Indentations and Other Stories

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Dear Ms. Hoffer:
Thank you for your interesting and unusual letter of a few months ago. Although it was a passionate and generic form letter, I’m taking the time to make a controlled personal response. My colleagues are right now sitting in the coffee room and scoffing at me for doing this—they have shredded their copies of your letter and given them to the rats.

I must challenge you on the point that the scientific community of which I am a member writes in an “unprofessional, slip-shod
way which breeds inhumanity." Although I am now studying to be a behavioral therapist, I hold a degree in English myself, and I assure you that I can turn a nifty phrase and trump up a sentence with just as much laconic style as you. The difference between us is that I understand my work and you do not. I, and my colleagues, use the rat as a test subject, not because we are bound by, as you call it, a "tradition of absurdity" (a phrase, by the way, which applies itself more readily to your field than to mine), but because we are devoted to knowledge, and rats' brains have the same constituents, the same chemicals, and the same basic neural connections as our own brains do.¹ Rats' brains are differentiated from ours only by cortex size and overall shape, and thus they are excellent models for study. As early as 350 B.C., Aristotle (a guy I'll bet you've fawned over now and again) dissected live animals in the pursuit of scientific study. But I don't expect you to understand this. Although it is true, as you mentioned, that some experimenters at our Head Injury Clinic were being protested against for awhile, their research simulated the effects of auto accidents on cats via artificial means—they didn't actually drive the cats around mercilessly in a car and crash them into a brick wall (as the analogy in your form letter would lead one to think), but controlled the brain damage to the cats in the laboratory in order to examine neurological results of injury and develop more effective treatment strategies for human car accident victims. Naturally, my colleagues and I harden our hearts against your kind of uninformed, self-serving criticism.

¹Thus science uncovers parallels: quail, poisoned by blue, sour water, afterwards avoid blue but not sour; rats, poisoned by blue sour water, afterwards, like man, avoid sour but not blue.
I must thank you, however, for prodding me into writing a paper that has been gnawing at me for some time. As a first-year graduate student, I've been struggling to nestle into my own niche in the scientific-academic community, and I think you've helped me find a way to "bed down." Your letter prompted me to write up the attached study (my first graduate paper), in which I put into practice your suggestion that we "courageously tell the world the truth about [our] work, instead of hiding behind obscure, degrading, speciesist language." I am sending the attached study out to the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* for possible publication. It is impeccably researched and I am enthusiastic about it; I hope that it also helps to correct some of your misguided notions about animal experimentation, especially in regards to the rat. Again, thank you.

Albert Frick
Figurative Language: Bridging the Scientific-Rhetorical-Rat Gap

Albert Frick
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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the partial results of a behavioral study of Norway rats—specifically concerning one rat which behaved in a rather unruly yet fascinating fashion. The original intention of this research was to test the theory that rats, when exposed over time to inescapable shock, will accomplish complete passivity even when forcibly prompted to rise. Many studies have proven that rats are capable of both learned helplessness and surprising eccentric behavior, and this study resembles those in that it is designed to provoke a lever-pulling response from the rats’ amazingly durable little paws. The real contribution of the current writing, however, comes in its presentation of a new communication theory, especially useful to those researchers who are faced with both criticism from outside parties and the problem of reluctant and often vexing test subjects, both rats and

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2 Two recent examples from the same journal will suffice:

Devenport and Holloway, "The Rat's Resistance to Superstition: Role of the Hippocampus." Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology. 1980. Vol. 94, No. 4. 691-705. This study illustrated that rats, unlike pigeons, seem immune to the development of superstition in their lever-pulling habits.

Dohanich and Ward. "Sexual Behavior in Male Rats Following Intracerebral Estrogen Application." Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology. 1980. Vol. 94, No. 4. 712-722. This study found that estrogen injections induce males to superstitiously attempt mating behavior even after castration.
otherwise. The resulting rhetorical principles that have been evolved will be peppered throughout the syntax of this study, and are even evidenced subtly in this abstract.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a lot of attention has been focused on the issue of the “morality” of animal experimentation. Most recently, the House of Representatives has heard an amendment to section 19 of the Animal Welfare Act which will allow “private” citizens (if there are such beings) to sue organizations which they feel are violating the act. Thus, attacks by “animal rights” groups flood our mailboxes, and we are even accused of promoting an “immoral vocabulary” about animals which reveals our allegedly black and adrenal hearts, while thumping our own Darwinian chests ape-like in defense of scientific advancement. The underlying problem is twofold: as behavioral scientists we must objectively record only observable and noteworthy behavior; as human beings we admire aesthetics. The outcome: a seeming robotic diction which is admirable for its clinical purity, but marks a low notch on the creative yardstick. This writer—who holds a B.A. in English and is now pursuing and M.S. in Psychology—has spent the last few months doing a behavioral study on rats, and thus is particularly sensitive to the need for appeasing both the behavioral scientist and the whining “animal rights” aesthete

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4Some diction taken from a form letter written by one Ms. Verna Hoffer, the Pennsylvania State University.
by writing in the cleanest and the most pleasing language possible.

At a cocktail party, a respected American writer once said, "For me, the Holocaust and a corncob are the same." This clever little equation makes it clear that language, by definition, allows equity among all subject matter. Further, language itself is divorced from morality: whether evoking a mound of seared flesh or a docile dinner plate, the written word reflects the subjectivity of the reader more than that of the writer. Yet we scientists meticulously cloak ourselves in the language of the lab coat while our readers, both professional and otherwise, know perfectly well that we are waking, walking, moral beings, with cozy fireplaces and curled-up kittens at home. The scientist-as-citizen may torture his ferret without purpose and properly be called immoral, but the scientist-as-writer is recording observable and historical facts, and thus morality is not the real issue.

We should, therefore, strive to make our writing both clinically accurate and prudently artistic, especially considering the subjective nature of the "animal rights" persons who peruse our journals in search of rhetorical atrocities. The suggestion provided herein is to use figurative language—to cast our experimental animals in subjective, flattering, and artistic language where appropriate, but without violating scientific purity. Thus a rat's stripped belly can properly be said to be "portly" rather than "substantial," then later be called "smelly" instead of "effluvial." The net effect will be a creative pacifying of both our audiences: to the reader demanding "equality" for the rats, we offer, through language, quiet applause for the rats'  

considerable contributions to science; to our fellow scientists, we report with innovation and publicly juice their pens to respond in kind. Such technique is, after all, more fluent, and has even crept naturally into the writing of such respected scientists as Martin Seligman; Seligman tells how, after fifty trials, the best dogs will leap across a barrier gracefully in order to avoid moderate-to-severe shock. On principle, if it’s good enough for Seligman it should be good enough for everyone. Some might argue that the use of figurative language will curb the level of objectivity necessary to our work, but this writer urges such skeptics to honestly assess the rhetorical achievement which this paper embodies, then see if you, too, don’t wish to write in this new, neat way.

A further modification in our writing is also suggested: let’s cut back on the passive voice and courageously assert our identity within our work. The damnably overrated use of the passive voice dates back to the 1920’s and we witness the unflappable practice of the experimenter avoiding the personal pronoun “I” in everything from technical journals to modern fiction. It has become painfully obvious that the passive voice is often a rowboat concealed inside of an ark—an itty-bitty individual denying his wee selfhood in favor of joint membership in the already overpopulated human species. The

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6 In addition to their use in the Behavioral Sciences, rats have been used generously to help combat aging, cancer, and diabetes, to name just a few. For an extended report of the rat’s prolific contributions to biomedical research, see Health Benefits of Animal Research, edited by William I. Gay, D.V.M. Published by the Foundation for Biomedical Research. 1985.


passive voice does function admirably when we are presenting our experimental methods, but the sad truth is that by avoiding the word “I” we are subduing authorial pride when we should be awarding ourselves credit, and our unfriendly “animal-loving” readers perch like hoot owls and screech “Who? Who? Who? Who? Who wrote this?” into the yawning abyss of our authorial canyons. In short, passive voice and depersonalized pronouns have both become cliché, and the use of “I” allows the researcher to boldly assert his identity within an esoteric environment where it is becoming increasingly difficult both to affirm one’s own importance and innovatively test the rat.10 I also find it invigorating to smarten up experimental reporting with tropes and schemes—in particular, metaphor, anthimeria, paradox, and litote. Let us be equally conscious of using plain language in favor of technospeak at times: we’re all familiar with the too-popular phrase—“the biota exhibited a 100% mortality response”—when it is equally accurate and infinitely more satisfying to write “all the fish died.”11 In short: let us

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10 This approach allows me to compete, philosophically speaking, with some of the more sophisticated recent studies. For example:

Taylor, Griffin, and Rupich. “Conspecific Urine Marking in Male Rats (Rattus norvegicus) Selected for Relative Aggressiveness.” Journal of Comparative Psychology. 1988. Vol. 102. 72-77. The research discovered that aggressive rats—whether injected with fluorescein solution or not—deposited urine on conspecifics more prolifically than nonaggressive rats made similar deposits.

Pilz, Schnitzler, and Menne. “Acoustic Startle Threshold of the Albino Rat.” Journal of Comparative Psychology. 1987. Vol. 101. 67-72. The research revealed that free-ranging naïve rats in a ballistic chamber had higher levels of startle-response to acoustic signals than did hammock-restrained naïve rats in the same setting.


11 From Thompson, Edward T. “How to Write Clearly.” Published by International Paper Company, New York.
be bold wordsmiths, wheeling our way into all of our readers’ minds and myths.

The original intention of my experiment was simple: to determine if rats, after reaching a state of learned helplessness, could be returned to their original naive (untrained) state, and again actively seek to avoid shock. Seligman successfully achieved this restoration of naive behavior in dogs,\textsuperscript{12} and when my research is completed, I eventually intend to attempt the same kind of restoration in the surviving rats. But as you’ve guessed by now, my essential contribution to the current research really comes via language, and the actual “rat end” of the experiment is still in progress. This particular paper was inspired by an unusually shrewd and elusive rat, whom I shall give a proper name later in the text. This rat, though only one among the seventeen who unfortunately have thus far died during my experiment, exhibited such an uncommon response to behavioral therapy that I will not touch upon it until later in this paper, where there will be sufficient space for expansion.

\section*{II. METHODS}

\textit{Shuttleboxes}

The thirty-eight shuttleboxes for the rats were painted with Cresodip to repel lice. Each box was made from a standard dormer cage and measured 3 feet x 2 feet to provide the rats with

\textsuperscript{12}See Seligman, Martin E.P. \textit{Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death}. University of Pennsylvania: Wilt Freeman and Company. 1975. When 100 of Seligman’s dogs had achieved learned helplessness in the shuttleboxes and thus refused to jump the barriers to escape shock, Seligman removed the barriers from the boxes and forcibly dragged the dogs to the safe sides of the shuttleboxes 25 to 200 times—until about two-thirds of them were actually able to relearn the original behavior of gracefully leaping the shuttlebox barriers to escape shock.
ample room for stretching and running in little circles. A six-inch high metal partition was secured in the center of each shuttlebox which the rat could vault if desired.

Electric Current

In the shuttlebox grid floors, an electric current of 40 volts was supplied for sixty-second intervals every thirteen or ninety minutes, depending on the time of day. The metal partition was electrified as well because Hunter found that a rat will actually perch competently on the shuttlebox partition to try to escape shock. The front screens of each cage were also charged continuously with 20 volts to discourage the mutinous behavior of screen-clinging.

Reinforcement Levers

Two reinforcement levers were provided in the back of each shuttlebox—one red lever and one green lever; one on either side of the partition. On the even-numbered days of the experiment, the green levers had to be depressed 100 times between each shock for the rats to receive positive reinforcement, while the red levers had to be depressed only 50 times. On the odd-numbered days of the experiment, the conditions were reversed.

13 Note that I consulted a veterinarian in determining an adequate shuttlebox size, as required by the Animal Welfare Act—*even though it does not apply to rats.*
15 The reasoning here should be obvious: If the task were not rather difficult, the rat, unlike members of other species, would perform it successfully each time. I was testing the theory that rats would learn that one lever was preferable to another on certain days, but then would discover *learned helplessness* and finally choose to make no distinction between the levers at all, finally lying passively during the shocks regardless of which side of the shuttlebox housed them. This particular experimental design was developed because, historically, the rat has
Feeding and Watering

Positive reinforcement was provided through separate water and feed ducts, which opened and emptied one ounce of water and one ounce of Purina Lab Chow into each shuttlebox at the same time that the electrical shocks were administered. If and when the rats didn’t have the gumption to depress the levers the required number of times, the electrical shock was provided without the feeding and watering.

Figurative Language

I cannot take complete credit for realizing the power of figurative language. I was inspired, in part, by the writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet. He helped me to see that, like metaphor, figurative language is never an “innocent figure of speech.” When we say that a rat’s behavior is “capricious” or that he “huddles” in his cage, we are not, and we can not, simply be recording physical data—we are choosing analogical vocabulary that reveals, as Robbe-Grillet calls it, “an entire metaphysical system”—and it’s this system which our scientific-creative minds have been charged with stewardship of. Figurative language does not make us one with the rats or make them one with us; rather, it whirls us further into the embrace of science, while keeping the rats at arm’s length by forcing us to really look at them, refurbish them in the purest terms we can muster, listen to their lessons, and witness their existence.

proven to be a much craftier test-subject than the dog in terms of learned helplessness, and the new designs are highly valued.

While watching over the laudable behavior of the favored rat in my experiment, *figurative language* became especially appropriate. I developed a Figurative Words Log of over 200 entries so far, *just using adjectives and nouns*, that we can begin assigning to the rat, and I'm starting to get a handle on the verbs and adverbs as well. Here is an excerpt from my log which lends itself nicely to the rat:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Scientific Adjective</th>
<th>Figurative Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>trifling</td>
<td>heroic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hooded</td>
<td>decorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naive</td>
<td>pristine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helpless</td>
<td>autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phlegmatic</td>
<td>seasoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional</td>
<td>errant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Scientific Noun</th>
<th>Figurative Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>trauma</td>
<td>incompletion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sacrifice</td>
<td>servitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesion</td>
<td>sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>safe</td>
<td>tranquil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stress</td>
<td>spiritedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death</td>
<td>grace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, care must be taken so that the figurative words chosen are used with consistency and discretion, and different experimenters will have different preferences.

### III. RESULTS

After voiding the rats' bladders via soft paint brushes inserted into their anogenital areas to rid them of impurities
and ensure relative equality among them, I began the experiment by placing the rats in the shuttleboxes—one per box. After just two weeks, most rats displayed the classic symptoms of the early stages of learned helplessness: prolific amounts of excretion (defecation and urination), spirited head-shaking, dainty paw-padding, superstitious leaping, open sleeplessness, durable “box-lapping,” upside down doggie paddling, posing or freezing when touched, seasoned huddling in a cage corner, and errant, indiscriminate lever-pressing.

One rat, though, which I shall now name “Max” (“Greatest in Excellence”) did something unprecedented. For four days, Max clung adamantly to the front of his cage, even though the screen he clutched was under constant electrical charge, and he squinted at me mysteriously like an animal—or pseudo-animal—from one of Poe’s fictions. Max seemed at once servile and tranquil: arching his back in the manner of either sexual tease or feigned agony. He bobbed his head continually yet also exuded some sort of contrived motor-pattern that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. He screeched an odd “aeaaka, aeaaka” sound and occasionally pounded his nose.

18By the way, this name was not chosen, as some readers may be tempted to think, to resemble the “Max” in John Barth’s Giles Goat-Boy (1966). Any resemblance is purely coincidental.
19I am reminded of “The Black Cat,” “Hop-Frog; or, the Eight Charmed Ourang-Outangs,” Pym’s faithful dog “Tiger,” and, of course, “The Raven.”
20I first suspected that Max might be an offspring of the strain of rats developed by Ward’s experiments on chronic stress (Psychopathology: Experimental Models, ed. Martin E.P. Seligman. University of Pennsylvania: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1977. 397-399.) in which pregnant female rats were placed into tight Plexiglas containers illuminated by floodlights. The male pups of these mothers ended up acting very strangely indeed, but Max could not have been an heir of these. In fact, I found out that Max was brought in by one of my colleagues, who had removed him from his neighbor’s basement.
against the screen with all his might. He was, in fact, so obviously lively and tyrannical that his very manner said "I will not learn." While most of his caged peers were busy being either docile or hyperaggressive within just a few yards of him, Max alone clung to the electrically charged screen in a state of utter incompletion.

I decided to meet his challenge. By day, I held "stare-downs" with him to try to hold his attention and freeze him in place, but he remained always in motion—a flexion here, a quiver there. Even when he seemed to stop I could see that his fur was bristling, and he bared his teeth and hissed right at me just when I thought he was tuckered out. He made me feel at odds with myself. In the evenings I pondered, read a lot, and found comfort in the histories of others who had been openly challenged with similar forms of aggressive skepticism. Still, I found myself perplexed.

On Day Three of Max's clinging, even stranger things began to happen. As though he knew I was keeping tabs on him with figurative language in my mind, Max did odd things to purposely pique my mind-pen: he hung upside-down and gnawed his long incisors viciously on the screen bottom; he

21 To quote from Helplessness (Seligman, 1975, 170): "Richter reasoned that being held in the hand of a predator like man, having whiskers trimmed, and being put in a vat of water from which escape is impossible produces a sense of helplessness in the rat. This must have sounded like a radical speculation to his tough-minded readers, but he substantiated it."

Also, just one month after William Faulkner was blackballed from the Scribblers of Sigma Upsilon—an Oxford campus literary society—because of his "airs," a series of parodies of his early poetry began to appear in the Oxford campus newspaper, the first of which transmogrified Faulkner's seductive maiden of "Naiads' Song" into a barnyard animal. (See Michael Grimwood's Heart in Conflict: Faulkner's Struggle with Vocation. 1987. 25.)

On a more personal note: one of my mother's favorite sayings was "those who coolly eye the tiger need not fear the fang."
coolly wiggled his ears for hours; he scraped his belly from side
to side until it was raw and filled with sacrifice scars; he thrust
his tail straight out through a screen-hole, blatantly wagging it
in long, seductive whips. In short, Max acted completely
pristine and sexual, stirring in me the bizarre notion that he
was both my slave and my intimate—his lord-brother, his
hangman-lover. That night I dreamed of Max heaping himself
upon me, chilling my heart, writhing on my throat, his cold
lips seeking mine, and then falling back into a lounge chair
and holding his belly thick with laughter, assuring me that it
was all a simple jest between two friends. When I woke I
realized that Max stirred something unnerving and neighborly
in me—mocked by his unctuous gaze, I felt overwhelmed with
the simple fact of being alive. Momentarily, I had the

\[22\text{See Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum."}
\[23\text{Strangely, this sort of thing has happened to me before. In seventh grade, Mrs. DILKER showed us an experiment that proved frogs are sometimes not smart enough to jump out of water. First, she stuck a frog in a pan of boiling water and it leapt right out, slipping out of her hands and off the high black tabletop onto the floor, and causing a merry flurry through the room as girls shrieked into their pigtails, boys flung their sharpened pencils and metal rulers to the floor, hoping to draw blood and see if it was really green; Mrs. DILKER high-stepped among the scraping chairs, batting at her feet with a broom, and spiral notebooks fluttered over our heads, snowing little bits of soft, curled notebook paper into our hair. Then, when she caught the frog, Mrs. DILKER showed us how it paddled around happily for a while in a pan of water at room temperature, and didn't even try to jump out as the water was heated to boiling—it just sat there, oblivious of its churning blood, bulging its eyes out and pumping its long throat back and forth more and more rapidly, the water around it rolling into bubbles that were clear, then white, then green, then pink.}

One more incident occurs to me too. One sunny afternoon, when I was
sixteen and driving alone for the first time, I saw a rabbit dart out from the
bushes and dive right under my spinning left tire, prompting that familiar
thump of bone-crushed-below which sickened my heart in those days. I stopped
and watched the rabbit in the rearview mirror. It flickered up four-feet high off
the ground, its body twisted and its head mashed red, with some neural
irrational thought of taking Max home and making a pet of him,²⁴ sitting with him at the kitchen table over a breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and orange juice.²⁵

Keep in mind that this was not ordinary behavior for me. I wear sensible shoes, plant them firmly on the ground, and drive a Saab, yet watching over Max made my mind reel a bit and sparked both my creative and scientific instincts simultaneously. For three days, I watched and recorded subjective data in fascination while Max continued his antics, showing visible signs of paradoxical behavior: emitting wild squeals while seeming to hold his very breath; bleeding from the anus and bending around acrobatically to nonchalantly lick the blood from the tail; showing no normal wholesale reaction to the continuous electrical charge coursing through his body, yet looking, as much as a rat can, forlorn, servile, graceful, and sincere. These particular observations, I argue, are a direct

connection obviously awry, but the brain still somehow alive, telling the body to keep spinning, spinning, spinning, and not give in, then it landed and kicked off the macadam again, spitting something off to the side this time, and flopped up and down a few more times like an elastic fish, until I whirred the car backwards and crushed it under the same tire.

These are two of my sharpest memories, and they illustrate, I think, how moved we can be by animals at times, and how profoundly their haphazard fates remind us of our own fragile and privileged existence.


Less fictionally, see Hendrickson, Robert. More Cunning Than Man. New York: Stein and Day Publishers. 1985. The famous petite but well-kept Rat Woman of Miami lived with over 300 rats in her bungalow, feeding them lettuce and corn, until police ordered all the rats killed and the Rat Woman told them that people bothered her a lot more than rats ever did.

²⁵ Interestingly, rats manufacture large doses of vitamin C in their bodies all by themselves and thus have no external need for it. See Paton, William. Man and Mouse. New York: Oxford University Press. 1984. 125.
result of my unique approach to this study: without the use of “I,” I could not have recorded many of these significant experimental results; without Max’s incredible behavior, there would be no reason to single him out; without figurative language, there would be no Max.

On Day Four, Max refused to move at all and simply clinched at a 45° angle to the screen, his claws frozen in place, his eyes vaguely fixed on a point somewhere in front of him, his tail curled in a frozen half-switch. I stared back as into a mirror—at once mystified, enraptured, appalled, and uplifted.

On Day Five, I opened Max’s cage and pried his stiff form off the screen. He fell from my hand onto his back on the cage’s latticed grid-floor, looking for all the world like he was waiting to be barbequed over the shredded paper and his own ammonia-filled droppings, rolling rigidly from side to side, like one of those Weeble-toys that happily rocks back and forth but refuses ever to fall down.

IV. DISCUSSION

Fondly, I am reminded once again of Martin Seligman’s master work on helplessness. In one of my favorite chapters, Seligman captures the beautiful scientific paradox that continually embraces our work. First he tells, in a seemingly clinical and dispassionate way, how his own three-month-old son is suckling at his wife’s breast in typical behavior/response patterns even as his father writes his book.26 Just a few pages later, Seligman lyrically presents the ongoing enigmatic paradigm of uterine and rearing factors in rats: When pregnant

rats who have been offered inescapable shock eventually give birth, do their pups show unnatural fears because the fears were transferred through the magic of the womb, or are the fears learned through the mother’s obviously incompetent rearing habits? The studies designed to settle this issue, and the melding of the scientific with the aesthetic, continue.

Finally, I hope I have clarified the point that the compelling subtleties of figurative language implicit in Seligman’s work and explicit in my own work are frank, inspiring, humane, and, in the end, sublime.

And so I leave you with the tortured and lofty image of Max: hovering belly-flat against his cage in the shape of a cross—blunt nose lifted to the heavens, hairy ears flattened back in supplication, outstretched paws fanned and forgiving, chest swelling triumphant above mangy stomach, feet dangling underneath in utter helplessness, and tail cocked at its elbow, seemingly ready to strike at those who dare look closer.