

STRANGE NURSERY

New and Selected Poems

Esther Schor



The Sheep Meadow Press
Rhinebeck, New York

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Designed by S.M..

Distributed by The University Press of New England.

All inquiries and permission requests should be addressed to the publisher:

Aplomado Falcon image courtesy of Rosamund Purcell

The Sheep Meadow Press

P.O. Box 84

Rhinebeck, NY 12572

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schor, Esther H.

Strange nursery : new and selected poems / Esther Schor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-937679-04-0

I. Title.

PS3619.C454S77 2012

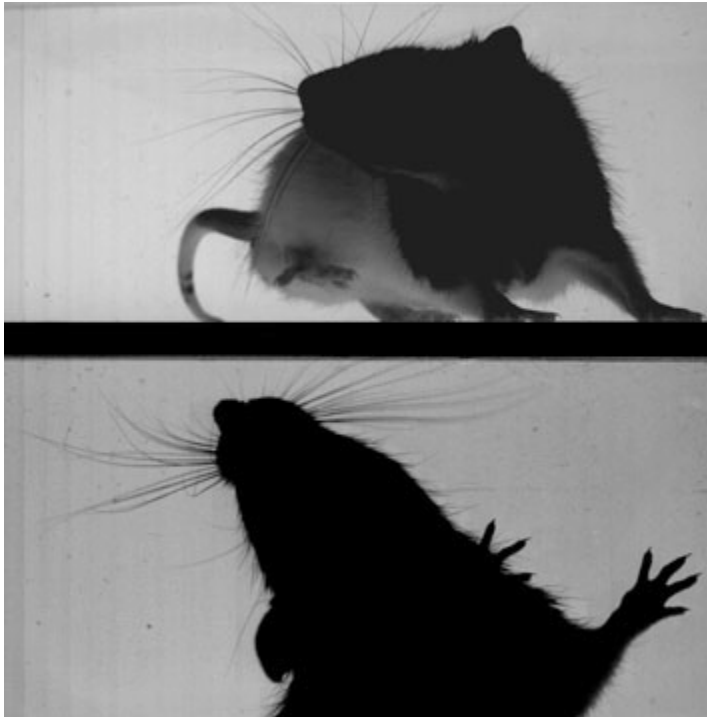
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2012001312

You'd think it would be easy, living.
All you need is a fistful of earth, a boat, a nest, a jail,
A little breath, some drops of blood, and longing.

–Adam Zagajewski (tr. Clare Cavanagh)

HARVEST



Rationale for Using Animals.
Rationale for Using Selected Species.
Consideration of Alternatives.

You'll start with fish and housesparrows, move on to fruitbats and California mice and work your way up to the transgenics and the NHPs—

NHPs?

—non-human primates

Pain Categories:

- B. No Pain—housing, identification.
tattoo, ear notching
- C. Pain or Distress of Short Duration.
radiation, parasites, gavage
- D. Pain or Distress Amenable to Anesthesia.
burns, cannulation, tumor induction, predator-prey interactions
- E. Pain or Distress without Anesthesia
lethal dosage studies
functional deficit (eg paralysis)
deviations from euthanasia protocols

pretty basic: anesthesia may compromise data and
no, there's no level A

*I remember his lab, the cages piled one on another,
the din the door opened and closed on,
reek of pee, iron, cedar (I xeroxed my hand,
carried my third hand home)*

*how the bungalow smelled in March, when we slept
in parkas on daybeds*

The Porsolt Swim Test is a rapid procedure for assessing behavior depression. Rats do not sink for more than a second during periods of immobility, but float almost effortlessly with their heads above the water. Rats tend to give up sooner in successive swim tests.

we say “dams and pups,” not families

anyway, rats are natural swimmers

*“kids are natural swimmers,” she said, only I wasn’t
not natural not breathing not floating
the dead man’s
wreath of kelp, mica crown—*

*now I know when not
to breathe I swim in chlorine pools
among the creatures of the deep:*

*latticed spines, sutured thighs, stumps
and withered limbs, flesh streaked and wimpled,
scarred, and burned*

since water closes its eyes takes us all in

This is the ritual in cases of jealousy. If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him and there is no witness against her

*transgenic mice quivering, pink, hairless—
immunosuppressed the thymus
bred out of them*

(the souls of mice)

The procedure for implanting cranial windows onto the skull of mice has become fairly routine. Most every mouse fully recovers.

*why do I keep telling you
about the mice*

but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself
or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself

*the hungers
hunger breeds—
a raft of chow
a drip a gyre*

unadmonished wheel

Live decapitation by DECAPICONE™ is a necessary and standard procedure for obtaining blood for measures of circulating hormones and metabolic fuels.

*For thoracic surgery, use
things you have
on hand:*

Xacto knife, scotch tape, eyelash glue

*Brain surgery requires
a dental drill*

*alka-seltzer (1 per 20L)
euthanizes fish*

The experimenter gently holds the rat so that it crawls into the guillotine. The decapitation is done extremely rapidly, thus minimizing any stress to the animal from being held.

pick up a mouse, his little adrenals will just
blow this stuff out

*it's a short list, "what could go off at
any moment"—*

*a bomb
a lover*

the man shall bring his wife to the priest. The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the LORD.

*any sanctuary will do
just don't forget
that I'm your ride*

Human subjects are not appropriate for dominance studies. Memory persists between trials. Experience effects are not well defined.

*come catbird
come sparrow*

Nests, roosts, and hibernacula are all within the survey. With catbirds you can expect temporary anosmia.

into our nets

wherever they are—Nashville, Cabo—
the transmitters fall off
and they're on their own

If the bird seems weak and not willing to fly, "humming bird water" will be administered to the side of the beak.

*what frays, what scabs, what's
debrided*

and place in her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell.

Raban Gamliel says: Like she did the doings of an animal,
so too her sacrifice is the food of an animal.

*"Cave canem"
says the dog in you*

And the Cohen grabs her clothes; if they tear, they tear,
if they tatter, they tatter; until her bosom is exposed, and
he undoes her hair. Rabbi Yehudah says: if her bosom is
comely, they do not uncover it; if her hair is comely, they
do not undo it.

like a fighter
pilot like a Brylcreem
hero like there was
no tomorrow

death soared

circled

a holding pattern.

They said, "she passed"
as if she were an hour

She will not be done drinking until her face turns green and
her eyes protrude and her veins become filled, and they say
"Take her out," so the enclosure does not become defiled.

Here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, "May the LORD make you a
curse and an imprecation among your people, as the LORD causes your thigh to sag, and your belly to
distend; may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag"

As for Patsy once her hind legs failed

we chose her last hour

she lay just there as if to say

*in your hands clouds
where her eyes were and ready,
the soothing vet from Ottawa.*

*Syringes, questions:
would she have wanted...
what would you want...*

And the woman shall say, "Amen, amen"

On what does she say "Amen, amen?" Amen on the curse,
amen on the oath; amen on this man, amen on the other
man, amen that she was not defiled, and if defiled, that he
will come to her.

Once anesthetized, the monkey will be positioned on the surgery table in a sphinx position with the head raised on soft towels

I said, get with the program:
for a surgical procedure, you need
a surgical plane of anesthesia,
you're not just harvesting organs

*this flutter
this moving air,*

*rachid, barbed,
covert, it is only
your hand*

If she was clothed in white - she is clothed in black; if she had ornaments of gold, and chokers, nose rings, or finger rings - they are removed from her, in order to disgrace her. And after this an Egyptian robe is brought and is tied above her breasts

*sharp blue corners, tattooed
around the breast for*

(once she said) archaeologists

and all who want to see may come to see, because her heart is known to them

Should an animal become fractious every effort will be made to place the animal in a primate sanctuary.

gas is cheap in heaven but look

*it can't be easy for them,
not enough
fenders to lean on, candles*

all blown out

Each incident is recorded in the Scratch and Bite book.

it's hot, neurogenesis, think
Alzheimer's

*stage six:
he admired the man in the mirror, a surprise*

visitor, he combed the man's hair

a fire, a clear-cut, a wave

*then (surprise) a visitor whose hair
he combed*

*a downpour, a fig, a surprise
visitor*

and you haven't been tested?

Why?

*stage seven:
he admired the man in the
mirror, a surprise*

visitor, he combed the man's hair

no, there's no stage eight

I added sevens (eros)

I subtracted sevens (thanatos)

Refrigerator A: Animal Carcasses for Orchard Hill Crematorium. No food or supplies allowed.
Refrigerator B: Clean Carcasses for Raptor Trust.

Never underestimate a monkey: keep on
the goggles and don't make eye contact

*Patrice
Simon
Bradley
Lennon
McCartney
Vanilla Ice
Mojave
Battista
Shaft
Biggie Smalls
Bush*

(the mean one's Gandhi—)

whassup guys?

I saw your MRIs:

*glades vines fronds
sweet flag
corpus callosum*

*venous palms
pia, dura
sea salt*

wild turmeric

Stress levels will be measured noninvasively through a fecal cortisol assay. "Lake pigments" used to distinguish feces.

Not bad at all: popcorn every afternoon at 4, ice cubes with a grape inside and all the phone books they can rip apart

Euthanasia must occur within the vivarium. Principal investigator must specify research endpoint.

it means you have an obligation
to verify death

*you stare at your feet at the earth
as if for the first time so odd*

*you're in air she's in dirt
you're plodding around she can't move, so odd*

*he's glued to cartoons gumming a grape
at the bars, odd when he catches your eye and*

*you know him from somewhere,
some older world*

A) Approved Methods:

intravenous or intraperitoneal barbiturates

Decapicone™

CO2 chamber (Slow filling minimizes nasal/ocular irritation. Wait 3-5 minutes. Eyes should be fixed and dilated.

Consult SOP before use.)

exsanguination

cervical dislocation

immersion in benzocaine (fish and amphibians only)

(NB: Chloroform is not acceptable.)

Standard Operating Procedure as in, that's just the SOP.

B) Unapproved methods:

(to be completed by principal investigator)

*what don't the dead do?
it's a long list*

*clamber, groom,
dance, mate,
chase, scratch, scamper, growl, bite, bleed, write, gnaw*

*ruminate, chatter, swim
sing, butt, mount, suckle
listen*

If the animal is not dead, return it to chamber, recharge and wait 5 minutes. Or use scissors to open chest cavity and create pneumothorax. MAKE SURE THE ANIMAL IS NOT AWAKE WHEN YOU DO THIS.

*a log, histology
a spectral lobe*

*dark to them,
red light*

bring on the night

*meet
in a tremor*

*perfuse chambers
of the heart
with bitter water*

*raise a blade
cut
take your harvest*

in your hand

Hearsay

“In Cyprus they say that mice eat iron.”
—pseudo-Aristotle

In Crete they say lakes are bottomless. Proof: a drowning stone makes one sound, not two.

In Maldives a monk has a motor fueled by tears. It also runs on vermouth, but tears are more plentiful.

In Trenton an infant was born tattooed with instructions for smelting tin.

They say in Myanmar the ravens were white until the arrests.

In Vancouver boys sleep on toast till the age of four.

In Kashmir, hopscotch is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

In Circassia, rhinos commence on the upbeat.

In Tlateloco, they say the pit where the bodies fell never filled up. With each murder, the pit deepened.

In Finland, some children are born with braids. They are not the lucky ones.

The bees in Salamanca walk to their work.

In Guangzhou the penis of a groundhog, pulverized, cures melancholy. A killer of groundhogs is castrated but no one has dared.

In Illyria a snake shed its skin, ate it and realized its mistake. Then shed and ate again.

In Kamakura, they say you will turn the page before you will turn to God.

In your mother's house the piano was always there, even before the house was.

In Oaxaca the rain falls up (*pointing*).

A man skipped his own funeral to go to the movies. He stayed for eight days, through sorrow and joy, crime and redemption.

In Whitehall, the prime minister outgrew his allergy to long-life milk.

There was once a lake between East 44th Street and East 49th Street; a dig unearthed harps and garbage.

In Borobudur a child was born clenching stones the mother did not recognize. But *her* mother did.

In Washington the Defense Secretary does the crossword in blood.

They say if one more school is named Washington, Brooklyn will fall into the sea.

In Izmir the Turks waltz in cut time, like penitents.

They say in Belle Harbor, the tide rises twice a day.

In Odessa the water is fine once you get used to it. Before that, you will want to die.

There is a lake so clear you can see in it what you'll never become. Some say it is in Canada (Canadians).

In Scottsdale there was a rain date, but it rained.

In Girona a woman struggled for years to learn to dive but by then there was no more water.

In Nanuet a man shot a pistol and instead of bullets, out came his dreams.

In Scythia a second kiss tastes charred.

They say there is no bridge more beautiful than the Manhattan Bridge. They mean it.

In Alma Ata they salute the flag in Esperanto.

In Perth, there is an academy where commodores teach fellatio and chess. It is that kind of academy.

They say on the death march, their toes froze, then their ears, then their hearts.

A man fell into a pit and lay without food or drink, bitten by scorpions, snakes, and spiders. He called it the happiest time of his life.

In Berlin the Chaconne modulated to B flat, once A major ran out.

When the film is over, the stars go on to other films. The film goes on to other stars.

In Weston there is a golden retriever who takes his leash in his teeth and walks himself. He is popular, understandably.

In Penobscot, a man nursed into adulthood. When his mother lay dying she nursed him for the last time; a social worker drew the curtain.

In Port Arthur, there was no going forward and no going back. So they went forward.

In Bloemfontein they place a hand on the nape of a lover's neck and say, "None of it is true."

Laika

Before we said
you're breaking up

I loved my walkie-talkie's
static song, dialed

placid satellites
where weightless

dogs barking
in Russian sipped

vodka through
barberpoles

while all along
as Malashenkov,

late of the Institute
for Biological Problems

told the BBC
it was only Laika,

a brindled bitch
who strayed all the way

from Nevsky Prospekt
to the brazen steppes

past the Samoyeds
Albina and Mushka

sated and caged
in the simulator, taking

by twos the iron rungs
of the Cosmodrome

driven from earth
prone and chained

pulse unleashed
blood aflame, who

dead in the teeth
of orbit four

rounded the earth
three thousand more

then lit into sky
like a feral star

plumed, blind, newborn.



In November 1957, the Russians sent the first living being into space, a three-year old mongrel named Laika. During three weeks of “training,” she was exposed to extremes of noise and temperature and confined in progressively smaller cages. With Laika harnessed and chained in place, Sputnik II orbited the earth 2,750 times before disintegrating. In October 2002, Dr. Dmitri Malashenkov revealed that after five to seven hours in flight, the thermostat failed and Laika died.

Strange Nursery



—“Aplomado Falcon (*Falco femoralis*),”
Rosamund Purcell

This snowy bed of gauze

three eggs aligned,
as magnets to a pole,
a counterclock of beaks

ballerinas
fixed on a point
in the wings,

a blizzard of tulle,
buff and jet,
candied, cold.

Think: *before you were born*, think

the sofa where she said
you're too crazy
to marry, he said

sleep on it,
and promised to keep
his rifles chained
in a case—

on that sofa, face it,
you'd be out of place,
your arms, your legs:

just so, feather, breast, and claw
belly, neck, and thigh,

just so, bars and bands,
signature moustache.

Heads and eggs: as Beckett said,
a man without a bicycle
is half a man.

Better not to move you.

Stay on your plaid
divan, DVR your favorite
episodes

pretend the incubator's
a tv, a box
labeled FLESH AND TOYS.

I've read *A Field Guide*
To the Aplomado. . .

Let's just say, it wasn't pretty:

yours, the yield
of smoking fields. . .

yours, the wolves'
singed quarry,
fur and gore.

The twins' father,
dazzled by grace:

Let's not say: *soon darkness will come flooding back.*

Let's say instead
you're cordially invited to
a worry party:

steam or mist? wet bare night?
what rate of bleeding is
acceptable?

can I save
this bruise?

That's why we go to bed,
to show our eyes.

That's why it's called the burn ward,
because they set your heart on fire.

NOTES for *Strange Nursery*

For encouragement and support, I'm indebted to Walter Greenblatt, with thanks also to Graham Burnett, Maayan Dauber, Maria DiBattista, Jeff Dolven, Anne Barrett Doyle, Michael Greenberg, Langdon Hammer, J. D. McClatchy, Paul Muldoon, Deborah Nord, James Richardson, Jonathan Rosen, Ivy Baer Sherman, Willard Spiegelman, Susan Stewart, and Jonathan Wilson. Thanks to Dean Drummond for a tour of the Harry Partch instruments and for his companionship.

Stanley Moss's love for poems and animals are an ongoing inspiration.

Much of the travel that gave rise to these poems was supported by the Office of the Dean of the Faculty, Princeton University. I am grateful also to the Princeton faculty and staff who have taught me what I know about the care and use of animals in research.

Cover image: [TK]

Harvest: This poem is about how we press knowledge out of living things; how we decide whether knowledge of life is or is not worth its cost in life.

For two years, I served as a non-scientist member of a university Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). The Committee vets all research protocols involving animals to ensure that procedures cause a minimum of pain and use the minimum number of appropriate animals. It also inspects the vivarium—the “strange nursery” that houses the animals—twice yearly.

Before being appointed, I was asked if I had any objection in principle to animal experimentation. I said I did not. As a child, I had visited lab animals in my father's pharmaceutical firm; as an adult, I watched my parents (one with cancer, one with Alzheimer's) benefit from drugs developed through animal testing. I know that I may one day benefit from the same drugs, or others.

I received no formal training (though on-line tutorials were offered later), and had to rely on the good will and advice of my colleagues in Psychology, Molecular Biology, and Ecology and Evolutionary Biology; of the vivarium staff; and of the university veterinarian. Their work requires them to balance empathy for animals with the need to know more about life, its diseases, and its remedies. This is not an easy task, and it was a privilege to work with them.

At the same time that I was learning to read protocols, I was studying Tractate Sotah of the Talmud. Here I discovered an ancient protocol for acquiring knowledge, in this case, the “knowledge” of whether a woman suspected of adultery

was guilty or not. And here were the Rabbis offering commentaries and guidance, as my colleagues had done.

The left-hand side of the poem contains quotations from these protocols, modern and ancient, scientific and religious; on the right appears guidance and commentary, both of my scientific colleagues and of the rabbis. And from my two years of immersion in the world of ethical animal research, in which I, too, had to decide whether knowledge of life is or is not worth its cost in life, emerged the italicized text in the center of the page.

Budapest

I Szigetvár: *Zrínyi's Charge from the Fortress of Szigetvar*, by Johann Peter Krafft (1825), Hungarian National Museum. In 1566, during the siege of Szigetvár, the corpse of Suleiman the Magnificent was presented in battle against the Habsburgs, led by the poet-warrior Miklos Zrínyi; as at the Battle of Mohács, the Ottomans prevailed.

II Aszú: A sweet wine from the Tokaj region of Hungary, it ferments for at least seven years in the vat.

VI Radnoti's Pocket: Hungarian Jewish poet Miklos Radnoti (1909-1944) was shot by the Nazis and buried in a mass grave. Eighteen months later he was exhumed; in his pocket was found a notebook with his final lyrics.

Ulica Okolnik 2: The address of the Warsaw Conservatory. Umschlagplatz, a railroad siding adjacent to the Warsaw Ghetto created by the Nazis in 1942 for deporting Jews to Treblinka.

Bread of the Sun

“Life is never truly ours, it always belongs to the others,
life is no one's, we all are life—
bread of the sun for the others,
the others that we all are —”

Octavio Paz, *Piedra de Sol*, tr. Eliot Weinberger

II Zona Rosa: a neighborhood of nightclubs in Mexico City.

III Pirates: Chapultepec, a large public park in Mexico City.

IV At Monte Albán: A pre-Columbian archeological site in Oaxaca, Mexico. The anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff (1900-1972), a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Germany, was nearly deported to Germany in 1936 when his American visa was not renewed. Thanks to funds supplied by anthropologist Melville Herskovits, Kirchhoff decamped to Mexico, where he and the *Grupo de Trabajadores Marxistas* demanded that the workers of Spain break with socialists, Stalinists, and anarchists in order to constitute a “Soviet Spain.” See Chapter 5, “The War in Spain,” in Philippe Bourrinet, *The “Bordigist” Current 1919-1999* <http://www.left-dis.nl>.