



Among  
Animals 2

The Lives of Animals and Humans  
in Contemporary Short Fiction

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# Contents

Introduction .....	1
Roo .....	7
It Won't Be Long Now .....	19
Bight, Tomcat, and the Moon .....	33
Phoenix Cross .....	43
Shooting a Mule.....	65
Lost Pets.....	71
Exotic Animal Alert: Please Post Widely .....	87
Vivarium .....	105
Julia and the Sea Bear.....	117
A Normal Rabbit.....	139
A Sterile Place.....	153
How to Identify Birds in the Wild .....	161
Strays.....	169
Captivity .....	183
The Truth of Ten Thousand Things.....	197
Contributors .....	213
Acknowledgments.....	217

# Introduction

AS I WRITE THIS INTRODUCTION, my hometown of Ashland, Oregon, is embroiled in a battle over deer.

Ashland is located on the edge of a national forest; it is not unusual for bears and mountain lions to wander through town. And over the past decade, a number of deer have decided that life among our homes is preferable to the life up in the hills. I'd say they're onto something. While the hills have suffered from drought and man-made thinning for forest fire mitigation, the lawns in town remain lush and the vegetation plenty, and the only current predators are the cars the deer must navigate among.

An increasingly vocal number of residents view the animals as a nuisance. There is talk of *culling* (a popular euphemism for *killing*). The words *vermin* and *pests* and *predators* have become common in newspaper op-eds and in city council meetings.

The black-tailed doe featured on this cover is one of our Ashland deer—and one of the reasons we settled in this town; we appreciated the fact that humans and wildlife coexisted here so peacefully. This new conflict between humans and wildlife is not unique to Ashland, however, and not unique to deer. Coyotes, mountain lions, bears, and wolves have all been labeled nuisances in towns across the country and even around the world.

These labels have played a role in determining which animals we hunt versus which animals we protect. But just as words can separate us from animals, words can also unite us.

I'm particularly proud of the words that come together within this second volume of *Among Animals*. This collection takes up where the first collection leaves off, introducing us to new species and worlds beyond our own. In this volume, you'll encounter dogs and cats, chickens and rabbits, a mythical bear, a kangaroo, a harbor seal, a mule, and even a cockroach.

As our society comes to terms with a darker future for the world's animals, it is not surprising to see many of these stories grappling with what this future might look like. In "A Sterile Place," a man near the end of his life reflects on a world that has lost a great deal of its animal life, including the frogs he'd loved as a boy.

In "Bight, Tomcat, and the Moon," the future is both dystopian and fantastic, viewed through the eyes of a young survivor on a mission to save her finned friends:

*Moon's as full as she'll get since the Big Ebb—just a fish-scale sliver—since humans went walking all over her face in their fat white boots, then probes to study her plumes. Enough's enough, so she cut her ties and drifted, taking the sea with her. My father, a fisherman, caught the last of the sea, scooped her up, fish and all, into the Seahouse. "Stick to the roads," he said, "steer clear of ghost currents." So now I'm the moon to my finny friends, the tidal pull of my tiny sea until I find the true blue.*

As with the first edition, extinction emerges a bit too close for comfort. In "The Truth of Ten Thousand Things," we witness a ceremony marking the sad death of the world's last polar bear.

As we look at animals not so much as aggregate species

but as individuals, we can see parallels with our own lives. In “Strays,” a woman’s efforts to save feral cats mirrors the struggles she faces in her own life. And in “How to Identify Birds in the Wild,” a bird researcher suffers from the migration pattern of someone she’d hoped to hold close.

In Australia, it’s the kangaroos, not the deer, who are commonly viewed as pests. And in “Roo,” Sascha Morrell writes about the messy aftermath of one such killing:

*The thing lay sideways. It was the coat of the thing that first struck me—the soft depth of its ply, and colors in the fur like the memory of bushfires. Besides the blood. The tail was splayed.*

*He wasn’t yet dead. But we were prepared for that. I was brave enough to stand there while he looked back at us. For a moment I even thought his eyes were fixed on mine, proud and soundless and affirmative. We were prepared for that. We were so fixed at first on his eyes and the red wound in his neck with its trickle of blood that it took us a moment to notice his pouch.*

*Her pouch.*

And in “Shooting a Mule,” technology and brutality merge into photographic history, reminding us of the sins of our ancestors.

Some of these stories explore animal captivity for profit and for power. In “Exotic Animal Alert: Please Post Widely,” a retired circus trainer meets his match. And in “Phoenix Cross,” the chicken industry is portrayed from the inside, from the eyes of a young man who inherits the pressures and the cruelty of running a chicken farm.

We share the animal kingdom with insects, which are all too often not seen as animals. Apart from bees, they are usually viewed as annoyances rather than vital contributors to

our ecosystem. In “Vivarium,” a woman comes face-to-face with a “monstrous, hideous” cockroach, with a surprising and hopeful outcome.

In “Lost Pets,” wayward dogs become more than rewards for the narrator; they become the reward itself:

*Every time I pass a lost-pet poster on my street or in the park, I let a wave of pity roll through my body and then I keep walking. I'm like anybody else: I glance at the poster, I frown, but I don't for a second consider looking for the animal. I know better.*

Children have a special ability to see things that adults do not (or are no longer able to see), particularly when it comes to animals. In “Julia and the Sea Bear,” a young girl sees the past and future of a bear trapped on the beach between the cliffs and the ocean. And in “A Normal Rabbit,” it is the children who see through the subtle abuse of animal competitions.

In “It Won't Be Long Now,” a harbor seal strands itself in a woman's marshy backyard, leading the woman to step outside not only the safety of her home but the safety of herself:

*She wanted to say she was sorry—about the fishing line, about the flies, about everything—but he did not want her sympathy.*

*“Suit yourself,” she said. It's what she got for trying to help. She should just leave him alone and go back to the house, but some instinct would not let her leave his side. He was stranded, just like her. She was a bit seal-shaped herself, with almost the same number of chins. They were both full-blooded mammals, distant cousins, for better or worse. Here was a species who used to live on land but had decided against it. For some reason, the seals had chosen to go back to the sea. She wondered*

*if they regretted that decision, now that the water was getting as dangerous for the seal as the land was for Rowan.*

Finally, in “Captivity,” a teenager who feels trapped tries to set free a deer from a petting zoo—but in doing so ends up only further dooming them both.

Some of these stories are challenging to read. Others will offer hope. Taken as a whole, I feel that these stories point the way forward—to a world in which humans and animals coexist far more harmoniously than they do today. Animals have given their lives for thousands of years in support of human evolution. It is time that we humans return the favor by evolving a bit as well.

It is our hope that this collection not only open eyes and hearts, but open new ways of thinking and talking about our relationships with animals.

—John Yunker

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