



MODERN ANIMAL

NINETEEN TALES

A FOREWORD BY
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1

A farmer freely rented out a prize bull. The farmer proudly stood on top of Summit Hill and pointed at the herds of cattle grazing in the fields several miles in every direction. He said that his prize bull was responsible. The bull was placid and quiet enough, chewing on fresh alfalfa in its stall, entirely unconcerned as to the vastness of its progeny. Could a bull connect its copulation with a thousand calves? The bull's white hide was speckled with black marks that vaguely represented a map of Europe. Was this to be associated with the bull's fecundity? The farmer's pride

at his bull's prowess encouraged him to take a pot of black paint and add in parts of North Africa, aligning the bull's organ of reproduction with the river Nile.

2

A man needed to exorcise the guilty memories he had of certain European cities. He deliberately returned to Dresden, London, Paris, Strasbourg, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen to try to put things right. The bad memories were associated with love affairs, either unconsummated, improperly consummated, or consummated in ways he found irksome and unsatisfactory. He called them love affairs but even a casual observer striving to be dispassionate would describe them as affairs of the body and not of the heart. The man could hardly reconstitute those unsatisfactory relationships; going back over the same ground would probably not resolve anything, probably end in repeating the same mistakes and probably cause even greater harm, pain and anxiety for all concerned. It might be just enough, he thought, at least to simply visit those cities to salve

some of his guilty memories with their associated criminal characteristics. He just must promise himself adamantly to avoid visiting their zoos.

3

A theologian who was also an amateur entomologist believed man to be a caterpillar. His ten thousand converts entombed themselves in papier-mâché and brown tape to await metamorphosis.

4

Fish do not have souls; that's why you are encouraged to eat them on Fridays. Not having a soul implies you cannot feel emotions. Because it comes before a weekend, Fridays are emotion-free. One of the etymological origins for the word Friday is connected to the Scandinavian equivalent for the goddess Venus, Fria or Freyja or Frigg, the goddess of love and lust who is worshipped on a Friday due to the apparent prevalence of the planet Venus on that day. You eat fish on Fridays as a

safety valve against lubriciousness. You can believe all this if you like.

5

In the Great Railway Age, congregations of starlings gathered above the locomotive sheds of Crewe in Cheshire making shapes in the sky that resembled puffs of smoke. Starlings are the most extraordinary of birds with great ability to mimic, not just as individuals but as communities. It is due to the fact they have developed such a sense of communality for so long—maybe for over hundreds of thousands of years—that their ability to understand one another is very considerable. For example thousands of them, flying very fast, all at the same time making concerted and rapid twists and turns, never seem to crash. It is said that flying over the sea in late November they can mimic a shoal of herring under the water that can include the shape of a hungry predatory shark.

6

A woman hated window shopping. Anything behind glass drew forth her wrath. Even goldfish.

7

A woman on horseback had a fantasy of all the men in her life riding silently towards her down a broad road. Their faces were fixed in rigid smiles. They passed so close she could feel the warmth of their horses' breath. With trembling fingers she wrote down their names. When they had all gone and the sound of their hooves had passed away in the foggy air, she counted their names; there were fifty-five of them. Every one of them had once upon a time left semen in her vagina, but she was never to become pregnant.

8

During the Depression, there was a zoo in Linz where the animals were fed on one another to effect economies. The tally of visitable beasts gradually grew so small, that to continue to attract visitors, the an-

imals sacrificed to the meat supply situation were carefully skinned in order to make stuffed replicas. These replicas were placed in the cages in attitudes of health and happiness, and for a time convinced the public, who knew from previous experience that animals in zoos, reduced to catatonic boredom, often stood absolutely still for many hours at a time.

9

Christian went back to Rome to see if indeed tadpoles still swam in the garden tank on the Palatine Hill like they had when he was in love with Allison Armstrong's white face and her sturdy legs and the complicated folds of her vulva, fifty years before.

10

A fashionable food dietician devised a system that made pork-butchers rich. But also fat. Fatness could lead to an early death. The pork-butchers had to decide whether to be rich and fat for a short time,

or not so rich and slim for a longer time. The food dietician had to decide whether his system was profitable to him in terms of fatness or longevity. He enjoyed pork. Fat, dead pork-butchers were not in his interest. He revoked and recalled his dietary advice and its franchise. Some rich fat pork-butchers objected and sued him and won. The not so rich and longer-lived pork-butchers paid his legal expenses and went on paying them for some time since they lived long. Then the fashion in dieting systems changed, as it normally does every seven years, and everyone's attention centred on fish. In the end only the lawyers ended up rich and long-lived. The cows and the fish had no say in these matters whatsoever.

11

A man and his dog were regarded as a National Treasure. He had perfected a lion-tamer's act in a circus where he finished with that famous act of putting his head in the lion's mouth, only his lion was his terrier dog. His countrymen regarded this as a perfect analogy for desirable na-

tional behaviour. Think big in courageous if foolhardy acts, but act the same in miniature so as to attract humour and not rise too far above yourself in your own estimation.

12

Clarence Mach misinformed the police of his whereabouts on the Saturday night his dog was run over by an ambulance, a trivial fact in the large order of things, though tragic for his bitch Trixie, and significant for his wife Claire who was accompanying the animal, because the driver of the ambulance had the same unusual name as Clarence, and was wearing a brown trilby with a silver lining just like he habitually wore.

13

When you feel confident enough to jump into the sea for the first time it is said that a certain hormone activates a primitive swim bladder in your lungs in remembrance of the times when you were a fish.

14

This is a story about the loving daughter who pined for her father who was killed falling from a horse at a steeplechase. In order to join her father in paradise, she tried to repeat his accident by falling from a donkey at a beach resort.

15

Three decades ago, to curb vast flocks of sparrows from eating one tenth of China's food production every year, the authorities organised Sparrow-Week.

Both night and day for six days, China's vast population of nearly a billion people rang bells, banged saucepan lids, and shouted oaths and curses. The exhausted sparrows, too frightened to settle, eventually fell dead from out of the sky. Flight exhaustion from the same cause also killed gulls on the coast, herons in the marsh, eagles in the mountains and pigeons on the town squares.

At nightfall on the sixth day, the people of China rested, and Sparrow-Week ended. The following year, six tenths of China's food supply was eaten by insects and the authorities were forced to change the money standard from gold to eggs.

16

Amongst other material a naturalist took a photograph of a dead dog on a beach. The corpse was a week old and covered in flies. The photographer returned home, took the film from his camera and sent it to a reputable laboratory. The film was developed and printed and returned by post to the sender.

The naturalist opened the small parcel in his study and examined the prints. Comparing the prints with the negatives he had cause to hold one of the negatives in his teeth. It was the negative of the dead dog on the beach. That evening the naturalist died of an infection. His body was found by the police a week later and photographed.

Do different species of bird ever take notice of one another? Do a set of birds of one species ever think that another set of bird species is stupid or ignorant or potential bullies or likely catamites? When migrating geese and tern and green plovers and avocet all settle together for the night in a ploughed field in Spring, what do they think of one another? When on a wide African plain, wildebeest and giraffe, antelope and bison mingle with apparent equanimity, do they recognise their species differentiation? If they have learnt through long years of evolutionary observation that all on the plain are vegetarian, and that no species is about to threaten, chase, capture, and kill another, how do they negotiate relationships? Is it possible to know these things?

What are all those birds doing flying this way and that? Where are they going? Do they know where they are going? Sure-

ly, energy always being limited and finite, they are not going to fly about aimlessly? They so often look so purposeful in their flying that they must know not only where they are going, but the quickest way there, at what altitude, and, who knows, probably the time of their arrival. You would think searching for food was paramount in a bird's life—and of course it is. But once this prime activity is satisfied, how do you account for this determined flight to the left, that determined flight over the barn, this straight as an arrow flight over the laburnum trees and on to the oak tree and out across the fields? That formation flight in that direction that just seems to be into the mist? This up so swiftly into the air flight to fly determinedly towards a horizon that could scarcely be seen?

Once we have settled this dilemma with birds then we should consider the flight of butterflies. How can you account for that apparently aimless fluttering that seems so hit and miss and uncontrollable and approximate?

A man liked birds because they can both sing and fly and they are the last of the dinosaurs. He certainly wished he could fly and certainly wished he could sing, and to be the last of anything is always a privilege.

—PG

August 22, 2021

Amsterdam