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Animal Love

Arlene Plevin

Olympic College, USA
plevinarlene@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2785-698X

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by Arlene Plevin



About the Author

Arlene Plevin is an Emerita Professor of English at Olympic College, now focusing on creative writing, activism, sustainability, and modern slavery. A Fulbright Lecturer in Taiwan and a Fulbright-Nehru Lecturer in India, she has bicycled throughout the world and published poetry, creative non-fiction, fiction, and academic essays in national and international publications. Her recent work includes: “Where I Live” on Seattle’s Poetry on the Buses Program and “Lay Down Your 'Body Burdens' and Write: (Re)forming Environmental Science Through Narratives of Toxicity and Healing” in *Embodied Activisms: Performative Expressions of Political and Social Action* (2022, Lexington Books).

Animal Love

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I am driving 30 miles in a COVID-19 world to pick up liquid prednisone flavored with fresh chicken. The compounding pharmacy is not far, but it is distant enough, my errand inescapable. I will go for a brief walk with a friend nearby, the creamy chicken concoction tucked into a freezer pack, the measuring syringes listing in the damp paper bag. The traffic on I-90 is not bad, but I begin crying, the arch of the bridge pink-white in unexpected winter sun.

I am supposed to know when to let go, when it is best.

Everything is a measure. Is Gaia's breathing too labored? Take away points. Is she purring, the loudness like a cartoon bubble somehow five times the size of her weight? Add a point. Is she mobile, able to eat and drink? Add many points. Doesn't she enjoy Gus licking her, her head bowing in pleasure? How many points for love? But her eyes . . . Do her eyes really say: *keep me in life*? Do I correctly interpret she is also saying *I am not comfortable*. If one more person says it's a kindness not to suffer, I will punch him or her. It will not be a direct hit on the chin, more of a sad toss to the left, glancing off a shoulder.

How did kindness turn into me being able to end a life?

It's been days since I've gone more than a mile or two, back and forth to the local vet, weeping without sound. The cancer has come on like wildfire, an expression used more than fifty years ago about my own father's cancer. It seems cruel that I cannot put my hands around her rib cage, the grey fur not even adding any padding, and pluck the cancer out with my will power. I wonder if this is what it's like to lose a child, and then I think: does this diminish a parent's pain to compare this loss to an animal? I certainly don't mean that. I don't think pet; pet is what you do, a stroke that begins at the crown of a rapidly thinning head, and goes feather light to the end.

I want this touch to say, I love you. Tell me when. *Tell me when.*

But that's a bit of a myth we all hope for, I've found. Many wish their animals will die during sleep, no pain and no decision-making on our parts. It's a sweet hope. It's easier than beating our hearts up as we try and determine the right time. But cats will hide their discomfort—for them and us. But when has got a system to it, like the “Quality of Life Scale” my vet gave me.¹ The criterion includes “Hurt,” “Hunger,” “Hydration,” “Hygiene,” “Happiness,” “Mobility,” and “More Good Days Than Bad,” in that order. Each part has points; over 35 for all and your animal has “quality of life.” What to do with the “Happiness” part? “Does the pet express joy and interest? Is he responsive to things around him (family, toys, etc.)? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid?” Or is that me?

Who is to say that the three of us, Gaia, her brother Gus and I sitting on the back deck in unseasonal winter warmth and dryness, haven't had one of the nicest afternoons of our lives, the fleecy blankets wrinkled and fur-covered? Who is to say that will wash the sorrow of the next hours, her breathing more visible as fluid collects around her lungs, her heart? I do not know how to end a life; I do not know how to end love either.

An old boyfriend, more an affair, sends his attempts at humor: in the sandwich middle of his sentences, his recognition of his own fatherlessness and its effect, and then a slightly snide comment as if the emotional reveal was too much. And friends who have struggled with what I am now dealing with send textual love. I can hear their gratitude that they are not in my shoes rise above the vowels.

I wonder if this is just privilege speaking, this ability to choose and comfort, but then drop it. For pain is pain, in whatever body holds it.

A friend reminds me that “compassion doesn't always look like compassion.” Perched on my deck, surrounded by fleece and two Russian blue cats, I think of portals and bridges and places it is not my time to go yet. Gus and Gaia snuggle into each other like crescent moons. The early and possibly false spring brings fat breasted (and perhaps confused) robins onto the nearby quince. Gaia perks up, but does not move. A sentence attributed to Rabbi Nachman holds up this: “The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is to have no fear at all” (Hebrew: כל העולם כולו גשר צר מוד והעיקר לא לפחד כלל).

We sit and the sun warms our bodies.

Notes

¹ The “Quality of Life Scale” is adapted from Alice Villalobos' and Laurie Kaplan's *Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology: Honoring the Human-Animal Bond* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2007).