched. The glass of water sat, unchanging. Charlie stopped cooking for her and began leaving snacks instead; protein bars and bags of chips quickly became a household staple.

The bedroom door was left open to reveal a black abyss, which reached out into the hallway. The only tie between Lex and the rest of the world, Charlie didn't dare close it, despite the darkness that leaked through with the bird's stench – it was peeling away, rotting in the dip in the mattress where he usually slept. One by one, its feathers had fallen to its side. It lay naked and stinking in a frame of itself. Out of fear of facing Lex and the bird, he took to sleeping on the couch – and so each morning, the sun shone through the grand french doors and he was awoken to the dreadful mark of the bird.

It had been a week of silence when Charlie came to the sad conclusion that he was back to living alone with Gus; he felt like a caged animal. It had been almost two when he found himself haggling for a duck at a local farm shop, having grown feverish in the clammy quiet.

“We don’t really sell ‘em live,” the man behind the counter contested. He had a puzzled look on his face. He’d held up a naked pekin by its feet and dangled it in front of Charlie’s shaking head.

But he persisted and ended up driving home only ten dollars short, with a duck loose in the backseat of his Corolla. It was no scarlet macaw, he worried. But its feet made such a playful slapping sound on the wood floor, he figured Lex would find it irresistible, if not distracting. Charlie proved to be the only one who couldn’t resist the duck, though. Even Gus had no interest in the thing. It waddled helplessly through the house, a ball of sounds and smells that he couldn’t let go unloved. When a few hours passed and there was still no sign of Lex, he thought he’d try to make contact with her.

“I know it isn’t as fancy as your parrot,” he sympathized with her from the doorway, still unwilling to let more than an arm past the doorframe. He thought he might acknowledge the duck’s scent – but it couldn’t possibly penetrate the stench that was rolling like a current through the bedroom. “But it’s really cute, I think you’d like it.”

She didn’t answer.

But later, he could hear something. A light, staggered plodding sound. At first, Charlie was overjoyed, Lex had gotten out of bed! But the door had opened no wider, the room had gotten no lighter. He hadn’t seen Lex in days, only heard her steps as she moved back and forth, back and forth. It couldn’t be the duck, it didn’t dare approach the bedroom. It veered away from the dark that sprawled into the hallway each time it followed Charlie past it. He didn’t dare peek

past the doorframe to confirm it, out of a fear that Lex would still be in bed, and there'd be no reason to lend to the creaking in the floor. He sat down on the couch and watched the duck explore the kitchen, pondering his failure with one hand behind his head and the other gently scratching Gus's chin. It wasn't enough. Besides, it had quickly picked up the habit of following his every footstep, his own second shadow.

He needed to get something more exotic. What was he thinking, trying to replace a macaw with a duck? A little research revealed that illegal animals were not as hard to obtain as he had anticipated, and he set out the next day to meet a stranger in a parking lot two towns over. His post on Craigslist promised an adult giant anteater – by far the most exciting of the site's offers but with that, the riskiest, especially considering the quality of the photo.

Charlie stepped out of his car and walked across the parking lot to wait in the shade of an old gas station, leaning against a plexiglass window that had been scratched to opacity. He wondered if he should be worried that no one else was around, if he'd left the french doors open when he left, if the duck would still be there when he returned. A beat-up brown station wagon pulled into the parking lot ten minutes later than the time they'd agreed on, and he half-hoped it wasn't there for him. He wasn't sure that he wanted an anteater anymore, or even what an anteater was. Some cruel demon of replacement had occupied his most manic headspace, only to leave just in time for him to second guess its doings as a short, weaselly man wriggled out of the battered car and started towards him. He peeled off the plexiglass and stepped into the sun.

"You Charlie?" The man asked when they met. He leaned in close enough that Charlie could smell that morning's coffee on his breath. He nodded, and the man tipped his head back towards the car.

He withheld a sigh of relief when the trunk opened to reveal that there was indeed a giant anteater in the station wagon. Given the name he shouldn't have been so surprised by its size, but it was monstrous. It sniffed around, but didn't move until its owner hopped into the backseat of the car and began pushing it, his little feet scrambling against the front seat.

"I call him Jerry," the man grunted from behind the animal.

"Okay," Charlie looked at the anteater uneasily. He wasn't really sure what to say to that. He received the animal from the trunk and helped it to the ground. The man handed him a business card with a number but no name, in case he was looking to make any "similar purchases." Charlie took the card with a quick smile and stuck it in his wallet. When he arrived home with the anteater, he headed straight for the bedroom and leaned into the doorframe as he announced what he'd done.

*Is there an anteater here?* Lex was barely conscious. A foul smell was wafting through the house, and it only made her wish the door was closed. Her fingers had long dried a chipping blush color.

The anteater was a dark, looming creature, but he thought she would've liked it, for some reason. It lurked around the house on its knuckles, sweeping its tail across the floor and collecting dust. Unlike the duck, it was quiet, and off-putting. Charlie could hardly stand to watch it creep through the living room from his spot on the couch. It traipsed aimlessly past him, his distracted thumb stroking Gus's back. He hugged his knees.

It was hard to shop for, too. The man from Craigslist had gifted him a ziploc bag of "insectivore pellets" to mix with water into a paste. But they ran out days before new ones arrived, so Charlie was left with no choice but to give every egg in the fridge up to the anteater. It



looked much too delighted by the sacrifice. The eggs alone weren't enough, but ants came naturally to the mess it made of the house. Its broomish tail knocked over anything left within reach, sweeping mugs, crackers and boxes of cereal to the ground. Besides, it wasn't put off by the uncertainty in the air of the bedroom, or the stench. And when eggs and ants left it unquenched, whatever it was that might've been growing in there seemed to do the trick. Images of maggots wriggling under the sheets where Lex lay slipped uneasily through his head. The long brown snout rustling among them, right up to the bird's body, sliding tenderly off the bone, hot with decay. Its tongue must be sifting through fragrant rot in search of worms, their ancestors buzzing overhead. Its nose must feel the dip in the mattress once occupied by Charlie, and he wondered if Lex's exhales, no hotter than the rotting, bubbling bird must be, could reach it – if it could feel the difference between that and the breathy air of the room. He thought *he* sure could, if *he* were there.

The anteater had the good sense never to stay long in the bedroom – and the duck, never to enter in the first place. Charlie couldn't help but feel, sometimes, like he might hate the both of them. But the duck was so helpless, and so mundane. The anteater had no such excuse. Lex still lay unmoving, unimpressed, and untouchable. There was nothing left of her except for slight suggestions, occasional creaking in the floorboards and bouts of coughing. He was grateful only for the liveliness they brought to the house. There was finally something for him to do again, even if it was cleaning up after their messes, the duck's rocket-like excretions. Charlie mulled over this in the water-fowl section of the local pet store, his grip on a bag of duck feed tightened. He wondered if they might have insectivore pellets; he could never get enough of those. And so he flagged down the nearest employee, a fidgety teenage boy with an unfortunate, wispy mustache.

“An anteater...” The kid tapped his pointer finger against the shelf he was leaning on. “I don’t think we have anything like that, but maybe we could look around the cat food aisle or something, I don’t know...where’d you get an anteater, anyway? I’m really into exotic animals too but I didn’t think—”

Charlie didn’t hear much of the boy’s ramblings past the rejection. Something about wanting to check out his animals...the thought of another person seeing his house, even Lex, the dead bird, let alone the fact that this kid looked to be what? Seventeen? Had anyone else even *been* in his house before? Had they ever had a guest? Besides, he was focused on a small tank at eye level just ahead. The kid – Michael, according to his nametag – turned around to see what he was staring at.

“Oooh the *corn snake*!” He chimed, with a little too much enthusiasm for its price – how exciting could a twenty dollar snake be? But then he glanced around, and leaned forward a little. “I have something better than that in the back,” he whispered.

It was too intriguing for Charlie to resist. In the drabest of buildings, in the quietest of small towns, he never would’ve expected an ambiguously-aged part-time pet store clerk to be his savior. *Just the right place at the right time*, he figured. He checked out the duck food at the counter and threw in a new toy for Gus, just because, before following Michael to the “break room.” It was a small, poorly lit space that served more as a closet than a room – there was nowhere to sit, no natural light, just storage from ceiling to floor.

“Does anyone really take their break here?” He asked, glancing back to the door.

Michael was uncovering a stack of bins from beneath a towel.

“Not really,” he replied as he balled up the towel under his arm and looked the bins up and down. He hummed to himself for a moment, tapping at his chin.

Charlie was getting impatient. He opened his mouth to speak again, but the boy threw the towel back over the bins and slid behind them, into some corner made secret in the dark. He was pushing something heavy across the vinyl floor. A large plastic bin poked out from the depths; Michael was breathless, not far behind.

“This is a burmese python,” he said with a proud grin, “if you want it.”

He did. It was something about the rarity of it, and the danger of it, that scratched an itch Charlie didn’t know he had. It was monstrous. And he was entirely unsure of whether or not Lex would be happy, but if she liked it, he reasoned, she *really* would.

He returned home buzzing, lugging a python through the back doors. Like a tree limb, he bowed to the ground, and the snake slipped through the living room and disappeared into the bedroom before he had a chance to introduce it to Lex.

She lay still in the bed and watched as a python curled its massive, yellow body around one of its wooden legs. This must be some desperate reaction to her behavior, she reckoned, if this was even happening – but couldn’t fathom how Charlie could’ve come to this conclusion. She glanced to the other side of the bed, towards a slight movement – a dim, red flicker of life. The first glimmer of hope she’d felt in days, weeks, possibly months? There was no way to know how long she’d been lying there. The time of day didn’t matter in the incessant dark. In fact, the days had long lost their names, and so Lex couldn’t find the strength to care that a snake had bound her to her bed with just its presence, let alone the fact that the movement was not the resurrection of her bird. Rather, it was the largest fly she had ever laid eyes on, a dastardly thing descending upon her bird, with legs so big she could see their hairs. She turned to her back again, afraid to face the reality, which felt limp in her hands, that she couldn’t lift an arm to swat the fly

away. Even worse, she couldn't get out of bed – not for the snake, or the bird, or herself. And whether it was her brain or her body that was stopping her, she couldn't tell.

Charlie hadn't bothered buying a tank. He thought the snake was too big for one, it'd be cruel. He had always judged Lex, just a little, for keeping her bird in a cage. Though he realized he'd need to keep it well-fed to ensure the safety of the other animals. Just the idea of finding Gus lying lifeless in the knots of the snake shook Charlie, and he vowed not to let the cat suffer in the wake of the bird's death. He bent down to scratch Gus's chin as he strode past his legs, before rising up to the kitchen counter, where he was mixing up sludge for the anteater. He was finding himself struggling to keep up with its feedings, as well as the duck's frequent and violent bodily excretions – they were more than Charlie had anticipated, but he'd also assumed Lex would've taken on half the load.

That night, he gazed down at the guest pillow's and the throw blanket's fixed positions on the couch – they forecasted a semi-permanent sleeping arrangement. There was no returning to that mattress now. Each night, Charlie drifted to sleep in the breath of unfamiliar animals, Gus a small, orange exception at his feet. He lay on the narrow cushion and thought back on the rash decisions he'd made as a cool breeze wafted into the house through the doors. The curtains silently billowed from the windows. A duck was no replacement for a scarlet macaw, and an anteater was a bold animal to assume Lex could want. Even in the moment he purchased it, he wasn't entirely sure she'd appreciate him bringing home a python. Certainly not one so big, though he could've sworn he'd done it for her. But when they arrived home, and it slithered right into the bedroom and left him feeling disappointed, the eerie notion crept in that he'd bought the snake for himself. Once again, it wormed into his weary head; he shook it off.

He awoke to the concrete bird staring him down, the sun pouring uncensored through the doors – he'd fallen asleep with them open, a mistake he was grateful Lex wouldn't witness – and leapt up to shut them, unknowingly, behind a bat. It must've flown in during the night, and taken cover in the bathroom. Charlie wasn't aware of its presence until he'd gone to take a shower and there it was, all wrapped up in the upper right corner. He thought, what Lex didn't know about couldn't hurt her...or maybe she'd like the bat. There was no telling with her these days. He, for one, wasn't feeling particularly open to the bat. But it felt like a sign, that amidst his ridiculous purchases, a winged creature had flown through the french doors on its own volition. And so he decided the bat could stay.

It kept to itself, anyway – though it didn't appreciate him filling its home with steam, so Charlie switched to taking baths instead. It was a small price to pay for such a polite creature, which shone in comparison to the skulking ever-presence of the anteater, and the threatening absence of the snake. Weekly feedings didn't feel much different from the offerings he delivered to Lex. They were inky, unpredictable interactions – if he could even call them interactions. The distance between him and the python was uncertain. He could never make out how far into the dark it was. That, and it could snap at any moment.

By the end of the day, he always wished there were four walls around the couch, so he and Gus wouldn't have to worry about an attack from the snake, or even just the feeling of the anteater's eyes on them. And he *really* would've appreciated one more wall between him and the mark, still unpainted and suspended in time just across the street. He was careful to avoid eye contact with it as best he could, when filling a glass of water by the kitchen window or taking out the trash – but no amount of practice could keep him from waking up eye to eye with it.

He tried not to look anywhere lately. The corners of the house were a playful smattering of fecal matter, feathers and fur. The buildup of mail and dishes served – in some manner at least – to count the days since the death of the bird, since both he and Lex had gone blind to the putrid scent it let off as it rotted into the bed. When night closed in on the house, it felt more like home. Its filth fell into the blur of familiar corners and archways as light disappeared. Still, he cleaned what he could and when he could, though his constant falling behind was discouraging, and so was his failure to lift Lex from her comatose state. He should've just gone in there that day and cleaned up the body – was that disrespectful? And sit her up, make her move, make her eat something, but he didn't want to rush her. He looked to the broom, leaning against the kitchen table as if he'd left it mid-sweep. He still hadn't touched the vacuum. Whatever it was he should've done that day, he should've done it. A tear threatened to spill onto his cheek, and he cinched a garbage bag closed.

Luckily, as the floor grew dirtier, it dampened the sounds of little pattering feet. Charlie enjoyed the sounds of company, but not at all hours of the day. There were so many feet in the house, moving from one end to the other in no particular direction. It was enough to send him out the door if the garbage hadn't. What he really wanted was to check the dumpster around the corner for something he could fashion into a room divider – something to separate him and Gus from the other animals and more importantly, the mark. There was no second thought, no moment of hesitation before he leapt into the dumpster after the garbage bag.

Anything that could divide a room would be tall enough to stick out between the bags of trash Charlie was already sifting through, as if that wasn't what he was looking for at all. His fingers dug independently through wet cardboard, decomposing food, things no longer recognizable, as he imagined the bird looked sinking into his mattress. A desperate tear returned

to his eye as he rummaged, and rolled down his face. Then a second one formed, and a third. He couldn't stop them. They were rushing down his face as he tore through the trash. He clawed at a shiny black bag, and its contents spilled like a thick soup out of its side. Between two long, wheezing exhales he heard something, and stopped in his tracks. Something else was rustling through the trash. He watched, frozen, as a raccoon squeezed its way out into the lamplight, its little hands reaching for a wilted leftover salad.

Though his mind was feeling fuzzy and incapable, Charlie had a purely enabling thought: *that won't do*. He abandoned the task of drawing a line of separation between him and the mark for one quite the opposite of that, and headed back to the house. He slid open the french doors and bent down to scratch Gus's head on his way to the kitchen cabinet. There, he grabbed a bowl and plunged it into the bag of cat food – which was beginning to run low, he noted – before taking off again. Gus watched from the streak of moonlight he was sitting in on the living room floor as Charlie slipped back into the night with the bowl in hand.

The raccoon was on defense but with plenty of gentle coaxing, the hissing thing made its way through the french doors and they slid closed behind the last hair of its tail. Charlie was beaming. For a few fleeting moments, he had forgotten his helplessness. Instead, he felt powerful. Through the whole ordeal, not a single articulate thought had passed through his head. He had lent himself completely to the thrill of the task, was devoted to the simple duty of filling the hole in the house.

But the sun rose and he awoke to a morning no different than the last. The mark on the wall was still glaring at him from across the street. He got up quickly to set out for supplies: rats for the python, bugs for the bat...maybe toys for the raccoon. Every day, smaller animals perished in his house for the sake of bigger ones. It was something he'd grown pretty

comfortable with, though there was no way to know how Lex felt. She hadn't spoken a word, even made a sound – he couldn't prove she'd moved at all, and each passing day revealed that it wasn't something he could get used to. Her absence had a stronger pull than the nagging, impossible demands of the household. It was a pull towards something extravagant. And it meant that no one could say no to him, no matter the improvidence of his actions. Really, it was a blessing, wasn't it?

For as long as he could, he resisted the temptation to call the Craigslist man's number. But that wasn't very long. For three days, maybe four, Charlie was able to distract himself from the pull with chores around the house. There was excrement to clean, food to deliver, fights to break up, or prevent. He reasoned with it. There was no room, no time for anything else in his life. And if what was already there in his home wasn't good enough, what made him think something else would?

It was 10:30pm and Charlie couldn't seem to distract himself any longer. He dove into his left pocket and pulled out his wallet, found the card he'd received with the anteater floating between a few dollar bills, and dialed the number etched into it. The man had already picked up when he realized he didn't know his name, so he asked for the "exotic animal dealer." His voice was softer than Charlie remembered. The conversation was quick and to the point. He cut the dealer off mid-sentence when he mentioned an elephant – that was it. He pictured his house, quaint and unassuming, adorned with the largest, most unattainable thing imaginable. Something nobody else had. Not in his neighborhood, or even his state. It must've been fate; he couldn't believe his luck.

Scraping paychecks together, he and the dealer agreed on a price for the elephant. The man offered to drop the animal off at the back end of the house, under the condition that he took



a zebra as well – he seemed desperate to rid himself of these animals. Charlie didn't care for zebras, he didn't care at all though. He was buying an *elephant*.

Lex could feel her home crumbling under the weight of her silence, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. She should've known, from the moment she smelled the anteater, that none of this was for her – not that, *certainly* not the snake, and who knew what else was lurking in the daylight? Charlie hadn't even attempted to speak to her in weeks. For all he knew, she could be dead. And for all *she* knew, he didn't care. Maybe she'd have gotten up days ago if he did.

She often wondered about the duck. Was it okay out there? Was it alive? And was the duck, the meekest, most mundane thing Charlie had acquired, there for her? She couldn't be sure if even the simplest of creatures was truly bought with the intention of cheering her up. She had stupidly assumed it was meant to replace her parrot – which, by the way, was not replaceable. She didn't *want* to replace it. It was still there with her, just barely, fading into the floral pattern of the bedsheet, leaving behind a scattered pile of feathers and bones. A cracked beak. Two feet, one broken. Lex remembered how carefully she'd laid the bird down next to her. It had melted into disorder. Soon, it'd be nothing but a stain. Nobody, and nothing was what she thought it was. The grief of it bore down on her lips, so that still she lay in silence in the pitch-black company of the snake.

The rosy pink wall was eclipsed by the Craigslist dealer's trailer the next morning, and Charlie leapt up to greet the elephant and the zebra like treasured guests. He put them through the troubling formality of entering through the front door, despite what space the back ones offered. The other animals watched in dismay as the two monstrous creatures made their way inside. Gus

and the duck cowered beneath the kitchen table, where Charlie couldn't see them. He was too enamored by the beasts, anyway.

With the zebra's rampageous nature, its compulsions to kick and nip, and the elephant's infrequent but thunderous steps, which threatened the floorboards – Charlie thought he could be content. At least he couldn't hear the silence above it all. He didn't seem to mind the mess, either. Duck poop, too quickly produced, had dried, splattered to the floors and walls in spite of his greatest efforts. The living room was a symphony of animal sounds. It was littered with hair, sticky substances, broken belongings and the remnants of various violent meals. He couldn't possibly keep up. Rather, he basked in the intoxicating glory of the elephant. If only Lex would come out of the bedroom and see this. There was nothing like it.

But when Charlie woke up the next morning, the mark was glowing. Surely it was a trick of light. The trees had played "shadow puppet" with the sun. Overnight they had bent and twisted to the will of the bird, so that their leaves cradled it carefully from a distance. And so that when Charlie awoke, the pink was practically gray, the gray was practically glowing. His mind was a whirlwind. The elephant, the zebra, the raccoon, the bat, nothing, nobody managed to block his view. The sun was thrumming down on the earth. It descended on the house, glaring doggedly through every window, the glass of the french doors. He didn't dare open them. Panicked, lost, he made a call.

"What else do you have?" He croaked, averting his eyes from the concrete macaw.

He scanned the living room. It was a warzone. Completely inhospitable, though it had never been so lively. The zebra was kicking back at one of the few kitchen cabinets left intact. The raccoon ambled warily through the house, picking up pieces of things Charlie no longer

recognized. Everything had lost its face. He wondered how long it had been, whether the bird in the bedroom resembled the wall anymore. The paint had long dried, framing the shape with a deep rosy pink. It was a monkey, the closest to a person he'd get.

"Just take it," the dealer said. That felt right, anyway.

The house was a test of the natural order. No one animal had hurt another – a true testament to Charlie's ability to satisfy a snake. So he thought, despite the declination in every fiber in his being, that he could handle just one more animal. At this point, he was doing the dealer a favor. The monkey was to be discreetly delivered just like the elephant and the zebra had been. The man wasted no time in lifting the weight of the capuchin off his shoulders. He arrived within twenty-four hours, and walked it up to the sliding doors.

The monkey was an immediate regret. It took to wreaking havoc on the house; it broke anything that wasn't broken already. Charlie surrendered quickly to the shrieking creature. It ran the house, opening and closing doors and windows at its will, running the dishwasher, and herding the other animals. It screamed at him for feeding or cleaning the others, which at least served as a reminder for tasks such as these which were slipping through the cracks. He wasn't nearly as on top of things as he liked to believe and in its own way, the monkey let him know. It was so small, and so powerful, and its big brown eyes looked more ferocious than he'd expected. The house had officially entered a state of constant movement; it was chillingly noisy.

No one slept for days. The monkey howled into the night, not far from Charlie's ears. It riled up the other animals, and turned everything into a weapon – tumult became routine. Days and movements blurred together until one morning when Charlie woke up to a panicked pile of white feathers on the floor: the duck was gone. The python must've snapped – spurred by the

monkey, he assumed, ignorant to the fact that he hadn't fed the snake in weeks. All this mayhem had dulled every one of his senses – a sort of success – so numbly, he swept up the feathers into a bag. The heat of a nameless summer morning beat down on the back of his neck as he approached the wall and turned left, towards the dumpster.

The bat, tiny, fed up with the chaos of the house and feeling confined to the grossly shifting conditions of the bathroom, made a beeline for the french doors as they opened like the gates of heaven, for the first time in days. It exited with the last of the duck, as slyly as it entered. Charlie returned, already sweating from just a few moments outside, drew himself a bath and gazed up at an empty corner. He didn't bother searching the house, but drained the tub and took a shower instead.

The bat was inconsequential to miss. It was simple, spineless, easy to accommodate. Never, in all his baths, had Charlie been stretched too thin. But there was something freeing about the duck's absence. It was a mark of his failure to release Lex from the firm clutch of grief, and its passing served as just as much of a sign. Defeated, he lay down on the couch and draped a dish towel over his eyes. He managed to sleep through the bustling of the house for a few hours. When he woke up, the towel had fallen to the ground and he had straightened his legs out to stretch across Gus's end of the couch.

He wasn't sure if it was loneliness, or failure, or just the lack of sleep, but Charlie was perpetually exhausted. He could no longer tell one moment apart from another. The days were either slugging or whizzing by, and the state of the house had gotten so out of hand he desperately hoped Lex would stay bound to the bed with the soupy remains. Curtains were torn, or clung to their rods by a thread. They offered no protection from the swelling sun. The oven was useless. It had been claimed by the raccoon as a nest. Its little hands had gathered items from

around the house – a fork, a bath towel, a misplaced t-shirt, some coffee pods, the list went on – that made it feel at home. The floor was irredeemable, yet Charlie traversed it barefoot, thoughtlessly.

When the ants found their way inside, he felt a trill of relief. Some portion of his feeding duties had been taken care of by nature. Sure, there had been a few colonies here and there in the past, but these were serious. A passive worry had taken up a part of his mind, but it really only nagged him at night, when he couldn't move from the couch. There were too many moving limbs about, and too many eyes, and the floor was an excretory minefield whose reality he couldn't confront in the dark.

He kept the dish towel handy. It was a nearly useless sleeping mask – it let light in through its threads, and it always fell away from his eyes by the morning, so that every day he awoke to the same scene: an artificial jungle spanning all the way to the french doors and beyond them, the bird. But it helped Charlie get to sleep.

He welcomed the ants. He even followed their trail out the backdoors to a large anthill in the yard. Thrilled, he threw open the french doors, letting the sun into the living room, and escorted the anteater to its next meal. It followed the trail of ants mindlessly, from one anthill to another, and so on. By the end of the day, it was on the edge of town, where roads gave way to dirt paths and the forest offered an unending supply of insects. Whatever Charlie was occupied with during the time it took for the anteater to wander out of town was more worthwhile than any attempt to drag it back to the house. It only would've left again, as soon as the monkey opened the door for it.

He had spent the day deliriously washing the elephant, scrubbing it down like a dish. It was the most fantastic thing Charlie had ever seen. He even took the zebra into the yard and tied

it to a windowpane that had partly broken off, since it was disturbing the elephant with its kicking fits. And if there was anything else the elephant needed, *anything*, he would happily do it. By the end of the day, it towered magnificently over the broken furniture.

For a few days, all that mattered was the elephant's shadow, cast over the grime. All the light seemed to hit was the animal; it stood so statuesque that he didn't realize it could barely move. It pivoted like the arm of a clock. Its shadow swung about the living room in accordance with the sun, and Charlie didn't notice at first the way the breathy dark air of the bedroom had begun to shift. He didn't see it at first, the head of the python, peeking out of the dark, emerging to shoot him a hollow stare. Not until the other animals stopped what they were doing and cowered in the shadow of the elephant. He glanced around the room, half expecting to see Lex among the crowd. But she wasn't there, and he felt a sting of disappointment. He stood up as if at gunpoint as he locked eyes with the snake and swallowed, or tried to; his throat was in a knot, and he was alone. He moved towards the french doors, back to the wall and eyes on the long body that was rolling across the floor like a flat tire, weak but threatening all the same. He slid them open and watched, unbreathing, as it slipped out the door into the lawn and past the zebra. It writhed in fear as the snake slithered by. Charlie shut the door behind it with a sigh.

With its harrowing exit, the python had instilled a silent fear which plagued the house. The monkey ceased to shriek, and even the elephant was tip-toeing around on its knuckles. It was an uncharacteristic silence that was muddier and more turbulent than the unruly jungle the house had become. Charlie hadn't known he could miss it. It was setting in, the absolute volatility of the situation. Time seemed to slow. It seemed not to pass at all, until the raccoon bit the monkey and it let out a scream that could wake up a neighborhood.

It fought back in an outrage, and the two animals broke days of dead silence with a brawl that was only fair because both of them had hands. Scratching and biting ensued before Charlie's bewildered eyes. What had caused this? There was no way to know these animals. They were wild, and to his own credit, fairly new. But he could've had them for eternity – they were unknowable. He watched from the couch as if it were a form of entertainment. He could only hope they would sort this out among themselves.

The monkey grabbed onto the handle of the fridge and swung lithely onto the counter. Then it crawled across the granite to the silverware drawer, reached into it and pulled out a kitchen knife. The raccoon shuffled anxiously from one end of the kitchen to the other, its hands patting the ground in a desperate search for something. Meeting each other's gaze, he and the raccoon realized it didn't stand a chance against the monkey. There was a softness in its eyes that the monkey lacked. They were wet and pleading, as if it might cry. Charlie knew he should interfere somehow, but couldn't begin to know what to do. He was ill prepared to face a monkey with a kitchen knife – wasn't everyone? He stood up and hurried to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. He wished there were curtains on the french doors, though it was a little late for that.

He didn't return to the living room for a while. Not until the silence had returned. When he did, the raccoon was gone. Just a zebra, an elephant, and a monkey, standing upright with its arms at its sides, an innocent look on its face. It stared back at him with dark, beady eyes. It bared its teeth at him. He did the same. Then walked into the middle of the room where the knife lay on the floor. It wasn't bloody, at least. He picked it up, put it back in the drawer and sat down on the couch, his fingers absent-mindedly searching the cushions for something soft. They

wandered to the phone on the side table instead, and dialed. Charlie pressed the phone to his face and felt a low, rusty voice vibrate against his cheek.

Lex and the bird had withered into the sheets until they were a part of the pattern of twisting flowers. They curled around her so softly, she could lay still however long she wanted, for hours or days – how long it took for the smells and sounds to fade. The house was growing quiet again. The darkness of the bedroom reached out more than light reached in, so Lex didn't notice the elephant blocking her exit until he rolled over and met it eye to eye. On the other side of it, Charlie was grunting, pushing it through the doorway. His feet were sliding on the wood floor. She didn't speak. Her lips were so dry, she thought if she opened her mouth nothing would come out anyway.

With a few shoves, the elephant moved complacently into the bedroom. Charlie shut the door behind it, leaving Lex in the gentle pitch black with the animal. She had known about it before this, but not truly, without any level of denial – she'd thought it more likely that she was deranged. She had heard its trumpet on occasion, and felt it in the floor. But she never expected to meet the thing. It loomed over her and uncertain of how she felt, she turned back around to lay the way she had been, facing the dark patch on the other end of the mattress.

Animal control was there within the hour. Charlie met them in the front lawn, cradling the monkey and holding its wrists together like a criminal. He fed them a soggy lie about how the monkey had “just shown up,” “must’ve escaped from somewhere,” that his face was too tired to commit to. One of them stepped onto the front porch and peered through the window. The house was in no state for an inspection.



“Yeah, umm...it really made a mess in there,” Charlie stuttered as he handed the monkey off to the worker in front of him. She was holding a cage, and some sort of a capturing device. She certainly didn’t expect him to be holding the monkey. That probably looked suspicious. He wished he’d made a scene of it, so that when they arrived he was chasing it out of the house, screaming, a shoe in his hand. “I had to protect my cat—”

“How long was it here for?” The first one asked plainly. He stepped away from the window.

What was the right answer? “Not long,” he answered. His palms were getting sweaty. “It was already really messy in there, it’s a long story.”

The two of them lingered for a moment, and exchanged an uncertain look. Charlie stood still, his arms at his sides.

“As long as there’s nothing else in there,” the woman said cautiously as she began loading the monkey into the van.

“Nothing,” he held in a sigh of relief.

After they rolled out of the driveway, he darted back to the bedroom to free the elephant. Lex listened as the door creaked open and Charlie coaxed it back into the hall with a soft voice. She didn’t turn around, and he didn’t come in.

The house had lost its function completely. It was more like a shack with an elephant in it, and a zebra tied to the outside. The oven was full of junk, the floor was caked in dirt and excrement, and all the furniture except for the couch had been beaten beyond recognition. The bedroom was an infinite, sulking pit, entirely unenterable. The kitchen sink had become a trough of water for the elephant, and the zebra had taken to yanking so hard on its leash each night that

the walls shook – though Charlie couldn't figure out what that was. All considered, the bathroom was in pretty good shape. Like days, the nights blended together, and he learned to be lulled to sleep by the zebra's desperate pull.

Though it could shake the house, it couldn't seem to break free from the shard of warped, splintering wood on the windowpane Charlie had tied it to until one exceptionally stormy night. The rain pummeled the earth into soup and the zebra was sinking into it. It was so covered in mud that it looked like a horse. And either because the sky had drenched the wood, or it had finally tugged hard enough, the shard snapped, and the zebra was free. It crossed the yard, trudging through the pasty soil. The grass was dipping woefully down under the battering rain, a doomed return to the dirt. The anthill had turned volcanic, erupting with water and ants, twisting and helpless in a whirlpool of sludge. And through the kitchen window, somewhere in the dark there was a glint of the elephant's eye, a longing look in it. Whether or not the zebra saw it made no difference. It jumped the fence and ran through the neighborhood without looking back, over people's lawns and into town with the leash, still clinging to the wood – its final tie to the house flailing behind it. By morning, it had found its way to a stable a few miles south of the house. The owner welcomed the dirty animal in and searched it for a brand or tag or some sort. She figured it must've gotten lost in the storm. It wasn't until she bathed the mysterious horse that she realized it was actually a zebra.

The storm shook the house so hard that Charlie didn't notice its regular shuddering had ceased. But the next morning he strode outside for a breath of dewy air and saw that the zebra was gone – and a chunk of the windowpane, too. Other than that, the outside of the house remained unscathed. He thought he might be crazy but across the street, the mark was still

glaring at him. He stepped back to the doorway and scanned the house. It was empty except for the elephant. It looked small. It occurred to him that maybe it didn't like drinking dishwater.

He looked into the elephant's sunken eyes, one hand in the guilt-ridden grip of the other. It looked so defeated. Charlie broke eye contact to look to the ground in shame. Then he lifted his left foot and stepped aside, revealing the french doors, wide open. It stared back at him grayly. The animal was locked in an uncertain pause, until finally, it put one timid foot in front of the other. He moved cautiously to the other end of the room and sat down on the couch, sending it his most animated signals of encouragement. It crossed the living room, then the doors, and walked away.

Charlie didn't know where the elephant went. He didn't see it around town, or hear about it in the news. It was gone. Though he was sad to see it go, he felt a rush of relief. It was just him and Gus now.

He reached his arm out and felt around the cat's spot on the couch, but he wasn't there. *He must be hiding*, he thought. He leaned forward to look under the furniture, what was left of it. He looked around to see that the living room floor was covered with bits and pieces of things. It was a home for the most unnamable objects. Gus was not among them. Sure, he could be in the bedroom, on some off chance – but something turned in Charlie's throat. He got up to shake the bag of cat food. It was light. A few pieces of kibble bounced around the bag and made a low rattle. No footsteps followed.

He called out, "Gus?"

But that never worked.

Gus wasn't behind the shower curtain, or under the sink. The only other place he could think of was the bedroom, but only the snake and the anteater had ventured in since the bird's

death. He paused in front of the shadow crawling into the hallway and whispered his name, and prayed the cat would emerge on his own. He must've overcome some fear of what that room had become. Surely he was in there. Charlie just had to check.

In the bedroom, the smell was overwhelming. He thought about turning the light on, but he didn't know if he could stomach the black, bubbling stain on his side of the bed. It was so intense that he could see it even in the dark. At least this way it was undefined, and deniable. Still, he retched at the sight of it. He dropped to the floor and began feeling around, as quietly as he could. He squinted under the bed, looking out for reflective eyes.

"Gus!" He hissed.

With sprawled fingers, Charlie patted around every inch of the room. Every time they met the hardwood floor, his heart grew heavier, his throat tightened, until he was wheezing the cat's name. When he reached the other end, he turned around and began again. His fingers searched all the way back to the door. He couldn't take the stench anymore by the time he reached it. His throat was burning with the desire to cry. As he stood, his legs trembled under the weight of his chest. A moment or two passed while he lingered in the doorway and contemplated flicking the lights on. He did, and the room leapt into color. The green dresser, the mauve blanket, Lex stirring confusedly beneath it – her eyes were sealed shut with the crust of a hundred days – in his peripheral, what was left of the bird, a deep, dark reddish-brown. Like old blood. All for nothing. Gus wasn't there. His throat gave in.

He scrambled back to the kitchen and began peeking over cabinets, plowing through the pantry, and throwing even the things he could see past carelessly to the side. Shattered and spilled remnants of his home were reduced to evidence of a fervent meltdown. He tore through the house, unbreathing, picking at fragmented floorboards and ripping at the last of the curtains,

tears spilling over his face. If he thought the place was a wreck before, now it was nothing. He was screaming Gus's name with all the wind in his lungs, but his throat was so tight only a whistle came out. By the time he had exhausted himself, the sky had begun to yellow and the sun showed its last light through the grand french doors and onto the wreckage, as it rolled down to the horizon. There was no kitchen chair to sit on, and he had cast anything that could be turned into food to the ground. The floor was irreparably disgusting. Suddenly, it felt sticky. He put some shoes on. The house didn't shudder and if he stood still, it was completely silent – not even a footstep. Charlie knew there was no point in looking.

He sprawled out on the couch and laid the dish towel over his eyes. The sun had barely started setting when he closed them, but when he woke up it had risen again and was shining on the mark of the bird. He lifted his head from the pillow. It was soaked with drool and tears. Even in his sleep his eyes continued crying. They hadn't stopped until they were empty. He didn't want to stand, couldn't begin to think about his next step but he did stand, and walked past the bedroom where Lex was sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes, with the light still on. She couldn't see, but she heard the front door slam with Charlie on the other end of it and felt a real quiet billow up from the lingering smells.

He returned with a bucket of pink paint, and walked in one door and out the others like a breeze. He crossed the yard, and the street, and met the concrete bird inches from its face. He dipped his brush into the bucket and touched it to the mark. The hues weren't quite the same – the wall was rosy, and the pink Charlie had chosen was notably lighter – but he didn't have the energy to paint over the whole thing. He pressed the brush into the concrete so hard that pink paint bubbled up between the hairs and began to drip down the wall. Then he swirled the brush in circles, and passed it up and down, covering only the mark. Then he put the bucket and the brush

down on the sidewalk, headed back into the house, and closed the french doors behind him. He forced a smile. When he looked back across the way there was no bird. Not unless he looked really closely.