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# *Autumn*

Kathy Fagan

1.

I'm writing this quickly—I have to rush out to buy coyote urine. I bought three sixteen-ounce canisters of powdered coyote urine Saturday—after wiring my mother money to cover her bouncing checks—and I will buy at least three more today. At \$14.99 a canister, it is insanely expensive pee. With it, I am trying to deter the raccoons that have been systematically tearing up my lawn since July.

Saturday night, the urine worked. Sunday night, the destruction resumed. Monday morning, heading out the door for her one-hundred-mile commute, my partner broke into tears and begged me to take care of it. “By any means,” she said.

For \$49 an animal, a wildlife exterminator will trap the offending creature and relocate it. What that means in the state of Ohio, where neither raccoons nor gay marriage are protected under the law, is that any trapped raccoon—a potential carrier of rabies—must be destroyed: the ultimate relocation. But I think I can outwit a few adorable thirty-pound mammals. I have access to the Internet. I'm a registered Democrat and a vegetarian. I have a lot of junk stored in my shed.

So late yesterday afternoon I shook down the last of the initial urine supply onto the disturbed sod. I laid twenty-odd feet of chicken wire over

that. I planted pinwheels in strategic locations; erected garden statuary we've received as gifts, won't return, and can't throw away; I twisted aluminum foil onto tomato stakes, and scattered metal buckets and empty urine canisters out near their water supply (also known as our irrigation system). If predators' piss didn't sufficiently gross out the raccoons, I figured the yard décor might.

All this took about an hour. I was dirty after and smelled a little like dog pee. I showered and started dinner. Then the guy who mows our lawn appeared. His schedule is entirely unpredictable; by day he's a teacher at a local junior high. After patiently listening to my overexplanation of the public art installation that was the backyard, he replied simply, "Pan of antifreeze'll kill 'em," and mowed around it.



The raccoons returned to the backyard last night and, from the looks of it, had a kegger. They tossed pee canisters around, turned the buckets over, and toppled my foil stakes—but they left the lawn alone.

The rain began before dawn. I don't know what effect rain has on coyote urine, but I know from my research that the only way to frighten raccoons off for good is to vary the nightly routine. On my shopping list, therefore, is fresh coyote urine, but also ammonia and Mylar balloons. If the rain lets up, I'll leave a transistor radio out all night and an unfamiliar lawn chair to make it look as if there are humans out there. A graveyard shift of custodial staff, perhaps, at a sad little party.



My mother's checks bounced Saturday because she's completely irresponsible with money. She's also poor. She's also got an incurable blood cancer. At seventy, she continues to work, part-time and for an hourly wage, as a clerk in a bookstore. She's the Grande Dame of the Fresno Barnes and Noble. I don't go to bookstores anymore because I can't afford to buy books. Or, I could, but then I couldn't pay \$14.99 for coyote urine and \$22 for advice from the guy who mows my lawn. I also wouldn't be able to send money to my parents.

I don't feel heroic for doing it, just different. I'm privileged enough, these days, to live in a social class in which people my age, that is, middle-aged people, have either buried their parents and inherited money—nothing ostentatious, just enough for the kid's college fund and a new SUV—or can expect

small gifts from their decidedly solvent, if aging, parents on a regular basis: a birthday laptop, say, a fat check at Christmas. If my parents had money, they'd give me those things. If I had money, I'd give them those things. But mostly, what I wish I could give them is a sense of ease, the safety net only money can buy and that my parents won't have to catch them when they fall.



The nursery I try today carries coyote urine but only the kind that repels mice and other small rodents. I need deer- and raccoon-strength (how strength is determined, exactly, I can't say). The clerk, sensing my frustration, wants to sell me a product that irritates the nasal passages of raccoons, voles, skunks, rabbits, ground hogs, hedge hogs, and chipmunks. He tells a cute if irrelevant story about his daughter believing that armadillos in Texas explode when overheated. I study the label of a blood meal product. A raccoon-deterrent site I've uncovered on the Internet suggests that dried blood works as well as dried coyote urine. It estimates that the potential for contracting mad cow disease through the use of their blood is slim, but it urges users to wear protective masks and gloves when spreading nevertheless. "That won't work," says armadillo-dad, "it don't list raccoons."

I buy the blood.



When my automatic motion-detector safety lights go on in the side yard, I leap up to see what's there. Two milky-furred possums! Their cone-snouts wriggle in the air. Do they smell blood? Note the Mylar, glinting in the light? The blood product don't list possum neither, but they're tear-assing out of the side yard anyway as if the furies had them by their stinky, pink prehensile tails.

## 2.

I was raised on Long Island—in working-class Levittown, Long Island, a strip of potato farmland forever altered by prefab housing slapped together for the returning veteran and his 2.4 children—with no wildlife to speak of but a handful of sparrows and neighborhood dogs. I read *The Wind in the Willows* not merely as children's fiction but as natural science tract. What I know about badgers and moles, for instance, I know from books like that, and what

books like that tell kids is that animals are people, too.

My mother, who has no Native American blood as far as I know, imbued virtually all things, for me as a child, with human character. When I “helped” her plant annuals in spring—which meant following behind, snapping blooms off to make her a bouquet—she’d say, “Sweetheart, you make the poor flowers cry when you pick them.” When, on stormy summer nights, I scrambled into bed with her because of thunder, she’d say, “Pumpkin, that’s only the angels bowling.”

So I won’t be leaving out a pan of antifreeze for my raccoons. I don’t want to irritate anything’s nasal passages. I’m glad for the rabbits to eat out of my herb garden, I feed and water the birds, I tolerate the deer that eat my hostas. But the lawn. . . .

The lawn is big, literally and metaphorically. The lawn is a pain in the ass. For years I mowed it myself until I could mow it no longer. We refuse to nuke the weeds and grubs with herbicides and pesticides—because we don’t, of course, want to hurt the rabbits and birds—which means we spend a lot of time on our hands and knees pulling out crabgrass and thistles and creeping charlie. For a couple of raccoons to show up and start yanking the good grass that’s left is, well, it’s just a slap in the face.



Tonight I deploy Step 3 of my aversion plan: CDs slice the sod at sinister angles, aluminum foil antennae rise menacingly from the soil, and a layer of red pepper flakes is spread on grass not previously saturated by blood and pee. Then I settle down to catch Tom Jones perform on *Dancing with the Stars*.

My mother’s mother, the grandmother whom I adored and who adored me in return, also adored Tom Jones. She didn’t have much use for men as far as I could tell, but the Welshman in the tight clothes made her smile in a way I hadn’t seen her smile before. My mother, addled by valium yet still hoping hopelessly to please her mother, gave her one of his LPs. Nanny was scornful of the gift, but she’d play it on her television-stereo console when I’d ask her to and indulgently watch me skip around to “She’s a Lady.”

The prosody lessons of my youth: “Talkin’ about”—emphasis on the first syllable, a nail hammered into that first syllable—“the little lady / and the lady is mi-e-yine.” This time, I think, I’ll get the lyrics straight: “She’s the kind I’d like to (what?) and take to dinner.”

And just then, out of the corner of my eye, as William Stafford says stars

and poems should be viewed, I see the raccoon, medium-sized, exquisitely marked. He strolls over to the glass door where my rubber garden clogs sit filled with rainwater, dips his paws in, and begins to wash. He's scrubbing like a surgeon. I go to the door and knock. I put on my best New York "Whad-daya" posture. He saunters, unhurriedly, off the porch.

Dialing up the most scandalous radio station I can find on my transistor, I loop it over the outside doorknob, close the door, and think smugly, Ah, he was washing his hands—paws! he, IT was washing his, ITS paws!—*because* he stepped through all of that blood, urine, and red pepper. He's totally repulsed, he's disgusted. And now he's got talk radio to contend with. He won't be back.



Whether or not he and his comrades returned in the night, this morning my lawn remains intact. It smells like a subway and looks like a roadside memorial, but for a record three nights no further damage has been dealt. I'm desperate with success. What novel aversion therapy will I offer tonight? Which revolting ingredients do I stir into the sensory cocktail that once was my serene suburban backyard?

I can't think about that now. Tonight we celebrate our twelfth wedding anniversary—"wedding" anniversary, that is, had a legal wedding between my partner and me been possible—and my attention is elsewhere. Angie will be home from her away-from-home teaching week any minute. I know that there are couples who, after living together for twelve years, go out to dinner and discuss the condition of their lawns, but I don't want us to be one of them.

### 3.

Novelist Jay McInerney writes, "Every great love story begins with a crime." In the case of my girlfriend and me, it was a capital offense. I was long-married, she was living with her long-time partner. I wasn't "bi," certainly not "gay," and she wasn't even a little happy. We lived on separate ends of the country, owned homes, held tenured positions at good universities. We weren't kids, in other words. We had long ago established our lives. To get together meant to literally break apart every other thing we held dear, including the sense we had of ourselves as responsible, mature, loyal, and caring adults who didn't risk everything for a chance to be—dare I say it?—wildly in love.

It was early spring, 1994, when we arrived at the bucolic MacDowell Artists Colony for monthlong residencies on the same day. We'd met seven years

earlier at the California college where we had both started our academic careers, and we remained in casual professional contact since then. I knew she would be arriving at MacDowell on that chilly April evening—she burst into the dining room of Colony Hall at the end of dinner, looking twice her size in a gray parka—I just didn’t have the slightest idea on what terms we would leave it.

There was a distinct possibility that I was pregnant—my husband and I had quit using birth control that December in the hopes of conceiving—and I remember thinking, as the New England mud sucked at my rubber boots, that the world was filled with possibility and sorrow. That life, as poet Charles Wright says, is, indeed, “a short life of trouble.” No one knew I couldn’t shake the grief that held me after the death, from cancer, of my best friend two years before. My other close friends were occupied with young children. My students came and went every year. I saw my brother, my mother, and father, each living in different parts of the country, rarely. I thought about my dead friend’s body, under the earth. I dreamed of her. I wrote poems in her voice—the voice I’d made hers and kept hearing in my head. I had therapy. I was trying to have a baby. But what stays? What can be saved? What, if anything, lasts?



We like to say that Emily Dickinson set us up. We mark the start of our romance from the morning we traveled, alone together by rental car, from Peterborough, New Hampshire, to Amherst, Massachusetts, to visit Dickinson’s house, garden, and burial plot. But the truth is, Edna St. Vincent Millay was our matchmaker.

Millay was not, I’m embarrassed to admit, a poet whose work I knew. Angie, a scholar of American literature before becoming a poet, was secretly pleased, I think, to be able to introduce me to it. One evening, in the small, musty, stone library of MacDowell, she read poems to me aloud, something she has not done once in the twelve years since. In the final two stanzas of the poem, “Dirge Without Music,” Millay writes:

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter,  
the love—

They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant  
and curled

Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I  
do not approve.  
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in  
the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

She read me the lines. She looked at me. And it was my heart I saw in her  
sky-blue eyes.

#### 4.

All that is to say—to quote my father’s favorite recording artist of the  
twentieth century—*Que sera, sera*. Treat your lawn organically to save the  
world, you get weeds and grubs. Pull your weeds, you get holes in your lawn.  
Raccoons, nothing if not opportunistic, see a hole in the lawn and think, The  
easier to eat grubs with, my dear. And soon you’ve got a yard full of blood,  
chicken wire, and urine. You’re playing AM radio all night. One thing leads to  
another. “In every beginning,” Eliot writes, “is our end.” It can all be uncov-  
ered, discovered, recovered if only we look hard enough—and dig, dig, dig to  
the roots with our dexterous little hands.



My father is, in every sense of the word, a faithful man. He has sent to  
me, one full week before my birthday, a packet of old family snapshots: my  
brother and I, as preschoolers, wearing plastic bowler hats; Dad himself in his  
Marine uniform; he and my mother, smiling at their wedding; and our saintly  
collie, enduring hugs from us all. The back of each photo is captioned in my  
mother’s hand; decades ago she must have mailed them to my father’s sister,  
near whom my father now lives.

He refers to my mother, in the brief letter accompanying the photos, by  
her first name, rather than the customary “your mother,” which means he’s  
feeling peevish with her, as he will two or three times a year, twelve or thirteen  
times less the annual number of times my mother feels peevish with him. I  
do not know if he still loves my mother—she claims he never did, and they



have been divorced now twenty years—but my father has, to my knowledge, remained faithful to her. In his mind, and in the eyes of his church, they are still married.

My father is too practical minded to abide by anything as restrictive as a law—although he spent fifteen years serving New York City as a police officer—but he is slavishly devoted to the doctrine and dogma of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. During one particularly crushing financial moment in my parents' marriage, my father left my mother to work on the other side of the country. She was to follow when he called for her. My mother, thus liberated, promptly divorced him. There was a period, for my father, of protest, threat, and emotional devastation. That's over now, but he persists in helping to support my mother, with the help of his meager police pension, and he always speaks of her, fondly, as his wife. He holds a small insurance policy on her life, but will not concede, no matter how often and heartlessly I remind him, that her cancer is incurable. He is, therefore, a faithful, practical, and romantic man.

He is also, I think, a fundamentally happy man. Severely hearing-impaired from his years in the service and police department—protective headgear was not required, as it is now, at target practice in the 1950s and '60s—he pursues a life, at seventy-five and on an extremely limited income, that actively engages him, body and soul. He attends mass, plays golf, attends triple A ballgames.

These days, he drinks moderately, sees his sister and brothers socially. After a stage 2 colon cancer, chemotherapy, and coronary bypass surgery (“Just a little heart surgery, Kath”), he works out each day on a treadmill (which he calls a “threadmill”) while listening to inspirational sermons on what he refers to as his “M3P recorder.” He watches political programming on TV, votes a straight Republican party ticket, marches in the pro-life rallies he can afford to travel to, and drives an early-model American-made automobile with stars and stripes on the rear bumper and St. Christopher on the dash. He attributes my “lifestyle,” only half-jokingly, to the small percentage of protestant blood staining both branches of the family tree. He told my partner, when her father died in 2002, that, if she'd like, he could be her father, too.



The day after our anniversary, feeling hopeful about the progress of our raccoon-aversion program, we tentatively prepare one of the three most damaged parts of the backyard for reseeding. With our steel rake, wheelbar-

row, top soil, and ryegrass, we literally plow ahead. Then we re-lay the chicken wire, water lightly, and shake liberal amounts of blood meal over all; it crosses both our minds at once that we are half-afraid of what, besides grass, might grow there.

## 5.

Our handsome young raccoon has visited again—he stood on his hind legs two evenings in a row, in full view, looking in (what could he make of us? two women, two cats, watching him?), then scavenged energetically under the light rain we'd prayed for after planting—but caused no damage. Until last night.

Discouraged perhaps by the funk and junk of the backyard, he and his comrades moved on to the front, a lush hill of green bordered by two limestone walls. How Angie didn't notice when she drove away this morning—it looks as if someone took a hatchet to the lawn—I don't know. After sunset, I'll soak rags in ammonia and line the walls with them, I'll leave the radio whining on the front porch, and I'll fire up every house light the place has. With luck, the front yard will be back to normal by the time Angie gets home in three days.



But it isn't back to normal. Because my rag bin contains only threadbare crew socks and ancient Fruit of the Looms once belonging to my former husband, our front lawn has, for three days, been festooned with foul-smelling underwear. As I resoak rags each evening, I try not to breathe—a mistake that, let's just say, irritates my nasal passages—and I try to avoid eye contact with neighbors and drivers who pass the house: bigger kids heading home, the after-work runners and power walkers, mommies out late with their strollers and golden retrievers. Where do they find the time for play and exercise and the usual daily chores? Why is mine the only home under siege?



Allen Smith is still walking the property with Angie when I am summoned to gather my underwear, CDs, balloons, pinwheels, and urine canisters from the lawn. They have been discussing strategy; he has given her an estimate for his services; he is preparing to spread and spray his first application of pes-

ticide and herbicide. He is singularly unimpressed by my raccoon-abatement methods. He's "seen it all," he says. He cannot guarantee that the raccoons will quit tearing up the lawn immediately, but "they sure don't like my stuff," he says. He doesn't lay the poison on "strong enough to hurt the birds and rabbits," he says, when questioned. The side of his white van reads, Smith's Lawn Services: "Serving God By Serving Others." Pesticide's more Christian than antifreeze, I reason, and probably not any more carcinogenic.

## 6.

Faith and good deeds. I never knew about the split, that the first virtue might be valued above the second, until starting college at an institution run by the Church of Christ. It was a bad fit for me—I'd received a full tuition scholarship and been dazzled by the white stucco buildings arranged on golden hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean—and I didn't last more than seven months.

I left after the Journalism Department, in which I was then a major, put me on the band beat for the student newspaper. I have discovered that there are two things in life I cannot do: use a slide rule and find anything interesting to say about a marching band. I'm sure I could have asked for another assignment, but by that time I was reading the newsprint on the wall: I wasn't a journalist; I wasn't a fundamentalist Christian; I wasn't, as most of the students there were, wealthy or beautiful. I couldn't tan even if I'd had the time to try.

I had a work-study job in the library. Every day, like clockwork, an upperclassman appeared at 10 a.m. I assumed that, like me, he worked there, but all I ever saw him do was read the *Wall Street Journal*. One morning as I shelved around him, I asked if he was work-study. At first I thought he hadn't heard me because he didn't look up; then slowly he lifted his blond head while simultaneously shifting a finger across the page to hold his place. He was the kind of tall young man whose body seemed reluctant to pull itself out of a chair once it had gone to the trouble of settling there. "Um," he said, a little nasally, still not looking at me, "I'll be through with the stock pages in a moment."

By autumn, I'd be shelving books in the library of a state university. I'd find a route to a writing life that didn't include majoring in journalism. I'd take a vow of poverty if I had to. I'd begin studying poetry.



My mother still lives in the town where I finished college. She believes that the tools of agriculture—pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers—have contributed to the high rate of blood cancers in the valley, and, based solely on anecdotal evidence, she may be right. My brother is in remission from leukemia. My father battled colon cancer. We're all still alive, but every time I have a backache, a mouth sore, a lasting bruise, I think it must be my turn to get cancer.

There's a famous scene in *The Deer Hunter* in which Christopher Walken plays Russian roulette with a loaded pistol. I was in college when I saw the film. It's the figure I associate with cancer in my family. A genetic Russian roulette. "And then there was one."

At first I didn't fear for myself. It was a year after my mother's diagnosis—which came several years after my brother's and two months before my father's—that I realized how aware of my own mortality I'd become. It's true, I'd always been a "sensitive" child. I was the child, after all, who stayed up late to hear grown-up discussion between my parents and their friends: a litany of job losses, children's disobediences, money problems, infidelities, and illnesses that I never tired of. I'd think to myself as I listened, "I won't be making *that* mistake." As if knowledge were a shield I could use against failure. It was arrogance on my part, but arrogance that arose out of a genuine desire to learn and, by learning, to help myself and my family. The world was a dangerous place; I wanted to be well armed.

In middle age, I can sum up my entire emotional education this way: I thought myself armed; I was disarmed. My life has been a serial surrender to circumstances I could not control. When I realized this, I realized also that I would never kill myself. I figure I'll go the way I came in: surprised.

## 7.

Another birthday, come and gone. Mine falls just after the autumnal equinox, sometimes on one of the Jewish high holy days. In her brogue, my Tom Jones-loving grandmother was fond of saying I was sure to be lucky, having been born at the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. My former husband, for whom I converted to Judaism in the early '80s, has sent me a birthday gift—we've been divorced now over ten years. It's a CD of love songs, composed and performed by a lesbian friend of his; he wrote the lyrics. I haven't opened it yet; I'm afraid it might find itself wedged in my lawn.



*Poor craycher*—in her voice the words had water in them—*poor helpless craycher*, Nanny would say on those rare occasions when, in her borough of New York, we'd happen to see a squirrel or bird dead in a park or a stray loping along the expressway. *God bless it and keep it.*



Angie made me an anniversary card this year. It lies on the sideboard with a handful of birthday cards, a couple of favorite vases—empty because our cats eat flowers and we don't, of course, want the cats to die of the toxins found in most flowers—and a platter of tomatoes, the last of summer.



The days have been excruciatingly beautiful. Big silver clouds in a bright blue sky—more Paris sky than Columbus sky. Honeybees are drunk on the jasmine's nectar in the side yard. Half a dozen juvenile cardinals, in hues of red and peach, bicker at the feeder.

The grubs may or may not be dead. The raccoons may or may not care. What we know is that a \$98 application of chemicals by a Christian hasn't deterred them any better than tacky lawn statuary did. What we know is that, soon, the weeds will die back, the grass will go dormant, and all will be covered in snow. And what will the condition of the lawn matter then? For what did coyotes sacrifice their urine—and, no doubt, their lives? And the cows? No wonder they're mad!

I may sound like I'm joking but I'm not. I'm writing this quickly—I have to rush out and buy more chicken wire. It is the only raccoon deterrent that is 100 percent effective and, as far as I know, it won't put anyone in the poorhouse or give them cancer. Already the young grass in our backyard has grown so thickly that the wire beneath it is nearly impossible to see. If we leave it down, by this time next month, the grass will have it completely covered. Unless we dig, we might forget it was ever there at all.