

An Animal Book, for Yuuki

Anna Felicia C. Sanchez

A is for animal

The root is *animus*, the meaning, *life*. What is an animal, asks the anthologist and scholar Alberto Manguel. In *Curiosity*, he looks to the Greeks, looks to Dante, looks to Neruda. He finds Cerberus on the one hand, God on the other.

The animal behaviorist Temple Grandin offers an astounding alternative: animals might be autistic savants, registering language on a different plane, registering most things on a different level of pain, and fear, and joy, so that the rest of us are unable to see the self, the other, that awaits.

To you, my daughter, for whom animals and autism have been longtime acquaintances, I offer the same answer, though it is hardly enough.

B is for bird

“If I write you a poem,” wrote Simeon Dumdum, “will you make it fly?” To him, a poem is a bird is a poem. To me, a bird is the thing with feathers. Or is that hope?

To you it is a made-in-India picture-book, cheap but glossy. You brought the book with you every day to summer ballet class, and then one day, we arrived home and realized we had left it behind in the studio. Because you would not stop crying, we bought you a new copy. When the studio reopened after the holidays, you ended up with two bird books.

When the Aviron Zoo brought its animals to the mall, we fell in line to get our pictures taken with them. My arm became the perch for a heavy macaw parrot, all gold and turquoise, with eyes like an ancient dragon's. Its talons pressed imperiously into my flesh. You were supposed to let a little budgerigar rest on your arm, but its tiny feet clawed at your skin, and at the last minute you pulled away, hands flapping, completely overwhelmed. Years later you would remember the budgerigar that you never touched, and you would hold up your arm, as if it would appear from across the years and alight there.

We bought you another book, this time about macaws and budgerigars. All the pages featured pictures of brightly colorful parrots, except one, which had the enlarged photo of an ugly chick, big-eyed, no feathers. It was your favorite page.

C is for cat

A young cat, maybe five months old, white with ginger and black patches, followed your father home one night. She adopted him, then you, then me. After she gave birth to four kittens, the following year became The Year of the Five Cats. The kittens kept at bay the thoughts of exhaustion and suicide that had been revisiting me the past couple of years. Your father and I had been having trouble dividing finances, housework, and Yuuki-duties, but the kittens made us partners again.

Then before they reached a year old, the two girls of the litter died from a virus. Your father could not console me, and I wondered why I was so broken, and why he was not as broken as I.

You watched me cry for weeks. I had to explain to you that the girls, our constant companions, were not coming back. I had to tell you they were in Heaven, a concept made concrete by your religion book with its pictures of angels and God, because how else do I explain death to you, for whom each word requires its own course of explanations?

A Turkish documentary posits that dogs think that humans are gods, but that cats know better. Cats are complex creatures, by turns cunning and dumb, aloof and affectionate, selfish and kind. I had to learn to read them. And you, my dearest, were my very first cat.

D is for dog

I loved two dogs growing up: the first was the mongrel Apo, who had gray-green eyes and an extreme breed of loyalty; the second, and last, was the Dalmatian Brando, who was the sweetest clown of a dog that ever lived. Knowing what I do now of the brevity of animal lives, I regret that my family kept them in the garage, instead of in our rooms.

You, however, are terrified of dogs. You quake with fear of them, as you still do with firecrackers and thunder. But you love cats because they like to lounge beside you and do not bark.

E is for emergency

You met Loki only once because in the eleven days that he lived under my care, you were sleeping at Granny's house. He showed up outside our gate like the most precious of gifts, playful but gentle, the easiest kitten to love, and even though you got to cuddle him only once, you would miss him, asking to see his photos every night. He was our trickster, our male doppelganger for our late Dany, down to the white belly, striped gray markings, and crooked tail.

Since the death of our girls, I had started rescuing kittens near our house as far as my meager salary allowed. The cold season—November to February—had become a detestable season of sickness for the cats. Despite checkups, medicines, and hospitalization, the three kittens I had been trying to rescue since November, and with whom you and I had fallen in love, had died over the span of a week. At the tail end of this season, Loki had been traipsing on the sidewalk outside our compound's gate, and because I didn't want to see yet another feline corpse flattened by cars, I plucked him up and brought him in. I thought I could save him.

It was about six in the morning a mere ten days later when I brought him to the emergency room of the nearest veterinary hospital. Loki had caught the same parasite or virus that had killed the three kittens. He had been mewling and thrashing in pain since dawn, but I had to wait for morning light to commute. The only vet in the emergency room was busy with a dog who had given birth but would not dislodge the placenta. For three hours I stood there waiting my turn while my kitten was dying from dehydration in my arms. Another man came in with a shoe box, an adult cat inside, also dying from dehydration. When another vet finally came in, he attended immediately to the adult cat, and I had to insist that my kitten and I arrived first.

The adult cat died shortly after, despite oxygenation and intravenous fluids. But trying to insert a dextrose tube in Loki's tiny vein prompted tachycardia, and standing a few feet away, I cried silently at each of the attempts. It took two more vets to finally place Loki on IV fluids, oxygen, and a heart monitor, buying him a few more hours, almost another day.

As I sat beside the frail creature that the machines were trying to save, I thought that perhaps I should not have sought emergency treatment only so he could die in a cold metal cage. Perhaps it would have been better for him to die in the warmth of my inept but loving arms. Could I have lived with the decision not to bring him here?

Early the next morning, the vet sent me a message of condolence. I went to pick up the body, wrapped in plastic, already stiff. The staff placed it inside a box then I took it to the local animal shelter, where I convinced the groundskeeper to let the remains rest in the same land where my girls' bodies had been incinerated a year ago. "*Mahal ko po 'to,*" I told him, swallowing.

How bitter it is to entrust the tiny shell of a beloved to a stranger.

I have marveled at how any mother can survive sitting at a child's bedside as it dies. Dengue took a friend's son, and yet my friend lived on, giving birth to a daughter after a few years. I have sat at your bedside when dengue laid its treacherous hands on you, and that is mercifully the worst that it has gotten, but even so I have felt how easy it would be, to just switch off.

I do not wish this pain for you, this fear of outliving those who hold captive your heart. We have four more cats at home, each of them living out a life shorter than ours. But I wonder if this capacity to survive fear and pain, like this capacity for love, is what our animals teach us.

F is for fox

Even before he and I separated, your father did not spend time with you unless I asked him outright. He did not have to work outside the house often, yet he did not read you a story every night, nor help you with your homework, nor hang out with you at the mall. I took this to mean that you were less important to him than his own hang-ups about his estranged father. No, he said, you were his whole world, it's just that he didn't know how to talk to you. I could not make him understand that he had to learn. As I have had to.

I think if he had only bothered to read *The Little Prince*, he might have tried to learn, too. Come at this hour every day, asked the fox of the little prince. Come at this hour every day, and you will tame me. You will teach me to expect you, to long for you. That is how friendship begins.

It is the same for motherhood. For fatherhood. For all love.

G is for goat

On the way to special school every morning, and on the way home every afternoon, the tricycle we ride passes by a hectare of undeveloped land. Grazing on the grass are families of goats, some brown, some white. Sometimes they graze close enough to the highway for us to see the rectangular pupils of their eyes. We watch the kids trail after their parents, and trot and play on the grass. We agree that they're very cute.

H is for hippopotamus

It was one of the polysyllabic words in the spelling bee, and you knew it so well that you pronounced it the way you were used to, *hiPOHpoTAHmus* instead of *hipoPOHtamus*. You had never seen a real hippopotamus before, but you encountered it enough in the *Madagascar* movies, kids' music videos, and picture-books to know how to spell it. But because you knew it, you spoke quickly, and because speaking is formulaic for you, you didn't notice that you repeated the *po* too often, so that what you spelled was technically H-I-P-P-O-P-O-P-O-T-A-M-U-S.

It's okay, though. I know you know. And also, my goodness, you and your classmates were being asked to spell college-level words—*camouflage*, *circumnavigate*. I'm sorry you were upset enough to cry when you couldn't spell *camouflage*, and that the fact that none of your classmates could spell it wasn't any comfort. I think that was my fault; I pressure you too much sometimes. But I'm happy you made it past the elimination, to this championship round, where parents were invited and I could cheer you on.

I is for insect

Introducing Ross Hutchins's book *Insects*, Joseph Wood Krutch supposed that, "God must have loved the insects he made so many of them." You went through an insect phase yourself, from ages two to eight. Everywhere you went you carried a flashcard with a photograph of something icky—first it was a fat green caterpillar, next it was twenty different beetles, among them a variety of roaches. On birthdays and Christmases, you received multiple copies of the same picture-book of creepy crawlies. Robert Magnuson's *Mister Beetle* entered our repertoire of bedtime stories.

Your fascination with insects did not survive puberty.

J is for jaguar

One of the conversation games we liked to play while we watched the first litter of kittens grow into gorgeous adolescents:

"Jaquen is like a jaguar!"

"No, like a panther!"

"Like Oreos!"

"Tywin is like a tiger!"

"Like *palabok*!"

"Dany is like a snow leopard!"

"Myrcella is like an ocelot!"

It didn't matter which lines were mine and which were yours, whether the similes of animals and food alternated or remained consistent. What mattered to

me was that we finally shared an obsession. Finally, we had something to talk about.

K is for kitten

Kittens complicate everything, spilling wordless joy everywhere.

L is for language

Philosophers have said that nothing meaningful exists outside language, that language is what defines humanity, separating man from beast. But Koko the gorilla communicated with sign language, and blackbirds speak, and some people with autism do not become verbal, do not become philosophers.

Loren Eiseley, in lamentation over the bones of sabertooths, wondered why
such perfect fury had been swept away, while man,
wide-roaming dark assassin of his kind,
had sprung up in the wake
of such perfected instruments as these.

M is for Margaery

Margaery, the young calico cat who followed your father home, is the first animal you ever held. You had not wanted to touch dogs, or birds, or insects, or the large but harmless python in the zoo. But when your father placed little Margaery on your lap, you beamed up at us like you had just gained a baby sister.

The first time she responded to the sound of my voice, I was putting you to bed, reading you a story. *The Little Island*, by Margaret Wise Brown. I had loved *The Color Kittens*, *The Runaway Rabbit*, and *Goodnight, Moon*, but you liked *The Little Island* best. Hearing it read aloud comforted you and eased you into sleep, even in the hospital when your scalp was glued full of colorful wires for an electroencephalogram test.

The Little Island is about a small lovely island that is visited by a black kitten, who discovers that the island isn't as lonely as it seems. Birds fly over it, the ocean surrounds it, fish swim around it, and underwater, the island is part of the earth.

While I read the story to you, Margaery entered the bedroom for the first time, leaped onto the bed, and curled onto my chest. She stayed there until I finished reading. She would make our bed her territory, watching you do your homework, swiping at your pencil, sleeping on my pillow through the night. When she gave birth, she built a nest for her kittens under the bed, right under our heads, so that we, too, fell asleep to the lullaby of her crooning.

You and I peered into the darkness under our pillows and waited excitedly for the day that the kittens would scamper out. I did not know then the magnitude of

what we would love and lose. You liked to trace the M on their striped foreheads, and we played the M game: M is for Margaery. M is for Myrcella. M is for monkey. M is for monster. M is for Mama.

Joseph Campbell once clarified that a mother, too, embarks on a hero's journey, but this is something that every mother already knows. This is my journey. Here is the elixir.

N is for naming

Genesis, chapter two, verses 18 and 19:

The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him." So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name.

My mother prayed the rosary every night while I was in her womb, so she named me after Mary's mother: *Anna*, for *grace*, or *blessing*. Your Japanese grandfather named your father *Ken*, but no one knows for sure what it means. Your father grew up believing it to be *sword*, but a mentor in Japan told him that it can also be the word for *wisdom*.

For Margaery and her litter, it was simpler: characters from *Game of Thrones*. You didn't watch the show, of course, but you liked the names, and approved them.

For your father's sake, I gave you a Japanese name. But it was one I had chosen before I knew if you would be a son or a daughter. I started speaking to you, calling you by name, even before you were born.

O is for octopus

Your fascination with the octopus survived your creepy-crawly phase. We spent hours on YouTube watching a mimic octopus camouflage itself in Indonesian waters. Your favorite stuffed toy was a realistic-looking octopus, ringed and blue-green, just a little bigger than an adult hand; in the EEG room, you buried your face in its tentacles as you fell asleep. No seizures, said the test. Nothing to fear this time. When I think of your EEG, I don't see the beautiful colored wires that the nurse glued onto your scalp. I see the blue-green octopus that we've never named.

Once, alone in a hotel room, I stumbled upon a documentary on the octopus, and discovered that, like you, they are highly visual thinkers. An octopus in one aquarium solves a puzzle, and a second octopus in a second aquarium can do the same puzzle

faster, after watching the first. Highly intelligent, the octopus could have evolved enough to take over the Earth. The documentary suggests that the reason it hasn't is that its mother dies soon after giving birth, and so the new generation never learns from the old.

P is for pheasant?

We were puzzled when we first saw them from the balcony of your latest therapy center. Foraging in the muddy yard below, a pair of gray waddling birds, their heads white like skeletal masks, blood-red wattles under their beaks. They looked like turkeys but smaller and short-tailed.

"Maybe they're pheasants?" I said.

You looked up at me from under your white floral summer hat. "Pheasants!" you repeated, with that big-toothed grin that marks every new name or word as accepted.

Each time we arrived for your therapy, we looked down past the corrugated rooftop and saw them, and you always exclaimed, "Pheasants!" You even took a picture of them with my phone, when they soared up from the yard onto the corrugated roof of their owner's house.

One day while your therapy was in session, I hopped down the stairs, walked around to the neighboring *panaderia*, and while paying for a couple of fried donuts, caught a glimpse of the mysterious white-faced birds. I asked the baker what they were called.

"*Pingala*," she said. "*Galing sa Ilocos*."

When your session was done, I pointed down at the birds and told you they were pingala.

"No, pheasants," you said.

"No, no, Mama was wrong," I said. "I asked the owners. They're called pingala."

"Pingala," you repeated, giving me that grin.

But then one morning your therapist caught us watching them, and he declared, "Those are guinea fowl."

"Guinea fowl!" you echoed without hesitation.

I wondered if, because of all the picture-books and videos you've seen, you had already known from the start that they were guinea fowl, and you just didn't say.

Q is for quetzal

A friend gave me an adult coloring book of birds for Christmas. I do not know what to do with it, because the illustrations are complex, and I have never been good with choosing colors. In all the art classes I have ever attended I have been praised for the fineness of my sketches, but criticized for the darkness of my color palettes.

Your colors, on the other hand, are bold and bright. Fearless. I don't know how you do it.

There are quetzals in the coloring book, along with peacocks, eagles, thunderbirds, phoenixes. Only you can make their feathers come alive.

R is for rescue

Last year, barely a month after the girls passed away at the vet's confinement area, I found myself standing in front of my first rescue's cage. It was my first ever attempt at a serious rescue, this ginger kitten that had been in and out of illness since he was born outside our house, the sole survivor of the aged compound cat's latest litter. He had a protozoan infection, the same infection that would take many more future kittens in the compound. His frequent colds made his vestigial eyelids show, so that the thin fox-like face resembled a bat's, prompting your father to name him Nosferatu, aka Nosi.

He would survive his infection after nine days, and though his spine and hind legs grew stiff from the long confinement so that he lost the shadow-grace of his species, he would thrive, become handsome, and contest Margaery's territory on the bed. You would insist that he sleep at your feet, calling "Nosi! Nosi!" and he would claw his way up onto the spread, forgetting it was bedtime, and start playing with your leg. You would squeal and protest, but would rather curl your legs up away from him than push him off.

But I will never forget when he was in that cage, fighting for his life. Every day of those nine days, I visited for an hour once the clinic opened, then returned after work, keeping vigil until the clinic closed. I brought you there only once because the meowing and the barking in the confinement area frightened you. One particular evening, when the miracle that would be his recovery was far from the horizon, I stood alone in front of his cage, stroking his head and cheeks as he limped around and got his IV tube all tangled. Beside him, yellow with diarrhea, was a cloth diaper that used to be yours, that I had given him as a blanket. I rubbed his fur and listened to his faint purr for almost half an hour, doing what I had failed to do for our girls.

I was surrounded by sick cats and dogs, most with IV tubes. I wondered why some pets did not have nameplates, if this were a prognosis that medicines were no longer needed, for one reason or the other. Behind me the saddest looking dog in the world pushed open his cage, and he sat there, the IV tube tethering him. I wanted to hug him. I rubbed little Nosi's cheeks some more, hoping my touch would last him until my return the next day. I wanted to tell them all, all of God's little people, You are here because you are loved.

S is for spider

I try not to kill spiders because they cull the fly and mosquito populations, but also because of the Buddhist story of the man who encountered a spider and chose not to kill it. When, at his death, the man found himself at the jaws of hell, the heavens opened and down came the gossamer thread of a spider, a lifeline. It was the man's reward for his mercy, for his understanding of the sacred web that connected all life.

T is for translation

In *Animals in Translation*, Temple Grandin dissects animal behavior by dissecting her own autism: visual thought as her "native language," her high fear, her processing difficulties. She claims she has no unconscious, by which she means she has no filter and cannot hide or deny the things that upset her, like violence and cruelty. Until she began taking antidepressants at the age of thirty-three, she struggled with anxiety: "I felt exactly the way you feel when you're about to defend your dissertation, only I felt that way all day long, every single day." And it began when she was eleven. What typical humans have that animals don't, and that people with autism will not always have, is language. Fear is necessary for survival, but language, for better or for worse, is a means to combat it.

Your meltdowns lessened when you learned to read at the age of eight, that year your father went away to Japan. You are slightly older now than when Temple's adolescent anxiety began—does this mean the worst is yet to come?

In the book, Temple recalls the first time she saw a pig brain and a human brain side by side and could not tell the difference, save for the neocortex, the part that processes details into the bigger picture. She narrates how she lies down on a field with grazing cattle, how the cattle approach her, sniffing and licking, how sometimes she kisses them on the nose. She jokes about being "spayed"—her word—and how the post-surgery pain felt less when she deliberately crouched on all fours like a dog, but not so that she could jump onto a sofa so soon. She compares herself and autistic people to animals without missing a beat, because she sees no true inferiority, just difference, and a sense of responsibility. The book is filled with strange humor and love. Reading her words, listening to her TED Talk, I feel like I'm getting to know her.

I had hoped you'd get to know me the same way, and I you.

U is for unicorn

I bought you a huge stuffed unicorn when you were younger, the kind I couldn't even hope to get when I was your age, but you showed so little interest in it that even I have forgotten where I kept it. You are too young to understand unicorn lore, about

virginity and medieval values, but maybe not too young to watch *The Last Unicorn*, even though it's not quite the musical you'd like singing along to.

V is for vegetarian

You know *Babe* only for the farm animals and the three singing mice, but it was the first film that made me want to try becoming vegetarian. I always gave up. Then when I started teaching I met a coteacher who was truly committed to it. He became one of my best friends, before he left the university.

His family had set up a kind of animal shelter in their home, where he and his sisters cared for dozens of cats, dogs, and at one point, a wild deer. Once, he mentioned that in a car ride along EDSA, he spotted a tiny kitten on the highway. He actually jumped out the car and sprinted across the road to grab the kitten and take it home.

He died a few years ago, before my obsession with cats began. His passing broke my heart, and I could not fix it in time to attend the wake. But whatever strength I require to rescue a cat by myself exists only because I can imagine him on EDSA at night, running to save a kitten.

W is for wolf

The wolf is wild, but it is a pack animal, like humans.

Your father takes pride in being a lone wolf, thriving as a wanderer though haunted by the loss of his family. Dreaming of the land of his father's birth, he has fancied himself a *ronin*, masterless samurai, without ties to any clan.

But the Japanese tale that I have always loved is that of the thieving white fox, the one that was saved by a samurai lord, that then disguised itself as a boy in order to serve his lord as a swift-footed messenger during wartime. It gave its life protecting a final message crucial for its master's victory.

A dream is the wellspring of life, but I do not know if it trumps sacrifice. It can, in fact, be the perfect sacrifice.

X is for x-ray fish

At the pet store, you insisted it was called x-ray fish, even though the strip of tape on the aquarium said it was glassfish. We could see their miniscule bones through their almost transparent flesh and scales.

You like aquariums. We had one a few years ago, before we had cats. Your teacher had given you and your classmates fish as gifts. Yours was a small greenish gourami, so we called it Garry Greenfish. To prolong its life, we bought a small aquarium

that your father outfitted with a filter and air tank. Then we bought more fish, like hammerhead fish, and koi—too many, it turned out, because most of them died one by one in the next few weeks, until only Garry Greenfish and a couple of the Japanese carp were left.

By the time your father left on a yearlong fellowship for Japan, even Garry Greenfish had died, and only a single orange koi was left. The night I got news that a beloved aunt had succumbed to cancer was the same night that the final koi died. I saw it arc its spine, as if in agony, or ecstasy. I remembered a legend about the Japanese carp: if it lived long enough, it could become a dragon.

I watched the little body float in the water, waited for the dragon to rise like smoke from its shell.

Y is for yuuki

Yuuki is the Japanese word for *courage*.

Z is for zoo

There is a four-photo picture frame I keep on the vanity table. All photos of you: in one, you are blowing bubbles in the playground of my old grade school; in another you're in a celebrity pose with my brother in a restaurant; in the third, your first time on the beach; and in the fourth, you're with your father in the Tagaytay Zoo, in front of the ostrich pen.

It was our anniversary, and you were seven and a half years old. We spent hours at the zoo, gazing in awe at the reptiles and tarantulas, at the birds and monkeys, the alpaca and boars and lions and tigers. In the photograph, your father is carrying you. If he had faced the camera, the photo would show his bushy eyebrows, his Japanese eyes, his face so much like yours. But his back is turned. He is facing the ostrich pen, trying to get you to look at the ostrich. In picture-books and cartoons the ostrich amuses you no end, but the real thing is intolerable, and so, your delicate face tense with fear, you turn toward the camera instead. Your hand covers an ear, your other hand reaches around your father's neck, clutching his shirt.

I snap pictures because I want to remember.

We don't go to zoos anymore. The cages unsettle me. But you are older now, grown too heavy to lift, though you no longer need carrying when you're afraid. You like sundresses and summer hats, you like kittens and their momma cats, and you smile at me like I am enough.

That's how it is. If we have truly grown, then maybe what is real will no longer be impossible to bear.