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Cold and Calculating

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Abstract

This nonfiction essay investigates the relationship between eye contact and power in different situations. It brings up the idea that animals and humans are less different than often thought to be, and how body language is transcendent. It uses this underlying theme to investigate the author's changing relationship with her father.

Keywords

animal vs. human, nonfiction, communication, body language

Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Nonfiction

Katie Slezak

Travel Writing

2nd REVISION

Cold and Calculating

Its talons pinched through the thick leather of the glove encasing my forearm. We were told not to look him in the eye when we were handling him, but when a great horned owl is grabbing onto your arm while staring you down, it's a little hard to not be affected, to not be drawn in by those wide, calculating eyes. I tried to look anywhere but at them; I counted the wrinkles in each pale, clenched toe, studied the coarse fur that covered its feet and legs, and tried to guess exactly how long each dark, curving talon was. But, as a slight wind brought the scent of warm manure from the Cornell Plantations near the Raptor Center and ruffled the owl's soft feathers, I looked up from the owl's feet to the pointed horns that jutted out like slanted, angry eyebrows above those yellow eyes. Though the Cornell professor in charge of teaching us the ins and outs of bird of prey care had threatened that eye contact with such a predator might be the last thing our eyes saw, that owl and I stood frozen on the stage staring at each other.

In all the sappy romances I've read, watched, or heard about, people describe moments of significant eye contact. They say the world melts away and that it's just the two of them standing there watching each other, appreciating each other. Now I'm not trying to say that this owl was in love with me, or that he appreciated my tight grip on the leather jesses tied around his thick ankles, but at that moment I understood the power of eye contact. When my blue eyes lingered on his yellow ones, the crowd of high school kids sitting on the grass for the raptor program, the

other high school juniors in Cornell Summer College, and the fear of this enormous bird disappeared.

The owl clicked his beak, a sound similar to a pen falling onto a tile floor, and let his eyelids slowly drop down. In a movement that was somehow an equal combination of jerky and smooth, he rotated his head away from me. It was only when he looked away that I noticed how fast my heart was beating; my skin was tight and cold, the skin covering my carotid artery almost jumping with each heartbeat. I exhaled slowly, trying to get myself together with the thought that though I could never beat my sisters in a staring contest, I had beaten a dangerous predator. Despite the loosening of my nervous muscles when the confidence kicked in, I couldn't help but see that cold, calculating yellow gaze every time I blinked, the eyebrows protruding angrily.

My family went out to celebrate the night after the last day of my summer internship working in the small mammal department of the Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange, NJ. We went to my favorite restaurant, a little Irish pub with alcohol anecdotes painted on the walls in lilted script and really good corned beef sandwiches. My dad met us there when we had gotten a table and a few beers and I was passing my phone around, showing my family the pictures I broke the rules to take that day. He eagerly reached for the phone any time it would come near him, asking questions about the sloth, the bobcat, the otters that I had loved and taken care of all summer.

"I'm sorry I missed the zoo visit," my dad said softly when I finished telling a story about using grapes to help coax a red panda into his travel crate to be taken to the veterinarian for a check-up. I looked at him over the smooth, bubbly light beer I was sipping, my eyes narrowed.

I could only think of his excitement the first time I was lucky enough to get close enough to being a wild animal trainer, when I was a trainer for five minutes.

“You excited?” My dad leaned down from the row of bleachers behind me to ask quietly.

“Is that a real question?” I held my hands up to show him their anxious vibrations.

“What do you—” His question was interrupted by the frantically waving hands of the worker next to me as she gestured that it was my cue.

Though I was a junior in college, I had been bouncing happily while walking into the Dolphin Discovery exhibit. While visiting me at Gettysburg College for Parents’ Weekend, my parents had been searching for something to do that we hadn’t already done. Knowing and sharing my love of animals, my dad suggested Baltimore Aquarium. My childish enthusiasm earned me a question from the worker at the entrance: “Do you want to do me a favor?” I wish I could say I didn’t scream my ecstatic agreement. So when it was time for me to go up the stairs to the viewing platform in front of the amphitheater full of spectators, my shaking hands were a mix of uncontrollable excitement and nerves.

“This is Foster. He is a young male who’s about 6 years old. He is relatively new here and doesn’t usually do this trick, but he’s going to come up onto this platform on his belly and wait there to be rubbed. Dolphins love to be touched.” The trainer with the headset’s voice got louder as I climbed the steps toward her.

She asked me my name as she covered the mouthpiece of the microphone headset.

“When Foster comes up here on his belly, Katie is going to feed him a fish and she’s going to pet him a little bit to reward him for correctly performing the trick.”

The dolphin slid up onto the ramp, causing a wave of water that sloshed around the ankles of my boots. He came to a stop directly in front of me, mouth open, tail up, waiting to be praised. I didn’t expect the expressive eyes that stared back at me. They were dark and somehow

droopy as they darted around in search of the person with the fish. The trainer put one in my hand with a moist slap and I bent down to run my hand over the dolphin's back, from the spot above his eyes, to directly in front of his blowhole.

“Hi, Foster, it's nice to meet you,” I whispered to the dolphin, forgetting about the trainer standing next to me. “I've always wanted to meet a dolphin.”

His black eye held my gaze as I squatted next to him, the skin rubbery and firm beneath my fingers, tiny grains of older layers coming off in my hands. I ignored the hushed request of the trainer—she was again covering the headset to avoid broadcasting it to the whole amphitheater—as she urged me to give Foster the fish and head back to my seat. Eventually my hand stopped moving above his eyes as the two of us just looked at each other, sharing a level of intelligence and awareness that I hadn't before seen in an animal. I looked away, letting him win that staring contest as I tossed the fish onto his quivering pink tongue. He snapped his mouth shut and let out a puff from his blowhole as he somehow lurched himself back into the pool.

“That was awesome,” my dad whispered when I got back to my seat, his hand squeezing my shoulder as I sat down. “I'm so glad you got to do that.”

“I had to work.” His brow was furrowed, his voice low and concerned. He was usually more of a joking man than an overly sympathetic one, so the concern in his voice was disconcerting. “I'm sorry, Katie. I asked off, but you know, they're having that water crisis down the shore because they're still repairing that plant that the hurricane destroyed, and all of us at the water company have to spend a certain number of hours there. I'm sorry. You know I wanted to be there.”

I could only imagine how excited he would have been to see me get to train the gibbons I worked with all summer, rather than to have one chance to get close to them for less than five minutes like the dolphins at Baltimore Aquarium.

The fence behind us had quickly grown crowded as people invaded each other's personal space in an attempt to watch the keepers feed the gibbons. I had tried to ignore the clicking and flashing of my mother's camera. She and my sisters had come for the first time to watch me train the gibbons. I had looked around, searching for my dad in the crowd of people near my family. He had promised he would be there. Unable to find him, I had rearranged the light blue surgical mask I was forced to wear to prevent the exchange of germs, and took my place in front of Sovann to explain what would happen next.

The black one with the white cheeks is Sovann, he's our male. He's seven. Sovann's dark eyes had darted between me, Suki, and the exhibit behind him. Yellow jackets had nested in the ground just outside their exhibit, and the bees always made the gibbons nervous. The blonde one on the right is Suki, she's our female. She's eight. Suki had grunted a few times, her dark lips forming that familiar "o" shape. It had seemed to comfort Sovann; he began to become more still. We're going to have them perform a series of behaviors. These are not tricks, they are behaviors designed to make it easier to check their health. We can ask them to stick out their arms, or their tongues, and we can check them without sedating them. Annemarie had pulled out the ultrasound machine we were training Suki to be comfortable with. If she got pregnant, it would be better and safer if the veterinarian could examine her in the least stressful way possible. It's also good for them to be challenged in learning these behaviors because they stimulate their

brains and make each day different. Annemarie and I are going to be giving Suki and Sovann our full attention because we expect theirs, so please hold all questions until the end.

Annemarie had nodded at me and I stepped closer to Sovann, close enough to count every wrinkle on his knuckles. “Turn around.” My voice had been calm and confident as I put two fingers together and made a circle in the air. The black ape had spun quickly, pressing his back against the mesh so I could poke him with my finger to mimic the touch of an injection. He turned back, watching my eyes over the surgical mask.

As I pulled a piece of strawberry from the small green bucket attached my belt loop and placed it on his outstretched tongue, I had wondered again where my dad was. As the animal lover of my two parents, he was engaged in hearing about what I did each day, whereas my mom was simply happy that I was doing something I loved that would serve to help me get into vet school. He had been working a lot more, but he told me he had taken off that day so he could see me on my last day at the zoo.

“Open.” I pressed my index finger and thumb together, spreading them apart in a reverse pinch when I had gotten Sovann’s attention. He had opened his mouth eagerly, his long, white teeth vivid against his black fur and bruise-colored tongue. I gave him another piece of strawberry. “Hand.” I had placed my right hand against the mesh and he reached his left hand up to mirror mine. It had been warm and strong as he stuck his fingers through the mesh to wrap them around mine.

I only watched him over my beer, nodding slightly. I could act mature and say it was fine, that he had tried to make it but couldn’t, that my mom had recorded it and he could watch it later. But I couldn’t. Something struck me in this situation. I don’t know if it was that weird heavy

feeling in my chest that came from finishing the internship that served as probably the best experience of my life, the fact that he wasn't there to see it when he was the only one that truly understood why it meant so much, or my own stubbornness. I just knew at the time that it was unforgiveable, a once-in-a-lifetime thing. I knew it was immature and unfair, but being a one-beer queer that was one beer in, I just held my narrowed eye contact and said nothing, trying to make my anger and disappointment clear. He finally broke it and looked down at his menu, running his hand over his face.

My sisters and I stood at the kitchen window, our arms folded tightly across our chests in the same defensive posture our father usually held when he was uncomfortable. We watched as our father stood slightly bent, one hand wrapped firmly around each handlebar of his old purple BMW motorcycle as he fiddled with the clutch. His face had a haunted look: his nose was too long, too thin, too pointy; his cheeks were shadowed where the skin had pulled in and formed hollows; he had definitely lost more hair. This decision clearly wasn't agreeing with him.

“Should we go help? Maybe we should help.” I pulled at my lower lip nervously. I wished I hadn't suggested it.

My sisters had called it immediately that I would be the weak link, the one to crack and talk to him first. Aly had even included in a letter she wrote to him that he shouldn't take advantage of my compassion, my inability to hold grudges against people I loved, my strong relationship with him. But I wasn't a weak link that day to suggest that we help, I just couldn't watch it happen. It was making me sick, my stomach restless with the struggle between hatred and pity; I wanted to keep hating him, I didn't want to feel bad for him. He just looked so old, so much frailer and more awkward than I remembered him being as he tried to heave that reluctant

motorcycle up the hill next to the house and into the big white rental van in the driveway. The last thing I wanted to do was help the man that had left our family six months earlier for another woman out of the blue, breaking my mother's heart. I didn't want to do anything for a man who would rather have spent the day with some woman that watching his daughter train gibbons. Why come to the aid of a man who hadn't spoken to me since he called me that October night of my senior year of college to tell me he was leaving? He broke my sisters' hearts, my heart.

"I don't know," my younger sister Aly shifted from foot to foot. "I don't want to."

"Let's just do it. The sooner he can get that and the rest of his stuff, the sooner we'll be rid of him, right?" Maggie turned around, heading toward the stairs. "Let's just do it."

I had to fight the dogs back as I pushed open my bedroom door. The two of them were hidden away behind a closed door, the wooden barrier failing to muffle their chimp-like sounds of frustration as they whined. Aly and I had been adamant about keeping our father from seeing the dogs. He loved them. We knew they would jump all over him because they hadn't seen him in forever, whining and writhing with their efforts to get as close to him as possible like they would do whenever Aly and I would come home from college. I slipped on an old pair of sneakers while I whispered promises to the dogs that they didn't have to worry, that it would be over soon, that they could be free soon. Aly and I met at the front door, my hand resting on the cold door handle for a minute before pushing through.

He looked up when we turned the corner to the side of the house. His brow was furrowed, the parallel vertical wrinkles that never quite left their post above his nose were deep with frustration. His eyebrows were just as I remembered them—short, slanting tufts that were too unruly to sit flat on his face. It was his eyes that had changed. When I was younger, they had

been a comforting shade of light brown, but now they seemed yellower, no longer warm. They also couldn't meet mine.

“Gonna help?” he mumbled, his voice low and strained.

Aly and I didn't respond—we didn't even nod—as I took hold of some part of the motorcycle on the opposite side of my father, Aly gripping the seat from the back. He cleared his throat anxiously and counted to three. Pushing hard, the three of us pushed it up the hill, covering more ground in the five seconds it took us to push it up to the van than he had in the whole hour he had been struggling for. Aly dropped off once it looked like there was a clear shot to the ramp behind the van, but I kept pushing until it had gone up and into the back. Once it had been settled on its kickstand so my father could strap it in, I brushed my hands off and turned around to leave—I didn't want to be in such a tight space, really any space, with him anymore.

“Wait.” His voice was rough and raspy as he grabbed my arm.

I looked down at his hand on my arm, my mouth open a little bit in a mixture of surprise and disgust. He hadn't spoken to me in six months, he hadn't made eye contact any of the four times he had come to the house to get more of his things, he hadn't even texted me on any of the holidays that had passed. What made him think he could touch me? He must have seen my face and realized his mistake, dropping his hand quickly to his side. I watched him carefully while I waited for him to speak, searching for the man I had known for 21 years. His eyes flitted around the van, looking anywhere but into mine. But I held my gaze, looking right at his yellow eyes in hopes that he could feel it, feel the coldness and dislike I was trying hard to convey, feel his own cowardice in his inability to return my stare.

“Happy Birthday, Katie.” His voice cracked a little as he finally met my gaze.

I couldn't look at him, my eyes dropping away. It was the first time he had spoken to me in six months. I spun around and practically ran out of that van and into the house, pushing past Maggie and Aly as they argued because we hadn't waited for Maggie. I ran to the bathroom, bending over the gray toilet as I gagged. He had bested me, throwing me off with sadness rather than the cold calculation of a cheating liar who didn't love his children that I had expected his stare to hold. He had won.