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## A Precocious Love of Animals

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### Part I - Beetles

*Ever since I discovered animals*

*I have loved plants.*

H. Beyer, actor

Our school was a near-square russet brick building, which had reportedly once housed a chocolate factory, something I occasionally thought might be true when a whiff of vanilla—weak, yet sufficiently pungent in its strangeness—penetrated the habitual stench of beeswax and piss in the heat of the summer sun or, more rarely, in winter, by the heat of the cast-iron radiators, particles of whose peeling brown anti-rust paint I collected for a while, as I did the flies that had croaked on the soapstone window seats, which I would dismember with my mother’s hair-removal tweezers while hiding behind a wobbly tower of textbooks, preferably during maths lessons, into their component parts, before heaping these—the bodies with the bodies, the heads with the heads, the legs

with the legs, the wings with the wings—into four different-coloured *Sprachlos* cigarillo boxes.

Like a small lidless box inside a larger one perforated with square, glazed air holes and peepholes, the playground lay inside the school, and across it scampered two rats, not especially fast or close together, throughout the autumn of my sixth grade, always early in the day, before assembly, until one morning the caretaker knocked at least one of the two dead with his coal shovel. The other, however, far from running away in panic, pattered in a tight circle around the victim, as if it were drunk, shocked and confused, and such was the caretaker's surprise that he kneeled down in spite of his rheumatoid arthritis to take a closer look at the remaining rat, still clutching the shovel for safety's sake. Unable to believe his eyes, even at this range, or fearing for their sight (on account of the rat), he reached for the reading glasses that were otherwise tucked, solely for decorative purposes, along with an old fountain pen, into the bib of his never-truly-clean, yet always stiffly starched and perfectly pressed overalls.

Having gone to such lengths, the caretaker could not fail to notice that the surviving rat's eyeballs were completely milky, and that it grasped between the yellow fangs of its mouth, fringed with bristling, quivering whiskers, a twig by which—to quote the caretaker—its 'fallen fellow rodent' had led it 'through life like a faithful guide dog'.

Until the caretaker took permanent retirement around the end of the new-year holidays, Rolf—for that, he told us, was what he had christened the white-eyed rat, with the aid of some Pilsner lager, 'in memory of the dead'—lived in the caretaker's boiler room, where the rat was nice and warm; and so were we on the rare occasions we were allowed to feed it—but only with bits of bread, never with sausage.

Almost exactly in the middle of the virtually rectangular playground stood—I do not wish to say 'grew', for compared to what I imagine 'growing' to mean, that which was taking place was happening, if indeed it was still happening at

all, at an almost imperceptibly slow rate—a forty-foot pedunculate oak tree. The fact that we were even aware that this was a pedunculate oak was the apparently logical result of our old biology teacher's claim that, in the absence of any other or further clues, one could identify a tree purely by its bark structure. On not one spring day of a single year of our decade-long acquaintance was the tree to be seen anything other than bare. Each and every fresh shoot that tried to break out of the oak every twelve months vanished like a mirage as soon as this process so much as tinged the outermost tips of its many-forked branches; golden-arse caterpillars would gobble up the buds, immediately and utterly.

Maybe they were discovered by a wretched worm of a man called Goldenarse, but there was not the slightest evidence that this was the origin of their name, and thus to this day I have no idea why these creatures are called golden-arse caterpillars. None I have ever seen presents a golden or even a yellow arse, and the threads that emerged from their swollen abdomens as they swung from twig to twig or abseiled earthwards were the light grey of spiders' webs. But didn't the tree of which the woody-brown, bristle-tufted golden-arse caterpillar formed the sole buds, shoots, leaves, blossoms and fruit, go by the equally nonsensical name of 'summer oak'?

Sometimes a few perhaps weakened, perhaps clumsy, perhaps escaping golden-arse caterpillars would lie on the ground; they were immediately destroyed, squashed into the gravel with steel toe-caps, stones and sticks. Otherwise, the golden-arse caterpillars never crossed our minds during our first six years at school, and not even our biology teacher knew of which species of moth they were the preliminary stage. They never pupated; if they did indeed do so—for, after all, they were caterpillars—then it must have been somewhere else, or it lasted just one night, for they would all be gone one morning each time, but whether they too had been devoured by some other creature or had flown out into the world in a changed state, or been atomised—crumbled into dust—remained unfathomable, and so exercised my imagination that in the seventh spring I pulled my grandma's potato knife from my cardigan pocket under my school desk, used it to hollow out a wine cork, stuffed it with the

caterpillars I'd picked up in the playground three days previously, and sealed the hole with a lattice of needles. And lo and behold: the first animal-filled prison cork.

At first, my study of the behaviour of golden-arse caterpillars under specific architectural and social conditions went off to my relative satisfaction; in the next long break this novel handicraft gained, along with several admirers, a few imitators, and even my test subjects behaved—as they excreted droplets of a bile-green liquid, they tweaked the close-fitting needles incessantly with the pincers of their trophi, squeezed their suckered front feet between them, and pressed their chitinous foreheads to the stainless-steel curtain—exactly as you might expect convicts to behave.

There was only one real problem: I had no idea how I was supposed to feed the golden-arse caterpillars. They had already finished off the one thing I knew they ate—the foliage of the pedunculate oak in our playground. Other trees of the same species probably did exist in our area, in the graveyard perhaps or one of the parks. Yet even if I had sought out and found the nearest pedunculate oak trees, I could safely assume from my accumulated knowledge that they too had been eaten bare by identical golden-arse caterpillars. So I stuffed the leaves of other plants through the bars to the three in the cork, followed by blades of grass, then morsels of apple and turnip. Clearly quite incapable of learning, my golden-arse caterpillars gnawed—though with less than half the belligerence they had first displayed—nothing but the needles, not even one another. Eventually, on the fifth day of the experiment, at about 2:30 in the afternoon, in the middle of a German lesson, just as we were having to write a dictation, they died as if they'd been executed, all at once and virtually simultaneously, their appearance unaltered from the first moment of their imprisonment until that of their death; they were not even any thinner.