

All the Animals: Short Fiction about Multispecies Families

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Abstract: The five-part short story ‘All the Animals’ imagines an array of animals who feature in the life of a fictional human family over many years. The story is inspired by qualitative research into human-animal relationships in families with children in Lisbon, Portugal. ‘All the Animals’ aims to offer a fictional ‘thick description’ of multispecies families in a particular time and place, but also to provide a reflection on the role of storytelling in human-animal entanglements.

Keywords: fiction, storytelling, companion animals, pets, children, families, Portugal

Introduction

The short fiction presented here is inspired by sociological research on human-animal relations in Portugal. Between 2018 and 2022, the CLAN project team, based at the University of Lisbon, conducted qualitative research into children's relationships with companion animals in the context of family life.¹ Using in-depth interviews, observations, and photographs taken by children themselves, the researchers aimed to explore everyday domestic and affective practices in such multispecies families, and to ask how these relationships might contribute to – or challenge – the construction of the species barrier (see also Policarpo et al.). As the project drew to a close, lead researcher Verónica Policarpo initiated a collaboration with several artists and commissioned a range of creative responses that engaged with the project's findings. These creative responses were intended to produce work which would complement traditional academic outputs and perhaps engage new and non-academic audiences.

As a writer with a background in human-animal studies, I was asked to contribute a piece of fiction – the short story 'All the Animals' is the result.

Inspired by the key themes which emerged from the project's data, as well as a close analysis of the children's photographs and in-depth discussions with the research team, I developed 'All the Animals' to tell a story about a range of animals who play a role in the life of a fictional Portuguese family. The five parts of the story imagine the perspectives of different human family members, exploring how human and animal biographies might intersect and entwine, and how these relationships can encompass moments of deep affection and understanding, as well as bafflement and ambivalence. Through the story, I hoped to convey the embodied, intimate, and sometimes life-and-death consequences of species entanglements, where seemingly-small human decisions can have profound impacts on the course of animals' lives and their wellbeing – part of what I think is suggested by Donna Haraway's evocative description of 'the fleshy detail of a mortal relationship' (3) between humans and companion species. The story also seeks to capture what might be distinctive about interspecies relationships in this particular time and place – for instance, the ways these relationships are shaped by local cultural understandings about animals and humans' responsibilities to them, and by environmental factors such as Lisbon's built environment (where, for example, many families

live in apartments) and its Mediterranean climate (where certain species are able to thrive; see also Policarpo et al.). And, of course, all of these issues play out in the context of multiple, overlapping relationships between parents, children, siblings, other family members and friends, and companion animals themselves.

In one sense, then, the story aims to offer, in fictional form, the kind of ‘thick description’ (Geertz) that social researchers often seek – an intricate account of the situated interactions, engagements and rich layers of meaning that make up social life.

However, fiction about human-animal relationships also opens up many possibilities and questions about how such stories can, or should, attempt to imagine non-human perspectives. Indeed, innovative creative writing about human-animal encounters often seeks to ‘evoke the creaturely point of view’ (Johnson 93), or aims to use ‘language to go beyond language (...) and reconnect directly with the more-than-human world’ (Stibbe 162). Such writing may be deeply affecting and can become a powerful force for change.

Although it would have been possible to create a piece of short fiction informed by such thinking, in this instance I chose to take a different approach. This decision was, in large part, informed by themes which emerged from the project’s data. As I grew familiar with the research, I became fascinated by the way that human narratives and stories were, in themselves, pervasive and significant – for instance, in many families, animals featured centrally in a ‘family imaginary’, where a particular pet, or type of animal, became intimately associated with the family’s own narrative about itself (see also Policarpo). I wanted to examine how such stories told by humans about animals can *matter*; as Arran Stibbe observes, human ‘ways of speaking about the world (...) encode a particular model of reality’ and frequently result in ‘destructive discourses’ (3) that have real and profound consequences for animals (for instance through rendering normal and unremarkable the consumption of animals as meat). The stories and imaginaries explored in ‘All the Animals’ are not necessarily ‘destructive discourses’, but they *are* narratives in which animals are unwittingly enmeshed, and which shape and impact those animals’ lives.

Although ‘All the Animals’ is told from an avowedly human perspective, this is not to say that it is straightforwardly anthropocentric, or that it is unconcerned with animal points of view. While the authorial voice is not intended to ‘evoke the creaturely point of view’, the human characters do themselves attend to this question as they wonder about and reflect upon animal subjectivity, glimpse the world through non-human eyes, or come up against the limitations of their human understanding. Additionally, the five sections are structured around distinct animal characters, acknowledging (albeit indirectly) that these individual animals are ‘subjects-of-a-life’, as Tom Regan puts it (243). And while we learn of their biographies, bodies, subjectivities, desires, experiences, lives and deaths only via the various human characters, I think it is also possible to glimpse something of the reality of animal lives through the cumulative layers of human narrative about those animals – perhaps through what is said, as well as what remains unsaid or implied.²

Similarly by grounding the story in the characters of particular, named animals, I hoped to attend to the ways in which humans often recognise animal personhood in these intimate relationships: many of the animals in the story are, in Carol Adams’s words, ‘persons’ in the sense that they are individuals who are ‘given a name, touched and caressed, [with] a life that interacts and informs another’s’ (61). Although, at the same time, the story also acknowledges that such animal personhood can be fleeting and fragile, and that even tenderly-bestowed names are sometimes forgotten.

The story’s temporal structure (a narrative which spans multiple human generations and looks both to the past and the future of the family members’ collective lives) was influenced in part by the significance of ‘family imaginaries’ discussed above. It allows the story to explore how these imaginaries unfold and play out over many years, and to speculate about how children’s engagements with animals might echo in their adult lives. However, this structure also offers a way to tell a potentially less anthropocentric story. Taking a narrative vantage point outside of the present, experiential moment – from where the reader can reflect on the broader passage of time – highlights how orienting to *time itself* is one way to decentre the human. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that both humans and animals are equally subject to time’s passing; that both possess impermanent bodies which occupy only a brief and particular moment

on earth. (Here, again, Haraway's characterisation of these engagements as 'mortal relationships' seems apt.) The story's title underscores this idea: although on one level, the story is an account of 'all the animals' the human family has ever known, it also brings into focus how, ultimately, *all* of the story's characters are (mortal) animals.

This story, then, is not intended to present a definitive or comprehensive account of these particular multispecies families. Instead, I hope it might offer a means of thinking about some of the ways humans encounter, know, and tell about the other animals in our lives, and a way to explore what such 'telling' looks like and what it might mean, for both humans and animals.

All the Animals

I

Bernardo

If you were to tell the story of all the animals in their family, it would have to begin with Bernardo.

Ana would tell you how she fell in love with him at the age of 14, when he wandered into her yard, through the open door into their house and settled down to sleep in her father's favourite chair – as if, of all the places in the world, he'd simply decided that their house was where he was going to spend the rest of his life. She would tell you about the time Bernardo devoured an entire chicken that her mother had roasted for Christmas and set out on the table. And how, unaware of his size, he would clamber, clumsily, onto your lap and stand there licking your ears.

Miguel would tell you about the first time he had dinner with Ana's parents. Only 18, nervous and eager to impress, carefully carrying a *pão de ló* his mother had made for the occasion. And how Bernardo leapt up, excited to greet him, knocked the cake onto the ground and promptly started to eat it (and, most surprising to Miguel, that this wasn't a disaster, but

that the chaos and hilarity just seemed to confirm to everyone that Miguel should become a part of the family). And how he'd always thought he didn't really like dogs until he met Bernardo, so that when, years later, Bernardo died, Miguel felt as bereft as if he'd lost a lifelong friend.

Luís, who was only three when Bernardo died, would tell you the story that his family still recounts, about the first time he met Bernardo – when Luís was only a few weeks old, visiting his grandparents for the first time. Ana had handed baby Luís to Grandpa to hold and Luís had begun to howl (Luís knows too, from his parents' stories, that he hated being held by anyone except his mum until he was two years old), but Bernardo, thinking Luís was in danger, started to bark and growl and leap up at Grandpa, until Ana came and plucked the screaming Luís from Grandpa's arms. As an older child, he's embarrassed to think he was once so silly about his beloved Grandpa, but he loves to hear that story again and again anyway. Loves to think about how Bernardo was ready to protect him from the first moment they met. Loves how strange and warm and sweet it is to think of someone looking out for you like that, before they even knew anything about you.

Clara would tell you all of these things – how Bernardo tried to protect Luís from Grandpa, how he destroyed her dad's cake and ate her grandma's chicken, how he stood on people's laps – even though she never met Bernardo. She would tell you that she feels like she knew him, though. She couldn't say why – perhaps it's because she's seen so many photos of him and because she knows exactly what he looked like as a fuzzy puppy with gangly legs and big feet, scooped up in her mum's arms. She's seen the photos of her mum as a teenager, sprawled asleep with Bernardo on a picnic blanket, Ana's head resting on his hairy, brown side. And she's seen the photos of Bernardo when he was old, grey around the muzzle by then, sitting patiently while Luís climbed on him and tugged on his ears.

So it seems to Clara that she was there all that time too; as if she's also buried her hands in that thick fur, or lain against him in the sun using his strong body as a pillow, or as if *she* has taught him to sit, or come, or shake hands – the twinkle of his black eyes, and his pert ears waiting for the next instruction.

Just as if she knew him too, as if she can remember it all.

II Birds

They never planned to get birds. They weren't even looking for a pet – the kids were insistent on a dog, of course, but as Miguel and Ana kept saying, it wasn't the right time. Maybe one day, if they moved out of the apartment and had more space or a yard. Maybe when the children were a little older. So they'd only stepped into the pet shop to look around, the way they sometimes did at the weekend.

In the centre of the pet shop was a large aviary. Miguel loved to watch the parakeets, fluttering about in their jangle of Easter colours, busily talking amongst themselves.

When Miguel was small, his great aunt had had parakeets. He didn't remember much about his aunt now, only the feeling of stepping inside her dark, hushed house with its loud ticking clock and dusty shafts of light, and how when you got inside it felt as if the sunny street was suddenly miles away. Although his aunt herself was a just faint memory, he did remember her birds clearly – their tall cage in her living room where they would chirrup and flit from perch to perch, glowing turquoise, yellow and green in the dark room.

The birds all knew some words and phrases, but there was one in particular – his aunt's favourite – who was always the first to hop onto her finger and sit and talk with her. *Kiss kiss*, the bird would say. *Pretty bird. You're a pretty bird.*

One hot afternoon, Miguel had held the special bird, too. Even years later, the memory was crisp and clear – the scaly feet curled around his finger; the bones he could feel under the bird's soft feathers, almost as if the bird were transparent; and how horribly strong he had felt with that tiny creature on his hand (the awful thought had occurred to him that – without meaning to or wanting to – he might break the bird).

‘*Olá,*’ the bird had said, looking straight at him. ‘How are you?’

And Miguel had laughed out loud.

‘*Olá* to you too,’ he’d said. ‘I’m very well, thank you.’

Miguel remembered how the bird had rubbed its head against his chin, closed its little eyes blissfully, and nestled itself onto his chest, as if it felt entirely safe.³

It had had a turquoise chest, the special bird. And inky blue patches on its white head that always made Miguel think of spots from a leaky felt tip pen. In fact, it was almost identical to the bird who came and perched now on the edge of the cage, cocking its little head, catching Miguel’s eye before flittering away.

When Miguel looked around, he saw that Clara and Luís had joined him. ‘My aunt used to have parakeets,’ he mused. ‘One looked just like that.’

Luís didn’t miss a beat. ‘We could get birds,’ he said. ‘If you won’t let us get a dog.’

Miguel laughed, and surprising even himself, said, ‘Yes, I suppose we could.’

And so they did.

As he said later to Ana (who said she’d never have agreed if he’d consulted her) it would be good for the kids to get used to looking after animals wouldn’t it? And, anyway, the birds were so small, they’d hardly take up any space at all.

Luís and Clara picked out the ones they wanted – one turquoise with a yellow face, and the other blue and white. Lovely, improbable colours like a summer’s day – sun, sand, and cloud-dotted sky – with small, curious black eyes. They named them Bela and Linda. Luís held the box of birds delicately in his lap all the way home, and the children ran inside while Miguel and Ana followed with the cage, the toys and equipment the pet shop had recommended, and a giant bag of seed.

The obvious place to put them was in the kitchen. They could watch the family coming and going through the day. And there, in front of the window, they could look outside if they wanted, to where starlings perched on the telegraph wires, and sometimes a dog barked, deep and bellowing, from a balcony across the street.

Clara and Luís carefully installed the perches, filled the food bowl, hung the water bottle, and put in the sprig of millet that the woman in the pet shop had told them the birds would love. Everything neat and small as a doll's house.

The birds soon became part of their day. Each morning, when it got light, Bela and Linda would start chattering and singing.

They sounded so different, Miguel thought, to the birds you heard outside – the pigeons who burred about in the square, or the busy sparrows in the park. The wild birds seemed to prattle on whether anyone was there to hear it or not, but the parakeets' songs sounded *intentional* somehow. Their little throats filling with bright, intense sounds – often a strange bubbling, and then sudden cracks, squeaks and trills, and occasionally a noise like the slow crunch of an opening zip. All of it in some complex, changing pattern you couldn't predict.

Almost, Miguel thought (as he filled their seed dish and pulled up the blind to let the morning sun in), as if they were trying to communicate, trying to tell you something. If only you could have understood.

III

Vitória

It was late when João knocked the door.

The children, who had been on their way to bed, came and clustered – blinking and curious – behind Ana’s legs as she stood and talked to her brother. (Clara, who was only four then, would recall that moment for years afterwards, sometimes saying wonderingly to Ana, ‘Remember when Uncle João came to the door with Vitória?’ as if the scene was forever burned in Clara’s mind: the night burst open, João framed in the porch light, his arms full of tiny, squirming kittens.)

João had found them outside the garage where he worked, their mother already dead. João was going away that weekend, he said, or he would have taken them in himself, but he thought perhaps Ana could look after them? When João handed her the tiny things, all wet and thinly mewling, she couldn’t have said no if she’d wanted to.

The three kittens slept in a box in Ana and Miguel’s room that night, although the smallest one (black, with sky-blue eyes) cried so pitifully that Ana ended up bringing it into the bed with her, where the kitten nuzzled onto her pillow and spent the night combing Ana’s hair with tiny claws.

The kittens stayed for three weeks, until a friend at Ana’s office took one, and Miguel’s sister took another – but Ana couldn’t bear to give up the little one that still nuzzled in her hair.

They called her Vitória – which seemed appropriate, they all thought, for this little creature who had survived against the odds.

Much as she’d decided Ana’s pillow was the perfect bed, Vitória quickly asserted her favourite napping spots around the house. In the afternoons she claimed the patch of sun on the desk, where she’d leave a mat of fur behind on the books and papers, and from where she could

bat at the children's pens when they wrote. In the evenings, she'd settle in the warmth behind the TV, nestling amongst the wires and gadgets, sending remotes and game controllers clattering to the ground.

She waged war with all sorts of unsuspecting inanimate objects – plastic straws, receipts, the papery skins of onions which sometimes fluttered onto the floor (and occasionally, a hapless moth startled to find itself inside the house). And when Ana swept the floor, Vitória would stalk the broom, leaping out from under the furniture and rolling onto her back, kicking frantically at it with her back legs and savaging its bristles.

It didn't occur to Ana to do anything about the birds – for months Vitória appeared oblivious to them, content with her moths and onion skins – until one day Ana found her with a paw wedged in between the cage bars, the birds a frenzy of colour and noise, their wings batting against the wire sides.

After that, Miguel moved the birds to the balcony where they could keep the door closed and Vitória out, which seemed to solve the problem for a while.

That particular day, Ana was up earlier than usual because she had to travel out of town to a conference. She wanted to hang out some laundry before she left, so she'd carried it out to the balcony. It was chillier than she'd expected and she pulled her robe tightly around her. The world was just waking up – the intermittent clang of early morning delivery trucks and the gentle twittering of birds in the trees. The sky was deep blue, just starting to glow with the dawn light.

The birds in their cage seemed quiet, although since they'd moved them from the kitchen Ana was used to not hearing their morning songs. She'd freshen their water and feed them while she was out here, she thought. That was when she noticed the small blue body at bottom of the cage. It was perfectly still, its eyes closed tight, so for a moment she wondered if it was just asleep, before realising that of course a bird would never sleep on the ground like that.

Ana took a rag from her laundry basket and lifted the bird out. Even through the rag she could feel the body was cold and stiff. And so light, as if the bird had just been made of air. Poor thing. Most likely it had turned cold in the night and it had been too much for its little heart.

She carried the bird, wrapped in the rag, into the kitchen.

Miguel wasn't up yet – she'd have to tell him of course, so he wouldn't be surprised if he noticed it was missing. And she'd have to tell the children too, although she dreaded having to bring that sadness to them, dreaded seeing their faces fall.

How strange it was that the little thing itself could be so light in her hand, but *telling* them seemed so heavy, as if she'd be handing them some dense thing. Far too much for children to carry.

She wrapped the body tightly in the rag and dropped it in the bin and covered it over with old newspapers in case the children saw it.

Probably it would be easier just to tell them that she'd left the cage door open while she changed the water and it had flown away.

Yes. Just say that the bird had fluttered out and that she'd lost sight of it as it soared off, its blue wings indistinguishable from the sky.

It was clear they needed to move the cage again, put it somewhere that wouldn't get cold, although there wasn't anywhere obvious it could go. In the end, Ana set it on the big oak sideboard that Miguel had inherited from his great aunt, which they kept in the hallway because it was too large to fit anywhere else.

Up high on the sideboard, the blue and yellow bird seemed safe from Vitória and the elements. (And which one was it anyway? Ana wondered. She couldn't quite remember if the remaining bird was Bela or Linda. Miguel, Luís and Clara couldn't agree either, so they compromised and renamed the bird Belinda instead.)

When the birds had been in the kitchen, Miguel could put his hand in the cage and they would climb onto his finger and he would lift them out. Now, if anyone tried to do that, Belinda would nip their finger or scramble up the bars as if she was afraid. She seemed to sing less, too, although perhaps that was simply because they couldn't hear her in the hallway. After a while, Miguel suggested getting another bird to keep Belinda company, but they never did. Eventually, Ana bought a mirror for the cage – apparently Belinda would think there was another bird to talk to. It didn't seem to work. Perhaps Belinda wasn't fooled, Ana thought, and could see that the other bird was exactly like herself.

With the cage gone, Vitória took to sprawling herself in the space on the kitchen table where the birds had been, luxuriating in the patch of sunlight that fell there each afternoon, soaking it up like a lioness. Sometimes, after hours of lying in the sun, her black fur would be baked so hot that Ana could hardly touch her.

IV Michelangelo

There were other animals they knew, and as he got older, sometimes Luís would think that he could almost measure his childhood by them.

There was that first almost-memory that he knew so well – when Bernardo had tried to protect him from Grandpa. And the birds who came the year he started school, and Vitória who arrived one night when he was seven. And later on, of course, Bruno.

Years later, Luís could still vividly recall being eight or nine, when his best friend was Martim, and he'd spend most days after school at Martim's house. Martim had a dachshund called Stella, who was smooth and brown and plump as a sausage, and who would sit on your lap

and tremble softly, her eyes closed in a sort of rapture, if you petted her ears just right. Martim's house always smelled of Stella. Even at school, you could smell Stella on Martim's clothes.

And there was the summer he was ten and Uncle João and Aunt Teresa got a dog, Renaldo, who would snap at Luís, and chewed up Luís's new trainers, and made him not even want to visit João and Teresa's house. And the year he was 11 and his grandparents' dog Beatriz came to stay for a month when Grandpa first went into hospital, and Luís trained her to shake paws and roll over and to bark when you said 'Speak.'

Then there was that one year, when Luís was 12, when Belinda was long gone, and Vitória was settling into a plump, contented middle age, and Michelangelo came to stay with them.

Uncle Tomás was going to work in London for a year and could hardly take a turtle with him, so Luís's parents had said Michelangelo could stay with them. Michelangelo was already 30 years old and had been part of the family ever since Miguel's brother, Uncle Tomás, had acquired him at the age of 12 (at a time when all Uncle Tomás's friends were also acquiring their own Leonardos, Donatellos and Raphaels). Luís and Clara had known Michelangelo all their lives although it was Luís who had always been more curious, who'd asked about him when they visited Uncle Tomás's house.

That first day, on the balcony, Luís told Clara what Uncle Tomás had taught him – how you had to wrap your hands around Michelangelo's body as if you were picking up a hamburger. How, even with your hands carefully placed, you needed to watch out for his long scaly neck craning around and his mouth opening to bite you.

Clara followed the instructions and gently lifted Michelangelo, his scaly legs paddling slowly through the air. And, Luís told her, laughing – just as Michelangelo let out a seemingly endless stream of liquid onto Clara's lap – it was important to always hold him away from yourself, because when you picked him up it was very likely that he'd pee on you.

For Luís, that whole summer was defined by Michelangelo – he and Clara would watch Michelangelo stalking bugs, or scatter raspberries for him to find, which Michelangelo would gobble up with delight. Michelangelo would amble around, nipping at people’s ankles and sometimes stopping to stare for minutes on end at Vitória, who seemed utterly disgusted by the arrival of this strange beast (although once or twice Luís found them coiled asleep together in the sun on the balcony, soaking the heat up through fur and shell). When he looks back, that whole time seems filled with Michelangelo’s unapologetic strangeness: the oddness of his shell, his scaly head and his swivelling eyeballs; the way he would fan his long, feathery nails back and forth – ‘Like he’s just had a manicure,’ Clara said once, ‘and he’s drying his polish’.

What fascinated Luís was how Michelangelo seemed to live outside of normal time, as if he was part-dinosaur, and as if time meant nothing to him. How he’d silently watch the decades pass, and even when life in their family changed – when they moved house, when each of Luís’s little cousins was born, or later, when Grandpa passed away – Michelangelo stayed just the same.

There must have been other animals, too. Although Luís can’t recall them all very clearly. Wasn’t there a guinea pig that Clara looked after for a friend? And, once, a goldfish (although he can’t remember where it came from), who lived in a little bowl with a castle to swim through and was kept up on the dresser where the bird had been. He remembers, vaguely, that the fish’s water clouded up so you couldn’t see the castle anymore. But it’s not something that stands out amongst the years – Luís couldn’t say what happened to the fish in the end, or when exactly they’d had it. Or even, he thinks now, whether they ever gave the fish a name.

V

Bruno

From the beginning, Clara loved Bruno. The day they drove out to collect him, she begged to be the one to hold him on her lap – his puppy snout poking curiously out of the blanket. And even when he got carsick and threw up on her, Clara didn't mind – just wiped him off and stroked his little head. 'You poor thing,' she whispered to him. 'We'll be home soon.'

It had been hard to find a dog they could all agree on. They'd all wanted a dog who was somehow like Bernardo, but no one actually knew what sort of dog Bernardo had been. He'd had the wiry, brown and black-tipped fur of a German shepherd, but Ana said shepherds could be aggressive, and anyway they were too big. Bernardo had been smaller, with stiff little legs, which suggested he'd been part terrier, but Miguel said terriers were too yappy. In the end, Ana's friend put them in touch with a breeder of *podengos pequenos*, which were a manageable size and apparently very friendly, although they didn't look much like Bernardo.

When they got home, Clara carried the little Bruno into the house where (much to Vitória's horror) he hopped up on the couch and promptly fell asleep. Clara was delighted – 'Isn't that what Bernardo did, mum?' and Ana laughed and said yes, it was. And it seemed evident to everyone that Bruno was meant to be part of their family; that, just like Bernardo, he'd decided he was happy to spend the rest of his life with them.

Everyone loved Bruno, but Clara couldn't help thinking she had a special bond with him. Since she always slept with her door open, Bruno figured out quickly that each morning he could wake her up with a gentle nudge of his moist snout under the covers and Clara would get up and give him breakfast.

Their weekends were filled with trips to the lake, where Bruno would fetch the sticks they threw into the water, never tiring of it – as if each throw was the first, exhilarating time it had ever occurred to him to chase and retrieve a stick. And then he would shake himself vigorously, showering you with spray, before he began again. On the drive home, he would curl up against Clara, and she would run her fingers through his still-damp fur.

Clara knew every inch of him. She knew the inside of his silly mouth that she frequently had to pry open to shake out some soggy, half-chewed thing he shouldn't have been eating. And when he slept, would peer into his ridiculous labyrinthine ears and she would pet his bare, pink tummy where no hair grew. Once, Grandpa told her that if a dog let you touch their belly it meant they trusted you, and Clara had felt a dizzy rush of pride that Bruno had chosen her and loved her like this.

They were all staying at Clara's grandparents' when it happened.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she woke up. It was already bright, as if she'd overslept, and it took her a moment to realise Bruno hadn't woken her. Of course, she thought, it might have been because they weren't at home. But they'd stayed over lots of times before and Bruno had always found her in the morning.

When she went downstairs, Bruno was sleeping in the kitchen, stretched out on the floor underneath the table. Clara poured out his breakfast, but even when he heard the clatter of biscuits in his bowl, he barely stirred. She leaned over him, pulled his ears through her hands, the way he usually loved. She crouched down and tickled his tummy, and rolled his ball across the kitchen floor. 'Don't you want to fetch?' she said. But he only whimpered, and his tail flapped weakly – the desire to play still rising up in him, even though his body couldn't comply.

Clara was at school the next day, her mind on Bruno the whole time. She only heard the news from her mum when she got home: that Bruno had started vomiting that morning and had seemed to be in pain, so Ana had taken him to the vet who said it looked as if Bruno had been poisoned. There were lots of things in the countryside that could be responsible, the vet had said – pesticides, algae, toxic plants. It was impossible to tell. And then the vet had said that there was nothing she could do, and the kindest thing was to put Bruno to sleep, so Ana had returned home alone. And when Clara came home from school to the quiet house, and Ana explained that Bruno was gone, Clara cried like she'd never stop.

She was still inconsolable the following day, so much so that Ana (who never let the children have days off without good reason) called the school to say Clara was ill and would be staying home.

Without Bruno, there was no moist snout to nudge Clara awake. No silky hair to snuggle her hand into when she watched TV on the couch after school. When she put on her shoes, it seemed shocking that there was no Bruno bouncing around in anticipation of a walk, and when they got out of the car at the lake, so strange that there was no leash in her hand, no Bruno lurching and pulling her along.

Bruno had only been with them for nine months, but it seemed to Clara that he'd always been part of their lives, and that nothing would be quite the same again.

In the months following Bruno's death, they'll talk about it sometimes – whether they might get another dog one day. But everyone will feel a little burned by the loss of Bruno. Even Clara, who'll want another dog more than anything, will be afraid of the idea. What if she were to love another dog just as much, only for it to die too?

After a year or two, they'll start to feel ready, but it will never seem to be a good time. Grandpa will be in and out of hospital, Grandma busy looking after him, so their dog Beatriz will often come and stay – and Ana and Miguel will say it would be far too much to add a puppy to the mix. A few more years and Luís will be away at university and somehow it won't feel right for just the three of them to get a dog. And anyway, Ana will say, they still have Vitória, so it's not as if they have no pets (and by the time Vitória dies, Clara and Luís will have long left home).

Years will pass, Clara will be living with friends and travelling abroad, so that there will be long periods where there are hardly any animals in her life at all – just her parents' new cat (who mostly hides out when she visits), or Luis's turtle, or the dogs and cats that some of her friends have.

And it will amaze her to realise, one day, that it's been 25 years since Bruno came and went.

She'll have children of her own by then. They'll be clamouring for a puppy, and her partner will say of course they should do it – imagine how much fun the kids will have, how good it will be for them to grow up with a dog.

Clara will have to admit that she can't imagine them *not* having a pet. And as they make plans, and debate the merits of Labradors and golden retrievers, she'll find herself telling her daughters again about Bruno.

And she'll think sometimes about all the animals she's known – all those little beings whose lives get mixed up with your own. The ones who stay around for years, accompanying you through your entire childhood and beyond, and the others who come for only a few years or months, or maybe not even that long – whose tiny lifespans could be wrapped up inside your own a hundred times over.

Notes

¹ CLAN – Children-Animals Friendships: challenging boundaries between humans and non-humans in contemporary societies’ was led by Verónica Policarpo (Principal Investigator) and Ana Nunes de Almeida (Co-Principal Investigator), and was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology [PTDC/SOC 28415/2017] (October 2018 to September 2022). For more information, and details of the other creative outputs, see: <https://humananimalstudies.net/en/clan/>

² I would suggest that such an attention to everyday human narratives about animals – and the implications, elisions and silences within them – is not necessarily at odds with creative writing which attempts more directly to ‘give voice’ to non-human experiences, although each emphasis perhaps lends itself to different forms of impact. For instance, fiction which effectively evokes animal consciousness could be particularly successful at inciting readers’ empathy for animal characters, whereas fiction which focuses on human points of view might enable readers to recognise and interrogate their own taken-for-granted narratives about animals, or reflect critically on what it is possible to know and understand about non-human lives.

³ Although most animal studies scholars employ personal pronouns in order to recognise animals as ‘beings’ rather than reducing them to ‘things’ (Gilquin and Jacobs 80), here, and at later points in the story, some human characters use the pronoun ‘it’ to refer to animals. This is intended to reflect ordinary English usage of the impersonal pronoun in cases where that speaker is unaware of, or perhaps unconcerned with, an animal’s sex.

The story was originally written in English, but has since been translated into Portuguese. In Portuguese, nouns are gendered, so it should be noted that there is no distinctive impersonal pronoun that Portuguese speakers would use in this way. For instance, *pássaro* (‘bird’) is a masculine noun, so an individual bird whose sex the speaker does not know would automatically be referred to by the masculine pronoun *ele* (the pronoun for feminine nouns is

ela). Additionally, possessive pronouns agree with the gender of the noun in question: for example, the phrase ‘its head’ would be translated as *sua cabeça* (the possessive pronoun is in agreement with the feminine noun *cabeça*). However, although there is no direct equivalent of the impersonal ‘it’, Portuguese speakers’ use of personal pronouns for animals does present other complexities – for instance, even when an individual animal’s sex is known, speakers might still choose to use differently-gendered pronouns that are consistent with the noun for that *category* of animal (for instance a female bird may be referred to as *ele*). Additionally, in many instances, companion animals such as turtles and fish might be given gendered names and referred to by pronouns which do not match their actual sex (Verónica Policarpo, personal communication).

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