

• 2006 Editors' Prize • First Place •

Mammalian

Nedra Rogers

Man is the only animal that goes out of this world as he came in—on milk.

William Osler

I've noticed lately, that my separate selves are growing more and more autonomous. Last evening, for example, as I tied my walking shoes, my feet grew tired of waiting for the second double knot. Without warning, they jumped up, ran out the door, and headed down the graveled Kaw River levee without me. I caught up with myself, of course. My mind, the tireless governor, persuaded my feet to jog in place until I joined them near the levee entrance off Sunset Avenue.

I understand my body's recent desire to act independently. Who could blame her? After more than half a century of working for the governor, Body has grown tired—tired of hauling the boss to and from the office, tired of being immobilized in cubicles and meeting rooms for hours on end. She's sick to death of being curbed by good manners, of being hidden beneath fabric, hampered by underwear and outrageous shoes. Body is tired of the straitjacket, tired of restrictions, tired of the contradiction of being a holy temple rated X.

I'm not alarmed much anymore when I sense a part of me has gone off on its own. With each passing year, I become more conscious of a separation process gearing up internally. I can only guess that I'm preparing in some obscure way for the final curtain's fall, when Body will exit stage left, and I will exit stage right.

When does it begin, this awareness of having more than a physical existence? As far as I can remember, I began to ponder the nature of my being back in elementary school soon after discovering my status as a mammal. It was my fourth grade teacher, Miss Butterfield, who introduced me to the bewildering and somewhat appalling notion. I still remember the afternoon

she fastened an oversized poster with the curious heading *Homo sapiens* to the blackboard, lifted her wooden pointer, and tapped it three times against her desk. Three taps meant that Miss Butterfield was broaching a serious subject and that we must sit up straight and give her our undivided attention. She began the lesson on scientific classification by explaining to the class that we all belong to a kingdom. My restless classmate Richard, who had a talent for answering questions that hadn't been asked, shot up his hand and blurted out, "I know. I know—it's the kingdom of God!"

Miss Butterfield studied the floor for a moment before facing Richard squarely. "I am talking about a scientific kingdom, Richard. I am talking about the kingdom Animalia." Raising her voice, she pronounced the word carefully, pausing briefly between syllables, "An-i-mal-i-a."

I was glad for the Latin word. There was something about the serious, exacting nature of science that called out for song, for the melodious, lilting tone of Latin. I was delighted to know I belonged to a kingdom. Perhaps a king and queen would be involved, perhaps a charming prince, a golden-haired princess in a billowing gown.

Miss Butterfield rapped the pointer against the blackboard, directing us in rhythmic unison as we repeated, *animalia, animalia, animalia*, followed by *mammalia, mammalia, mammalia*.

It was not until she displayed the second poster that the implication of our science lesson began to dawn on me. Under the heading *What is a Mammal?* were sketches of an assortment of animals assembled in some sanctuary that closely resembled the paintings of Eden on my Sunday school room wall. There were zebras, coyotes, gophers, giraffes, monkeys, panda bears—a virtual Who's Who of Noah's Ark. To my alarm, a man and woman were included in this bizarre group portrait. What was this couple, this modern version of Adam and Eve (they'd apparently traded in their fig leaves for polyester attire) doing in a chart headed *What is a Mammal?* Mammals were animals. Miss Butterfield had made that perfectly clear. Surely she was not suggesting that humans were animals.

Baffled, I fixed my eyes on the poster and concentrated on the tapping of the pointer as Miss Butterfield's distant, hypnotic voice guided the class through the six characteristics of a mammal.

Character One: A mammal suckles its young. I didn't know what *suckle* meant, but the word had a decidedly ridiculous sound. The accompanying sketch of a dog nursing a litter of puppies only confused the issue. I understood how puppies were fed, but I had three younger siblings and knew perfectly well that human babies were fed homogenized cow's milk from sterilized glass bottles.

Character Two: A mammal has hair. I had to admit that humans have hair, but animals had fur, not hair, didn't they? And they certainly didn't brush or shampoo it, or give themselves perms. Shouldn't that distinction count for something?

Characters three through six involved jawbones, middle ears, aortic arches, and diaphragms. I had no use for these details. The entire proposition was absurd.

I scanned the faces of my classmates. They appeared unfazed by the alarming disclosure. Was I making too much of this disagreeable revelation? But how could Miss Butterfield, with her glazed nail polish, her wooden pointer, and her high-heeled shoes, possibly be a mammal? And what about my own parents, who ate their meals with forks and spoons and drove a Chevrolet? What about Dwight D. Eisenhower? Wasn't it something akin to blasphemy to call the president of the United States of America an animal?

But while I had my doubts, I knew that Miss Butterfield had never been mistaken and that she would never lie to us. Eventually, I knew, I would have to accept my mammal status. I was, no doubt, an animal. But while sitting at my desk, struggling to comprehend the six characteristics that made me a mammal, I couldn't help but notice that outside the classroom window squirrels chased each other up and down the blackjack oaks, and a stray dog barked and ran about the schoolyard in circles, chasing its tail. Something seemed terribly wrong with this picture.

The closest thing to a sex education manual available to students in the late '50s was *National Geographic*, and at Bison Elementary, it was nearly impossible to get a copy from the school library that had not been tampered with. Our ever-vigilant school librarian, Miss Banks, made sure that all unwholesome photographs were snipped from its contents before it was shelved. And if that were not enough, she interrogated any student showing an interest in the magazine. "You're giving *another* geography report, Meredith? Are you *sure* Mr. Woodward assigned a paper on the Mayan ruins? I'll be checking with him."

My friends and I never dared reach a hand toward the top shelf of the magazine section. Perhaps we were unrealistically apprehensive, but more than one parent had received a phone call involving a *National Geographic* incident, and we weren't willing to take that risk. Stanley Feldman, however, would do just about anything for a quarter. He was a frail asthmatic, and even Miss Banks was wary of upsetting him.

So, despite the librarian's watchful eye, during every school term, several *National Geographic* naked pictures managed to slip past security and make the coat-closet rounds. Amid woolen scarves and snow boots, they were passed cautiously from hand to hand by whispering preadolescents desperate to know what their changing bodies would someday become. It was in the coat closet of my sixth-grade classroom that I finally discovered what Miss Butterfield had meant by *Character One*. Humans did, after all, suckle their young—at least in Zimbabwe and Guadalajara.

Years later, when I was 20 and suckling my own young, I became acutely aware of my mammalian condition. The word *mammal* itself alludes to the breast. When zoologists of the eighteenth century decided that humans were a type of animal and in need of a name that would link them to other species with like traits, Swedish taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus came up with the term *mammalia*, meaning “of the breast.” (He also gave humans the name *Homo sapiens*, which means “man of wisdom.”)

Before my own lactating experience, I had no sense of the functional design of the human breast. In our culture, breasts are profitable as bait, as visual attractions capable of selling Bud Light, Coca-Cola, and Levi jeans. They are valuable calling cards, important enough that fortunes are spent on their enhanced presentation. We squish them together and hoist them up. We amplify, magnify, push, prop, and pad. We cup, cap and condense them. We inflate, deflate, elevate, decorate, revise, restore, and escalate them.

Whole societies can be misled, and generation after generation of Coca-Cola drinkers can be bamboozled, but every nursing mother quickly discovers the truth about the breast. It is fundamentally a mammary gland with an agenda. All it really wants to do is suckle the young.

This fact was recently brought home to my daughter Maria, who gave birth to twins last March. The babies had to be nursed every 3 hours, which meant 8 breast-feeding sessions every 24 hours. She nursed each twin for 30 minutes during every feeding, which added up to a total of 8 hours a day spent breast-feeding.

It wasn't exactly the joyful, fulfilling experience advertised by La Leche League. She frequently experienced nipple soreness and painful breast infections accompanied by chills and fever, and because her breast had increased in size to a double E, she suffered almost constant backaches and couldn't find a comfortable sleeping position at night. One day she confided that her nursing experience had been a crucial revelation and somewhat of a shock. She had suddenly become aware of her tie to the animal

world and had discovered what the female breast was really designed for. “Welcome to the Kingdom of Animalia,” I told her in so many words, “and to the class Mammalia, under whose banner the lactating stand.”

One of Maria’s biggest disappointments as a nursing mother was that she was no longer able to be physically active. Before her pregnancy, she’d been an avid bicyclist and a jogger, and was training for a half-marathon. She’d been looking forward to summer, hoping to rejoin her Ultimate Frisbee team, but she was having trouble finding a double E bra with enough support to allow her to run. When she finally encountered a bra with the name The Last Resort Bra, she had a hunch it was the one for her. The 60-dollar navy-blue apparatus was downright humongous. The shoulder straps were three inches wide. The bra, which extended a few inches above the waist and fastened down the front with 12 tiny hooks, was a bit ungainly, but it worked. Maria, able to run at last, bounded through the grass chasing a Frisbee in that marvelous spandex contraption— living proof that lactating mammals *can* participate in Ultimate Frisbee, *if* they are tremendously determined, and *if* they are sporting The Last Resort Bra.

Man is a smart animal. He not only possesses the ingenuity to produce a plastic orb and the imagination to invent a sport for its use, but he also has the insight to fashion a utilitarian brassiere that enables the lactating *Homo sapien* to pursue that orb.

Maybe it is because we are such clever organisms that our scientific classification as mammals seems like an uncomfortable fit. Humans are always looking for qualities that separate them from the animal kingdom, and they’ve come up with some interesting observations:

Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.

William Hazlitt

Man is the only animal that blushes, or needs to.

Mark Twain

Man is the only animal that goes to sleep when it is not sleepy and gets up when it is.

Anon.

Man is the only animal clever enough to build the Empire State Building and stupid enough to jump off it.

Rock Hudson

Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve.

Erich Fromm

Man is the only animal that contemplates death, and the only animal that shows any signs of the doubt of its finality.

William E. Hocking

Regardless of the distinctions we make between animal and man, there remains one experience we have in common; that is the experience of life itself. Man realizes that whatever lives must also die—he knows he will terminate like all other species, but unlike other species, he has the blessing and the curse to be able to think about it. The tendency of man is to wonder what it's all about, to ask questions: "Is nonexistence conceivable? What, if anything, survives physical death?"

*There is part of us that believes
we will never die—otherwise
how could we watch so much television?*

Billy Collins, "The Teacher"

Body must sense that her days are numbered, for she refuses to sit for long watching television. She's had her fill of television, of repression, of the entire civilizing process. She's been insisting lately on side trips. She wants to breaststroke naked in the sun, dance unbridled through the forest, kick up leaves while she may. She wants to eat chocolate and sit on the creek bank at sunset. Now and again she catches the governor off guard and goes her own way. I find myself, lately, cheering her on.

Evenings when we take our walks, the governor, who has concluded that life is eternal, engages me in weighty conversation. I discuss with him the subjects of what was, and is, and is to be, as I try to catch up with my animal out on the Kaw River levee. 