2019

Toy (with) animals

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Toy (with) animals

by

Anna Segner

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Walton, Major Professor
   Barbara Haas
   Emily Morgan
   Kim Moss

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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Dedication

To my mother, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

My body of work, Toy (with) Animals, examines the co-option of animals in toys through painting, assemblage, and installation. The exhibition considers the word “toy” in all its parts of speech. As a noun, “toy” means plaything, generally directed at children but largely made and purchased by adults. With playthings, children are encouraged to enact fictitious narratives that rely on speciesism and anthropomorphized clichés, further divorcing animals from their natural anatomies and realities. As an adjective, “toy” suggests diminutive size, and a concomitant diminution of importance. In miniaturizing a species, a reduction of features occurs. To “toy” with something means to mess with or manipulate. Living, breathing animals that inspire toys are far worse off than their inanimate caricatures. Animals suffer extinction, habitat loss, genetic manipulations, displacement, pollution, industrial use, and scientific exploitation at the hands of humans. It is troubling that as adults, we still often treat animals as toys—put where we want, admired when we are in the mood, ignored when we are fixated on something else, and tossed out when we outgrow them. Ironically, as we long for a wilderness that is less and less present in our daily lives, we replace it artificially in our homes. Clearly, humans value nature and animals, but humans have lost touch with true experiences of the wilderness.

Throughout the exhibition, toys are utilized in intricate still lives, assemblages, and installation to create work that considers animal toys as playthings stripped of agency and reduced to toy features. Cut out paintings of animal images disassociate the organisms in their environment, leaving a void replaced by toys. Many paintings depict animal toys among domestic spaces and everyday objects that also evoke nature themes, such as intricate wallpapers, patterns, and décor. Use of collaged textile and text speak to the illusion of these items. Mixed media paintings invite viewers to question the human act of “toying” with animals as well as reflect on the complexity of humans’ artificial approach to replacing the lost wild.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Animals of Childhood

Since I was a little girl, I have had three main passions: books, wildlife and art. The three passions often (consciously and unconsciously) informed understanding of one another. From an early age, I fell in love with the plant and animal species that I saw in my backyard in Owatonna, Minnesota, and in northern Minnesota during family trips. My interest in animals was supported at the local library where I would load up on animal books (some factual but mostly fictional) to draw from and read. The animal’s role in children’s literature as a dominant character across the genre, deeply impacted my understanding of animals.

In children’s literature, animals are often anthropomorphized and used as symbols for human personalities. Oftentimes, these books reinforce the hierarchy of speciesism. I learned at a young age to categorize animal species as they were depicted in literature—as the protagonist or the antagonist. These binary categorizations influenced my assignment of character roles during play with animal-based toys. As a child during the toy craze of the 1990s, I collected Ty, Inc. Beanie Babies, plush representations of an entire animal kingdom. During playtime, I used classic tropes about animals to organize roles. Lion was king. Owl was wise. Pig was comic relief. The bear was cuddly, and the shark and wolf were villains. My play reflected some outrageous and humorous stereotypes, stigmas and inaccuracies that society holds about animals.
These stigmas are sometimes more dangerous than cute, for some animals have become victims of their villainous caricatures. I became aware of the dangers of stigmas when visiting the International Wolf Center on a rainy day during a family trip to Ely, MN, during the early 2000s, a time when gray wolf populations were low, but, on the rise.

I was initially afraid to go on this trip. My fear of wolves stemmed mostly from fairytales and my favorite book throughout childhood, *Aesop’s Fables*. In *Aesop’s Fables*, the wolf almost always represents the most undesirable of human features: greedy, selfish, and untrustworthy. My fifth-grade self seriously feared that wolves were going to eat our family pet, a yippy, miniature dachshund who always slept snug in his indoor crate. Although this scenario might have been possible, it was extremely unlikely. The villainous characterizations in literature likely fed this fear, however, spurring my low enthusiasm for spending a day at the wolf center.

At the Wolf Center, I expected to see the wolves’ villainy embodied physically: dirty fur, sharp teeth, sneaky black eyes, malformation and devilish actions. Instead I saw healthy appearing wolves in a pen area that felt a lot like a backyard. Because it was raining, they were relatively inactive, seeking cover under a tin shelter’s overhang. They had beautiful coats of fur and bright eyes, and they interacted sleepily but socially with one another. The center’s naturalist guide compared wolf sociability to that of a family. My love for learning about animals took over, and soon I was gripped by the environmentalist’s story of gray wolves’ tragic history, including the many human attempts to exterminate the species.
Wolf hunting has a long history, but in North America, the first bounty goes back to the 1600s when wolves were hunted for fur and to prevent threats to livestock and people. Often, wolf hunts were in retaliation for human deaths. Due to the personal vendettas and trigger itch, wolves were hunted nearly to extinction. Gray wolves were listed on the federal endangered list in 1974. Since then, debates about whether the gray wolf should be taken off the endangered list have persisted as populations stabilize.

Environmentalist Aldo Leopold speaks to this trigger-itch in the famous essay “Thinking Like a Mountain” from the book A Sand County Almanac. Leopold writes about a time in his youth when he shot at a pack of wolves under the popular misconception of the time that hunting wolves meant more deer, which made for a hunter’s bliss. In contemplation of his actions, Leopold writes “we approached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and the mountain” (138). Leopold reports that years after the near extermination of wolf populations, deer populations skyrocketed to more than the earth could sustain, resulting in overly browsed vegetation, scavenged land, erosion and deer starvation. Without wolves, the ecosystem was thrown off balance. Therefore, Leopold urges the reader to “think like a mountain” (147) and think of the bigger picture of the entire ecosystem. He writes that “only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf” (137). The mountain is not swayed by game laws or
cultural frameworks of the here and now. The mountain is symbolic for long term thinking of land health and security.

The carnivorous nature of wolves has been interpreted in storytelling as evil, but “thinking like a mountain” requires that we consider the circle of life concept. I came across Leopold’s essay in college when writing my thesis on the poetic use of language to communicate environmental science. Leopold’s essay resonates with my own change of heart about wolves.

The wolf center and its role in wolf survival and population recovery is overall positive, but ultimately their goal is to influence an audience and gain monetary assistance, in part by selling physical objects. I commemorated our family visit to the International Wolf Center by spending my vacation money on a plush gray wolf in the wolf center’s gift shop. However, I replaced the wolf’s villainous stereotype with another inaccurate characterization, that of a huggable dog.

I often honored experiences with nature by purchasing an animal toy. On another trip up north, I purchased a small plastic fox that fit in the palm of my hand. (This same small plastic fox is featured in the paintings “Ark” and “Watering Hole.”) I recall being in the backseat, driving along the outskirts of some state park with my hand out of our family van. I rocked the fox back and forth out the window as if it was running along the woods as we whizzed by forests. I remembered thinking that I could not wait to bring it home, to add to my collection of plastic animals. Interesting that the nature-
based toy made me long to be inside amongst things, instead of outside amongst wildlife.

The act of collecting objects representative of experiences with nature fed some insatiable need to possess and even consume nature. It was not simply enough to experience a co-option of the wolf into a live exhibit (albeit one with benevolent intentions of improving wolf populations); I had to take the experience home with me to possess, collect and arrange. French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote about the human instinct to collect and arrange as “an exertion of power or dominance, one that is remarkably successful when compared to our attempts to dominate and control living things” (Asma 11). French art auctioneer and historian Maurice Rheims even compares the collected object to a “docile dog” which is subject of a power game (Asma 11). The act of control that collecting embodies not only parallels, but helps to generate, the power dynamics of human/animal relationships.

Children likely do not have master plans of control and domination, but they are unconsciously indoctrinated to society’s behavior of wasteful consumerism and dominance over nature. And yet, I genuinely adored my plastic animals so much that my dad built the shelving unit depicted in my painting “Menagerie” to house them—a sort of pseudo-doll house for a daughter with no interest in dolls. I enjoyed playing with the toy animals and then rearranging them on the shelves. Toy (with) Animals stems from my natural interest in human collection and arrangement of animal-based objects and their complexities, but it was through further research that I became more aware of the complexities that these objects hold.
CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH

Animal Disappearance and Emergence of Animal-based Toys

“Contemporary culture resituates animals by positing that they belong anywhere, which is to say, they belong nowhere. They go where people put them: “go” not in the sense of having any agency of active volition in the process, but as one might say a lamp “goes” nicely with a particular style of drapery—as an accoutrement, a prop” (Malamud 3).

If one stops to consider “animals” seen on an average day, the list may include imagery in advertisements, a university mascot, clothing, jewelry, decoration, and a child’s toy. A squirrel may have been dodged on the commute and meat consumed, but for the average American, interactions with cultural representations far outweigh those with real animals. The reduction of animals to consumer media and objects is so common today that it is almost unnoticeable, but it signals a disappearance of real animals from human life. In his essay “Why Look at Animals,” critic John Berger mourns the lost connection between humans and animals and observes a resulting nostalgia. In her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart connects nostalgia for objects and toys as “a material allusion to a text which is no longer available to us” (60). As animals disappear from humans’ lives, the collection of animal-based objects isolates animals from their natural context and represents nostalgia our unconscious attempts to reclaim an irredeemable relationship.

Animal studies scholars agree that humans have long looked to animal lives for human meaning. Berger argues that even before animals were “with man at the center
of his world” as a commodity, they sparked the human imagination as symbolic messengers (252). He contends that even before humans domesticated animals, animals offered the potential to fulfill the human desire for meaning. Scholar Boria Sax goes as far as to say that animals shaped human heritage: “tradition links animals to the ideas, practices, and events that make up human culture” (272). As humans developed, animals became integral to the workings of domesticated life both as food and indispensable living implements. However, the turn to urbanization changed the interconnectedness of humans and animals through the physical exploitation and marginalization of animals on a mass scale in factories and industry. Most humans no longer directly interact with animals daily to complete tasks and survive, (though they may consume animal flesh and products). The reverential symbolism humans once attached to animals has been reduced to objectification, things produced and consumed in a consumer society.

Peter Singer illuminates some of understand the most insidious effects of this newly exploitative relationship in his book *Animal Liberation*. In the book, he focuses on three main animal injustices: speciesism, animals used in research, and factory farming. With staggering numbers of animals raised in horrific factory farm conditions in order to be slaughtered for human consumption (over 100 million cow, sheep and pigs and 5 billion chickens per year), Singer calls factory farming “the most extensive exploitation of other species that has ever existed” (95). The average human is so far disconnected from their food source that the animal ability to experience suffering is not considered.
Over time, animals have become victims of their symbolic nature to humans. Whereas animals used to represent symbolic answers to human mysteries, modern representations have depreciated animals to the status of “prisoners of a human/social situation into which they have been press-ganged” (Berger 258). For example, the illegal sport of dog fighting in the US is inextricably tied to expressions of masculinity. As opposed to human versus nature, dogfighting is a human constructed sport that puts two dogs in a cage to fight to the death. In their article “Dogfighting: Symbolic Expression and Validation of Masculinity,” Rhonda Evans, DeAnn Kalich and Craig J. Forsyth argue that elements of dogfighting represent a symbolic expression of a certain subculture of white masculinity in United States, especially the working class. A dog’s performance in the fight is symbolic of its owner’s masculinity. A dog exhibits honor by not giving up in the fight. If the dog that lost the fight is not already dead, it will almost always be killed by its owner. The sport offers a way to aspire to masculine ideals by dominating animals and using them as proxies, resulting in grievous harm of animal bodies.

For humans, animals have gone from being almost mystical symbols to serving as mere logos. Berger observes that as animals were withdrawn from daily life, the “widespread commercial diffusion began” (260). This commercial diffusion reduces animals and animal imagery to entertainment, sport, mascots, national emblems, commercial advertising or branding tools, cartoons, caricatures, games, decoration, visual art, and clothing to name a few. Berger believes that the cultural marginalization of animals is more complicated than their physical marginalization, for the careless co-
option of animals into human culture is unstoppable at this point with limitless media produced of animal imagery. Berger writes that “the animals of the mind, instead of being dispersed, have been co-opted into other categories so that the category animal has lost its central importance.” (Berger 257).

In his book *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*, scholar Randy Malamud deconstructs the cultural frameworks that strip animals of their natural contexts. As animal bodies become more and more isolated and enmeshed into human culture, their natural contexts and habitats fade away not only literally but in human understanding. Malamud exposes the co-option of animals in film media by interrogating humans’ desire to make animal spectacle. Not only are animals physically harmed in film making, but their legitimacy is squandered by inauthentic renderings that are often comedic. He draws on ecofeminist research to make a parallel between the male gaze on female bodies and the human gaze on animal bodies, which articulates the critique that animals are depicted as “vulnerable, free for the taking in whatever way the human viewer chooses” (Malamud 74). Objectification of animals in film frames the animal completely within the human gaze, whether they are used as cute, props, dangerous creatures or useful devices to advance the human plotline. Even nature films are drenched in human narrative, and the animals are always in perfect focus for human visibility, so humans can see nature while being apart from it. The nature documentary feeds the human hunger for animal content. Malamud wonders if it is right for humans to have such a view, as nature films enact “human power over animals, leaving them, thus, powerless” (78). In spectacle, the animal body itself can be made a cultural
representation of itself, for it is concocted by humans “in accord with our logic, prejudices, and whims” (25).

A consequence of human desire for animals’ hypervisibility is zoos, which embody the power dynamic of human gaze over animals. Consider Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punishment* and the theory that vision over the subject equates to control and power. While zoos and their philosophies range from entertainment to education to wildlife refuge, Malamud disputes the argument that zoos offer environmental education on four main grounds. First, animals in zoos are not the real animal but rather that animal locked in a cage. No true education regarding that animal’s behavior, activity, or habitat can be learned at a zoo. Second, zoos encourage anthropocentric thinking. Third, it is simply too easy to see animals in the zoo. Their availability for easy speculation in zoos is the opposite of their behavior in nature, as most animals avoid human contact when possible. Easy availability undermines the animal’s complexity. Fourth, animals’ displacement in zoos encourages the mindset that “habitats do not matter” (Malamud 122). Through capture, force, and imprisonment, zoos make animals available to the human gaze—not to be mistaken as a connection.

Zoos are a vehicle animal exploitation through their commercial aspects and targeting of children. A high number of zoo visitors are children who may end their visit begging for a plush polar bear in the zoo giftshop. The theatrical zoo experience is an example of the endless animal media targeted at a children audience. Children are the designated consumer of meaningless toys, games, movies, cartoons, decorations, clothing, and pictures that exploit the animal body. The sheer volume of animal media
marketed toward children might lead one to believe that children have a special affinity with animals. Yet, Berger claims not. While animals have always been evoked in human artifacts, it was not until the nineteenth century that animal imagery appeared in childhood nurseries of middle-class families, as toys were generally miniaturizations of adult life (dolls, dollhouses, trains, etc.) In preceding centuries, toys that were animal based were few and not realistic. Berger gives the example of the nineteenth-century rocking horse, which evolved from a stick with a simply crafted head to an “elaborate ‘reproduction’ of a horse painted realistically, with real reins of leather, a real mane of hair, and designed movement to resemble that to a horse galloping” (259). Within the rocking horse evolution alone, we see a turn from human imagination to verisimilitude, which can be mass produced. Berger states that “zoos, realistic animal toys, and the wide-spread commercial diffusion all began as animals started to be withdrawn from our daily life” (260). Gross mass production of animal media for children today far outweigh the living breathing animals that exist in the “wild.”

Cultural artifacts, particularly toys, shape humans’ early experiences with animals. Leslie Daiken argues in his book *Children’s Toys throughout the Ages*, published in 1953, that “those of us who reflect on our childish preoccupation with certain toys, while others failed to interest us, will admit that it is in this fierce concentration of childhood that our tastes and our prejudices, even our aptitudes were formed; that these are projected-up right through adulthood” (Daiken 16). Toys reflect the values of a society to be taught to the young.
In their book *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*, psychologists Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart recognize that study of animals and animal media in children’s lives has been “substantially ignored in psychology” (6). Cole and Stewart examine how cultural representations of animals aimed at children reinforce the dominant human-animal power structure of today.

As children age, animal toys move from inviting affectivity to encouraging instrumentalization of animals. Cole and Stewart prove this progression toward animal instrumentalization in their study conducted at Hamley’s toys store in London to analyze the prevalence of animal-based toys and significance with age. They found, that while still prevalent, the animal toy decreases with targeted age group. In the infant section, Cole and Stewart report that most toys are representations of animals, oftentimes less-instrumentalized animals, such as pets or wild animals. Often the animal is made of soft material and depicted as overtly infantilized or as “young children’s quasi peers, anticipating and mutually reinforcing the ‘pet’ relationship” with animals (Cole and Stewart 80). As the store moves to target pre-school aged children, toys take form of more instrumentalized animals. Farm animal toys in this section are represented in bright colors with anthropomorphized expressions. Unlike the soft infant material, the preschool farm toys are made of harder, colder materials, inviting less affectivity. The next floor offers toys “at the intersection of anthroparchy and patriarchy” for older female children (80). Animal toys are infantilized animals—bunnies, puppies, kitties, butterflies—rendered in pastel colors with preference to pink and purple. Contrastingly,
the animal toys—primarily farm animals—in the older boy section invite little affectivity in their plastic realism and miniature farm environments. While the toys depict animals for their utility, they do not detail the scope of the human-animal relationship: “there are no model slaughterhouses, imitation vivisection scalpels, or dismemberable plastic cow’s corpses for girls and boys to play with” (Cole and Stewart 81). The farmed animal in toy version looks much like the quaint farms of the past, and not the morbid reality of factory farms today as described in Singer’s Animal Liberation. These toys encourage a cheerful oblivion that persist into adulthood.

Today’s cheerfully naïve farm toys mask gruesome truths, paradoxically widening the gap between animals and humans. Modern farm toys differ from the verisimilitude of earlier toys on this topic. Detailed model butcher shops were not uncommon in the Victorian era according to Sarah Louise Wood, a curator at the Museum of Childhood at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. According to Lisa Hix in her article “Baby's First Butcher Shop, Circa 1900” in Collectors Weekly, butcher shop models were not originally intended for use by children but as advertising displays placed in the real butcher’s window. However, the popularity of dollhouses for children during this era led to miniaturization of places of commerce, and Victoria children did play with miniature butcher shops. Such toys offer a degree of honesty regarding food sources that the modern toys do not. Ultimately, however, both representations of domesticated animals, the cheerfully oblivious and the realistic, are problematic playthings, because both suggest that animals are devices for humans’ use.
To question the cultural representation of animals in toys and the resulting implications, one might begin by examining the word “toy” as it functions in all parts of speech. First, toys are playthings, often miniaturizations, that stimulate the imagination of the player, oftentimes a child. To a child, “a toy, simply, is something to have fun with” (Daiken 16). In her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, and the Souvenir, the collection* Susan Stewart writes that “the toy is the physical embodiment of the fictional it is a device of fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative” (56). A toy in hand invites imagination and fictitious narratives that rely on one’s own knowledge and sense of what the toy represents. Toys lend themselves to fantasy. The toy as a device for human projection recalls Malamud and Berger’s concern over contemporary culture overwriting animal contexts for amusement or play. Malamud writes that “the absence of fixed, meaningful identities facilitates their [animals’] dizzying transformation into whatever it is people want them to be” (3). While animal toys invite children to rewrite their contexts on a play level, adults exercise their control over real animals by reimagining animals’ natural contexts around human for spaces for living, industry, agriculture, and transport. This progression of seeing animals disassociated from their natural context from childhood to adulthood perpetuates animals as toys and shows how a fantastical representation persists into maturity.

The word “toy” as an adjective suggests diminutive size, and a concomitant diminution of importance. Miniaturization is the cultural product of human manipulation, whether scientific or manufactured. The toy world offers a projection of everyday life miniaturized “as a test to the relation between materiality and meaning”
In the manufactured miniaturization of animals in the form of toys, a combination of reduction and erasure occur. Animals’ physical complexities are overlooked as features are removed to make space for the exaggerated traits emblematic of that species. Distinct features such as color, pattern, distinct body features, and shape become the signifiers for the species, while biologically important features are erased. Often, signifiers are blatant and commonsense. Ty. Inc Beanie Babies® are a sound demonstration of an animals reduced to toy features. The giraffe toy is recognizable for the pattern and long neck on an otherwise vague mammal body. The flamingo toy is recognizable for color and beak on a vague bird body. The reduction of features is furthered by the naming of the Beanie Baby toy inside the iconic Ty Inc. heart label, which relies on the “common sense” claims about animals. The flamingo Beanie Baby is named “Pinky,” while the owl Beanie Baby is named “Wise.” The act of naming is an act of ownership, but the small scale of the toy parallels the restricted status of animals as humans’ miniaturized objects of desire.

To toy with something means to “mess with” or manipulate in varying sets of contexts (Stewart 56). In her article “Playing with Size and Reality: The Fascination of a Doll’s House World,” scholar Nancy Wei-Ning Chen writes that the miniature inflates the power of the viewer or the player: “the miniaturization of the original provides not only a new perspective from which one observes the world, but a trigger for one to remodel the order of things” (284). Children internalize anthropocentrism from the learned exploitation of animals in toy culture. For those who have trouble conceiving the connection between toys and animal abuse, consider the example of the live bird
automata from 18th century Germany. The bird automata displayed a comic figure with space inside to hold a trapped bird. As the anxious bird thrashed inside the automaton, the comic figures were activated by the bird’s motions. Daiken quotes the Nuremberg catalog’s statement of the live bird automata: “no one would imagine that a living bird was inside but would suppose that it was clockwork which made the head, eyes, and beak of the bird move” (19). Sadly, animals suffer abuse, extinction, habitat loss, genetic mutations, displacement, pollution, industrial use, and scientific exploitation at the hands of humans. Perhaps it is not even a stretch to suggest that the animal toy is even replacing the real animal.

Examining the lexical properties of the word “toy” exposes the issue of whether humans can separate understanding of toy from the real animal. In his chapter “Is it real or is it Disney?” in the book *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, scholar Steve Baker suggests that mass media animal representations frequently show animals as stereotypical and stupid. The result of these mischaracterizations is human confusion over “what exactly counts as animal” (Baker 169) or whether humans can distinguish the real from the representational. Baker uses the word “disnification” to explain the cartoon understanding that humans possess about animals. Animal “disnification” suggests that animals are blank canvases for human projections. The “disnified” animal is a human product with no agency, habitat or context in natural reality. Baker writes that “any understanding of the animal is inseparable from knowledge of its cultural representation” (25).
While this lack of understanding about what constitutes as the “animal” is a result of the severed relationship between animals and humans, Baker argues that “disnification” of animal imagery is a sign of a society that cares little for truth or meaning. Yet, one might point to the popularity of the animal image across medias, particularly amongst toys and décor. It may be a stretch to say that the varying representations are an unconscious societal search for what animals are and once were to humans. The act of bringing artificial representations of animals into the home or back into the center of human life suggests at least the vague recognition that there is a void. Berger finds that a result of the devastating rupture between humans and animals is a nostalgia for the connection we once had. The outcome of this nostalgia may be the collection of mass produced “relics” of animals that have further displaced animals from natural contexts.

Stewart offers “nostalgia” as a term for a desire for something lost or forgotten. She links her concept of nostalgia with objects: “the souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past” (151). However misguided, cultural representations of animals may represent a grasp at the connection of animals and humans that is irretrievable. If urbanization broke animal centrality in humans’ lives, nostalgia in mass produced cultural representations of animals makes little sense, yet people often consume to fill a void, however misdirected that consumption may be. Always the void to be filled is not easily gratified. The unconscious nostalgia is longing for the experience of connection, not objectified monuments of the
experience. Berger ends his essay by questioning whether humans long for the human/animal connection, before concluding that consumerism a “remorseless movement.”

While the collection of animal-based toys represents a nostalgia for that early animal/human connection, cultural representations are destructive to animals (figuratively and literally). Toys oversimplify animal complexities, distort animal realities, shrink animals in scale and importance, and encourage a vision of animals as instrument to be manipulated. And, toys ultimately become waste. The environmental impact of the growing toy industry is disturbing: 90 percent of toys today are made of plastic (Romper). Plastics, which essentially never decompose, have been consistently named by scientists as a major culprit in decreased land health and endangered species. In 2016, National Geographic released a study on why so many ocean animals eat plastic debris. A quarter of a billion metric tons of plastics in the ocean were recorded in 2014 (Parker). National Geographic reported that “more than 200 animal species have been documented consuming plastic, including turtles, whales, seal, birds, and fish,” due to the material’s enticing appearance and smell (Parker). Though clearly not all the plastic links back to toys, many toys end up as trash that never decomposes. In a throwaway society, there are environmental consequences of satisfying nostalgia through artificial representations of animals. Perhaps then, nostalgia might be more productively expressed through mourning the loss of animals and then reducing the consumption of products that contribute to the pollution of animal ecosystems.
CHAPTER 3. ART REVIEW

Animals in Art Today

Several artists are incorporating animal studies research and environmental concerns into their practice. In his article “What is the Postmodern Animal?” Scholar Steve Baker offers a spectrum of animal portrayal in art. He describes the spectrum of animals in postmodern artworks as ranging from animal-endorsing to animal-skeptical. He defines “animal endorsing” as artwork that endorses the natural contexts of animal life and align with conservationism. “Animal-skeptical” artworks criticize “culture’s means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human” (280). He provides the example of artists Mark Dion as “animal-skeptical” as he plays with allegory and humor, and the work of British artists Olly and Suzi as “animal endorsing” as they create representational artworks onsite, placing importance on animals’ environment. Despite their differences, Baker believes that both ends of the spectrum share the postmodern search for “truth” and what counts as authenticity.

Figure 1. Mark Dion. Survival of the Cutest. 2004, Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective, by Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist.

Figure 2. Olly & Suzi, Tatanka, Aquarelle And ink on paper. Yellowstone, Wyoming.
An interview with Mark Dion is included in the book *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective* edited by Joan B. Landes Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist. Mark Dion, as an “animal skeptical” artist confronts, (an array of topics including pets, hunting, zoos, taxidermy, speciesism, and consumerism) His artwork *Survival of the Cutest* is about speciesism or human preference of certain animas over others that goes as far back as the Noah’s ark story. Dion states that he is not interested in nature, but he is interested in ideas about nature. Dion did an exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Carl Linnaeus’ study. In many cases, his role as artist is almost that of “collector” or “shopper” rather than a “maker.” These assemblages use ideas about cataloging/organizing/examining to critique implications of consuming/hoarding/displaying. In the “Ecology” of *Art 21* video series, Dion states that he views contemporary art as gaining knowledge through things, whether those things be sculptures, paintings, or the arrangement of objects as in his works.

For examining the “animal endorsing” side of the spectrum, Baker looks at British artists Olly and Suzi and their drawings and paintings that express the beauty of animals in their natural habitats. Baker states their message to be simply that “the animals are here now, they just might not be for much longer” (280). They often create the drawings and paintings from direct observation of the animals (often wild and exotic animals, such as shark, lions, zebra, etc.). These works are made to react to the environment and engage the actual animal with the artworks. Their 1995 exhibition Raw included works that the actual animal interacted with, as seen in the figure below. Often this direct interaction inflicts bite and rip wounds to the prettified drawing or painting.
Because the key of Olly and Suzi’s work is “its status as the mark of the real, the wound, the touch,” it hardly matters what it looks like (Baker 281-282).

Figure 3. Olly & Suzi with Greg Williams, *Shark Bite*. 1997. Artists’ Website.

In his chapter “Photographic Animals,” Malamud applauds and analyzes the photography of Britta Jaschinski. Her photographs of animals in captivity resist the familiar and glamorized tropes of animal photography, as oftentimes the animals in Jaschinski photos are difficult to see or not in focus. Malamud sees in her work a “troubling philosophical depth that touches both the animal inside the frame and the human spectator who is outside looking at the creature” (51). Malamud interprets her photographs of animals in captivity at zoos to be both “mugshots” of trapped beings and a curious attempt at capturing the animal’s identity and spirit, which inspires the viewer to wonder. Malamud poses many questions in response to Jaschinski’s photography, but one stands out: “are we looking at animals hoping to see something about ourselves?” (56) Ultimately, her work inspires a new way of seeing animals, and consequently a new way of seeing humans. Photography, itself, reduces the animal to a
picture: “once we have a picture of something, that thing itself loses its value to us” (Malamud 67). He ends on the sentiment that all in all, animals are worse off for the encroachment that traditional nature photography allows—an encroachment that Jaschinski’s photography seems to resist and to question.

Malamud’s emphasis on photography led me on a path of studying photographers that engage in criticism of stereotypical animal imagery, as I began to question the portrayal of animal representation in my work. Like Jaschinski’s work, artist Taryn Simon’s photograph “White Tiger (Kenny)” (below) reveals the shocking face of selective inbreeding for the amusement of humans. While white tigers occasionally appear in the wilderness of India, most are selectively inbred and linked with theatrical performance (like that of Las Vegas magicians Siegfried & Roy). As a result of this inbreeding, the tiger, named Kenny, in Taryn’s photograph is both mentally and physically disabled, with significant physical limitations to such fundamental activities as
breathing, chewing and walking. Taryn’s photograph seems to be taken from within the bleak cage, which fills much of the composition.

Photographer Chris Jordan also critiques human behavior’s impact on animals in his photograph “Juvenile Laysan Albatross Carcass.” While I am often wary of photography of shocking imagery of animal suffering due to pollution, this image depicts a baby albatross’s decaying carcass, opened to revel a colorful array of plastics. It is shocking, but it has a quieter presence that seems less exploitative to the animal’s suffering—it encourages sustained contemplation of human indifference, rather than flash-in-the-pan outrage. While some of photographer Bence Máté’s work falls in line with traditional animal photography, his works like
“Patterns of Nature,” with their extreme close-up views of the animal subjects, both fulfill and challenge the desires of the human gaze to consume animal bodies. The view of the great white pelican in the photograph “Patterns of Nature” exposes textures and colors of the pelican’s body, which pleases the human gaze. However, the image also abstracts the animal body, which challenges the viewer to engage differently than with a stereotypical photograph of a pelican.

Photographer Peter Hujar also photographs people and animals, and his efforts to capture the subject’s unique personality are consistent across species.
Photographer Nan Goldin said about Hujar’s work that he photographs “a particular dog, not the whole species.” (Kingett) (below). He rejects the human tendency to lump animals into species and not acknowledge animal individuality.
CHAPTER. 4. DEVELOPMENT OF WORK

After reading about the exploitative spectacle of animal bodies in visual culture and its destruction of animal context, I questioned whether it was even ethical to paint animals at all. Baker’s spectrum of “animal-skeptical” or “animal endorsing” used to describe how artists render animal bodies in art today was helpful in shaping my understanding of what I had been doing and how I wanted to move forward. While a lot of my work prior to research was inspired by nature and birds, I was always interested in the representation of the animal vs the real animal.
With the physical presence of books and text in artworks, I grappled with representation of the observed animal subject and how it is represented in guides, books and maps. “Which Way, Warbler?” is a piece from my first semester in graduate school, and I was proud of my growth in learning how to paint and use mixed media approaches. Discovering research in animal studies after this piece made me realize that I want to critique animal representations more intentionally and rethink how I portray the animal body.
My painting, *Transient*, was a pivotal piece for the transition to “animal-skeptical” work, as Berger would define it, for I became more intentional about how I might portray the animal body and critique representation. I created *Transient* with a lot of thought about Berger and Malamud and the human gaze consuming the animal image. I began to think about the Great Blue Heron, an animal that has always intrigued me for its beautiful ability to appear and disappear to the human observer. Seeing Great Blue Herons, to me, always feels to be a sort of spiritual experience, for they are so stoic against the waterscape and scatter when you approach. I recalled the transient encounters with the bird as a child on canoeing trips in the Boundary Water Canoe Area and around Lake Superior. As we paddled forward, the heron always scattered ahead several meters until we approached again. As it scattered away, the glimpse of the fleeing heron was ephemeral and never a clear glimpse like we might see in a photograph. Only in scientific textbooks and guides did I see the heron frozen pictorially for spectatorship. Through contrasting text, photograph and painting of various ways one might spot a heron in nature, I was able to juxtapose these experiences against one another. I consider *Transient* to be transitional, for I am still sticking closely to beautification while also thinking critically about the visual experience of seeing animals and the portrayal of the animal body.
My piece *Go Home, Boy* (which is in MFA exhibition) is a piece about the death of my childhood dog, which happened in the fall of my first semester of graduate studies. His death felt intrinsically linked to the death of childhood. The piece depicts a sort of ascension of him from a standing position to the fetal position, which I wanted to convey innocence. My father’s designs and blueprints of our house are in the background because my dog was so wrapped up in my
childhood and perception of my childhood home that his death disrupted that sense of home. While this piece is sentimental, it made me think more about domestication and the implications of an animal being so linked to the human space.

Pairing my research on cultural representations of animals as objects and the book *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* by Clement Greenberg, I made the painting *Cupboard Kitsch*. Greenberg explains that kitsch is a product of urbanization. As outlined in Chapter 2, John Berger links urbanization to the downfall of animal and human relationships, so it is interesting that Greenberg discusses that kitsch arose to fill a demand for culture for the country peasants who lost their country culture taste.
after settling in cities. The animal object fulfills that lack of connection to animals while also filling a new demand for culture. I began to look at my grandma’s life as embodying this move from country to city, and coincidentally she has a lot of animal kitsch objects. Because she has always owned basset hounds, people tend to give her basset hound themed gifts, which have added up to quite a collection over the years. The painting Cupboard Kitsch is only part of it. While she found it hilarious that I would paint her trinkets, painting mostly from direct observation gave us an opportunity to discuss the idea of animal objects fulfilling a nostalgia for closer animal and human relationships.

Figure 12. Anna Segner, *Displaced (trio)*, Mixed Media
I created the “Lost Words” pieces with the support of ISU Focus Grant in spring of 2018. These three pieces explore how language used to describe nature has become more and more inarticulate, as words for the modern world become
more dominant/common place. The 2015 and subsequent editions of the Oxford Junior Dictionary replaced words like “acorn,” “fern” and “dandelion” for more modern words such as “blog,” “chatroom” and “MP3-player.” This loss of a lexis for the landscape contributes to a greater separation between humans and nature. These pieces seek to investigate the importance of language in shaping human’s sense of place through visual renderings. With the physical use of encyclopedias as a grid-like canvas for paintings, I attempted to reconnect landscape and language through painted imagery of the “lost words” or nature-oriented words that have been discontinued in print dictionaries. This project began my thinking about 3-dimensionality.

Figure 15. Anna Segner, Ark, Mixed Media, 2 x 2.5’ 2018
At the same time as I was imagining how I might break out of painting and work more three-dimensionally, I became devoted to a focus of toys for examining cultural representations of animals. Research made me think a lot back on my love for animals and realized that it was mostly rooted in toys. Beyond my grandma’s use of toys as decoration in *Cupboard Kitsch*, *Ark* is the first piece that I brought the toy subject into my work. I wanted to capture the idea of replacing the wild with artificial representation in the home, so I used a dollhouse and my collection of plastic animals to set this still life that sat in my living room for nearly all of 2018. This piece began to embody the direction I wanted to go with theme, use of toys, and examining play with these objects.

At the same time as I was paving new thematic ground in painting with toy subject, I decided that I wanted to work physically with toys through installation. Art installation is something that I have always wanted to try but knew absolutely nothing about. I began by studying other artists, which led me to consider how Mike Kelley uses plush toys and installation to challenge the legitimacy of societal norms, values, and authority systems. I looked to Annette Messager, who uses a lot of toys, skins, and taxidermic animals. Her retrospective exhibition at Hayward Gallery in 2000 tackles the subject of children’s
stories and their impact on the animal subject. She states in a video interview about the exhibition (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWKGTPlobo0) that “you can kill someone with a rumor, but there are a lot of rumors in the world.” Her message of the dangers of inaccurate representations is close to my exploration of the reduction of animals to toys and toys being a device for fictitious narratives.

My installation took place in an empty storefront on Main Street in Ames, IA. After several attempts, the final installation consisted of a mound of toys tossed into a heap at the center of a painted white floor with colorful rings of toy animals trickling out by color. The messy heap of animals in the mound juxtaposes the animals in the rings, as they are each set carefully in their own space. Each toy is set in a pool of watercolor matched to its coloration to speak to the reduction of color features. The pools of orange, green, blue, yellow and red watercolor on a white floor beneath each toy draws attention to the lack of natural context of these
outlandishly neon toys. A smaller scale version of this installation was incorporated as part of *Toy (with) Animals*.

Figure 18. Anna Segner, *Toy (with) Animals*, Installation, Empty Storefront, Main Street, Ames, IA

Figure 19. Anna Segner, *Toy (with) Animals*, detail
The installation was an opportunity for me to finally make a grand gesture toward my new thematic direction involving toys, but my installation ended (non-surprisingly) painterly after all, despite the beginning version being far more space engaging. Working through ideas in the installation process made me even more excited to get back to painting. I began painting some of the toys collected for the installation and focused on Beanie Babies as sound demonstrations of an animal kingdom condensed to toy features and naming of the Beanie Baby inside the iconic Ty Inc. heart label (read more in Chapter 2). Besides Pinky™, these pieces are no larger than 10” x 10” and painted approximately to scale of the actual toy. In these, I draw attention to the “toyification” of the animal by juxtaposing with a more anatomically correct line drawing of the species. Animal complexity is set aside to highlight desirable features and omit less attractive features. Particularly in a bird toy, like Kluck™, we lose the ggnarly feet and beak to a soft cuddly fabric. Each piece is titled the name given to that species. I used the encyclopedia and dictionary spines from my Lost Word series to create the background to the piece Wise™, which plays with the “wise owl” caricature that exists in society and is perpetuated by cultural objects like owl beanie baby.
Figure 21. Anna Segner, *Scoop™*, Mixed Media, 6” x 6” 2018

Figure 22. Anna Segner, *Wise™*, Mixed Media, 12” x 12” 2018

Figure 23. Anna Segner, *Pinky™*, Mixed Media, 10” x 10” 2018
I used some of the same Beanie Babies in the still life for the painting _Menagerie_, in which I started thinking more about the collection, organization, and display of these objects and how this might reflect speciesism. To parallel the dollhouse in _Ark_, I used a house shaped shelving unit that my dad built for me when I was little. The organization of the shelving unit reflects a sort of hierarchy of animals that speak to my personal biases. At the top, I have lion toys, which was my childhood favorite animal probably due to Disney’s _Lion King_. In the next row, devoted to teddy bears, I also include a panda bear to evoke the icon of World Wildlife Fund. The next two rows are exoticized animals—tigers, zebra, giraffe—all loved for their patterning. Then, I have animals that are poached, elephants and rhinos. At the base of the shelf, I have tossed about farmed animal toys. Animals become less carefully placed as we move down the hierarchy. At the top of the shelf, animals are neatly arranged, but the instrumentalized animals are tossed about at the bottom like bodies to reflect how the real animals are physically exploited. I painted in the floral wallpaper to look like the yellow wallpaper in my grandma’s toy room, and I collaged in the cloud fabric, which I chose because it speaks to me as an iconic pattern to 90’s childhood. I have vivid memories of sponge painting clouds in my cousin’s room to match her cloud patterned duvet, dish chair and pillows. Only a child would choose that pattern, yet it speaks to this human desire to artificially bring nature inside. Painting into the fabric to make it appear 3-dimensional was new for me and fits with this idea of artificiality or illusion of fake nature. I hope to work more with fabric like this in future paintings.
Figure 24. Anna Segner, Menagerie, Mixed Media, 4’ x 3’ 2018
*Watering Hole* depicts a toy scene that could never occur in nature—
predator and prey animals coexisting in harmony around one watering hole. This
painting was inspired by Cai Guo-Qiang’s 2013 installation *Heritage* and Jan
Brueghel’s ‘paradise paintings.’ Thinking about toys as devices for fictitious narratives
made me think about anthropomorphized play when I was young and how I would imagine
animals outside of their role as predator and prey. I call attention to the scale of toy objects
by juxtaposing them to a bathroom and objects like a toothbrush, soap, and drain cover.

![Watering Hole](image)

**Figure 25.** Cai Guo-Qiang. *Heritage*, 2013, eds. *Animal: Exploring the Zoological World*. Project
Editor, Lucy Kingett. 2018. Print.

![The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man](image)

**Figure 26.** Jan Brueghel. *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man.*
Figure 27. Anna Segner, Watering Hole, 2’ x 3’ 2019

Figure 28. Anna Segner, Sister, Mixed Media, 16” x 18” 2019
I created paintings *Question* and *Sisters* in response to ecofeminist research. When thinking of patriarchy as an unhealthy up-down system, which emphasizes domination and control not flexibility and openness, the downs in an unhealthy patriarchal up-down system are women, the human “other” and nature. To hint at this patriarchal system, I used this idea of up and down in the *Question* (below) by flipping the word “girl” upside down to hint at this patriarchal system, and several of the animal figures are twisted upside down as they form the question mark in the painting. In this way, I acknowledge women and nature’s linked oppression in a patriarchal society. The question posed in the background asks: “Girl or boy toy?” I created a font inspired by cookies that I bought at Trader Joes, which I believe speaks to the consumable idea that the patriarchy has about the “downs.” The animal toy figures form a large question mark daring the viewer to respond or take a stance. *Sisters* (above) was created while I was reading about the link between androcentrism and anthropocentrism in Karen J. Warren’s book *Ecofeminist Philosophy*. I was particularly interested in the linguistic interconnectedness between patriarchal domination of women and nature: “animalizing women in a patriarchal culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans, thereby reinforces and authorizes women’s inferior status” (26). Likewise, feminizing nature in a patriarchal society reinforces nature’s inferior status. *Sisters* is a painting of my and my sisters’ favorite stuffed animals from childhood. While there is room for growth in fusing research with this image, I was thinking of this as a pseudo portrait of us represented by our animal toy and how that may hint at the research.
Figure 29. Anna Segner, *Question*, Acrylic, 2’ x 1’ 2018
For the *Displaced* paintings (below), I was thinking that with only 2,500 black rhinos left on the planet, I figure confidently that there are far more plastic and toy and décor rhinos on earth than the actual animal itself. Considering that plastic is one of the leading causes of animal extinction, the manufactured, plastic animal is outliving the living, breathing animal itself. My manipulations of the canvas were influenced in part by similar actions in the work of Titus Kaphar. In some of his paintings, Kaphar inflicts a series of transformations such as cutting into the canvas, crumpling, shredding, tarring, twisting, erasing, breaking, tearing. As stated in his website “Bio,” these actions reconfigure the original to reveal “unspoken truths about the nature of history.” Through these powerful actions that “disrupt” the original, he exposes what has been lost in order to investigate the power of a rewritten history. I wanted to create a similar disruption and tension through creating a painting of an animal in its habitat, cutting out animal figures and revealing their toy representation. To create that contrast and allude to the bringing the artificial nature inside to our domestic spaces, I built a shelving unit inside the canvas to house cultural representations of the animal. For the painting portion, I took reference photos of the taxidermy at Cabela’s, a sporting goods chain store with a large presence in my hometown, Owatonna, MN. Rhino and polar bear were chosen for the initial paintings in the series because they are “poster animals” for endangered species; however, I intend to continue this series of other endangered species. *Displaced, Ursus maritimus* and *Displaced, Diceros bicornis* are a wonderful jumping off place for me to end my graduate studies, as I am incredibly happy with
the direction both thematically and artistically. Detail images here; see full images in Chapter 5.
Figure 31. Anna Segner, Displaced, Ursus maritimus, Mixed Media, 4’ x 3.5’, 2019 (detail image, see full below)

Figure 32. Anna Segner, Displaced, Diceros bicornis, Mixed Media, 4’ x 3.5’, 2019 (detail image, see full below)
Being that my background is in writing and literature, writing is a significant portion of my creative process. Oftentimes, it is through writing that ideas and interests are realized. I wrote the short story, “The 31st of October” (listed under Appendix), during my second semester of graduate school. It is a fictionalized telling of one Halloween when I accidentally trick-or-treated at a hoarder’s house. Stumbling into this home, so different than my own—but not so different than my bloated toy closet—opened my eyes to sickness of mass consumerism. I realized then that objects and their relationship to people are complicated and emotionally complex. Writing and telling this story helped me to realize my artistic interest in the implications of owning objects, possessions and collections. Writing continues to be an influential practice.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

“If I should labor through daylight and dark,
Consecrate, valorous, serious, true,
Then on the world I may blazon my mark;
And what if I don’t, and what if I do?”

Dorothy Parker, “Philosophy”

Throughout graduate school, I have been more serious and focused than ever before on improving myself as an artist and person. Through the course of my graduate studies, I have worked diligently in the studio, teaching, writing, and research. I can only trust that with hard work comes reward. I feel every word of the above poem by Dorothy Parker as excruciatingly embodying the truth of my hopes and fears throughout graduate studies and now. Yet, I tend to put my head down, work, and not look up to appreciate what I have accomplished.

I am excited about the direction my work has taken, as I have weaved installation and assemblage into my painting practice. The cut-out pieces are a wonderful place for me to begin my career as a freshly minted MFA artist. I plan to continue to merge assemblage and painting together to push the limits of two-dimensions and three-dimensions. With so much excitement in my studio practice, I look forward to opportunities in exhibitions, residencies, and teaching. My studio practice means everything to me, and I will continue to fight self-doubt as follows: “and what if I don’t, and what if I do?” (Parker).
CHAPTER 6. MFA THESIS EXHIBITION INSTALL
(ISU Design on Main Gallery)

Figure 34. Install

Figure 35. Install
Figure 39. Install
Figure 40. Install
Figure 45. Install

Figure 46. Install
Figure 49. Install
Figure 54. Install

Figure 55. Install


The 31st of October

When I was eleven years old, I dressed up as a tooth for Halloween. I wore a white pillowcase over my wind breaker while my younger sister, Josi, paraded in pink wings. Though I was at least a foot taller, I was the tooth to her tooth fairy. This may sound like parental favoritism, but I assure you that there were always an equal number of Christmas gifts under the tree.

My costume required little preparation, so I was left to wait as my mother curled Josi’s bangs. I sprawled myself on the carpet outside the bathroom and moped that we were going to miss Halloween every time our doorbell was rung by an eager trick-or-treater.

That Halloween was notable for several reasons. I think that was the only year that I broke loyalty with my witch costume, and Josi and I were given a few blocks in the neighborhood to trick-or-treat on our own before moving on to the greater area with our dad. This freedom came after much nagging.

“It’s a dangerous business, girls, going out your door,” said Dad, quoting Tolkien, after setting some ground rules of stranger danger. “Always hold your sister’s hand.”

Once Josi and I were let loose with our glow-stick bracelets and fluorescent jack-o-lantern buckets, we strolled down our driveway and passed crowds of cowboys, princesses, and vampires. Our neighborhood is nestled in the old part of
town where driveways are cracked, and trees are older than my oldest living relatives.

We lived at the top of Holly Street, a hill that might as well be a rollercoaster to kids on rollerblades or skateboards. Though the neighborhood was primarily inhabited by retired people and their dogs, there were always a surprising number of trick-or-treaters on Halloween.

Our first stop was at our next-door neighbors, Dave and Vickie, who mistook my pillowcase tooth guise as a ghost costume. As I explained our costume, we were led into their dated kitchen, a place I knew well.

Atop their wooden cupboards rested their salt and pepper shaker collection of at least 200 sets. I knew every pair because the summer prior, I was given $20 to dust each set. Most sets were souvenirs from travels—ceramic Queen’s Guard bears, Hawaiian Luau dancers, and crocodiles in sombreros. My favorites were the beret-wearing French bulldogs kissing, magnets gluing their snouts together, that I eyed before accepting a Kit-Kat. Vickie pinched Josi’s cheek, telling her that she was the cutest fairy she had ever seen. Apparently, she was not as charmed by a trick-or-treating piece of lost anatomy. Couldn’t they see we were a pair like their salt and pepper shakers?

“Don’t get a cavity from all the candy!” Vickie cackled as we walked down their drive—the first but not only dental pun of the night.
As our buckets became heavier, we became more confident ringing doorbells and screeching “trick-or-treat” to strangers. Our visit to the Arndts, an eccentric old couple with a Scottish terrier named Scotty that always ran away, was the second scariest stop of the night.

Their lawn was stuffed with foam gravestones and skeletal hands reaching for air. Cobwebs framed the door that creaked open before we knocked, and smog hung in a dark hallway. Fog machines were not something I suspected at that time, and I was terrified when hanging arms connected to a dead bride emerged through the haze. The bride’s lace dress was ripped with painted smears of red. Black eye-makeup was caked over Mrs. Arndt’s wrinkled face.

Desperate tugging pulled at my pillowcase, and I turned around to see fairy wings bolting off the steps. I stood brave, as any strong tooth would do, until another dead figure in a tuxedo emerged and let out a zombie moan. I dropped my bucket and rushed after Josi.

After Scotty chased us and lights were turned on, we made our way back up the driveway and decided that the bride and groom were indeed our neighbors in costume, oily makeup collecting in the creases of their wrinkles. They really pulled off the dead look.

Mr. Arndt offered us a treat from a bowl that had a rubber skeletal hand that slapped down when it detected motion. When Josi shyly grabbed a bouncy eyeball, the hand snapped down and let out a cackle. Josi burst into tears, and, I, the honorable tooth, consoled the fretting tooth fairy with my arm around her wings all
the way back to the street. After our scare at the Arndts, Josi hid behind me while I mustered the courage to ring the doorbell at each house. We acquired candy, Little Debbie snacks, yoyos, and fake vampire teeth. Favorite neighbors spoiled us with Halloween gift bags, and some old people were still convinced that they could throw loose candy corn in buckets without mothers sweeping the unwrapped pieces into the trash.

Our heavy buckets and the praise we received for our duo costume (always after an explanation) boosted our egos enough that we worked up the courage to go a few houses beyond the map outlined by our dad.

“What’s Halloween without a little danger?” I told Josi smugly, as I sucked on a ring pop. We walked on and noticed a small house behind overgrown pine trees. With no decorations or lit up jack-o-lanterns, the house was only lit by a streetlamp. The shingles were curling, and white paint chips flaked across the front of the concaving exterior.

My will for trick-or-treating independence and desire for cheap treats overcame better judgement, and we walked up to the house. We stepped over multiple strings of garden hoses on the grass before reaching slabs of cement before the door.

We rang the doorbell, and after waiting longer than anyone ever should, the screen door swung open. There was no fog machine producing smoke, no holiday sweater and no cobwebs strung over the door—just heaps of junk everywhere. A woman stood slumped over in an oversized polo, loose jeans, and slippers. Her
grayed hair was slicked back so tight that her temples had to hurt. She had age marks spotting her cheeks and a blank expression that did not alter after our “trick or treat” hung in the air. The woman’s gray eyes were lost and underwhelmed by our presence.

Her world was an untidy interior overwhelmed by the wildness of things. Our mother would have a fit. She would not even allow me to leave my stuffed animals spread out on the floor overnight after playing with them.

Upon closer examination, the things were arrangements of toys, many of which I knew to be McDonald’s Happy Meal toys or cereal box freebies. Beanie Babies, Hello Kitty figurines, Madame Alexander dolls, and cheap collectibles from popular children’s movies of the 90s were posing everywhere.

“Is it the 31st?” she asked quickly out of the side of her mouth. Her eyes were fixed on the street behind us, and her voice was a worn through rasp. She swept her hand up and slicked back her greased pony tail.

“It’s Halloween,” I said. She stared at us for a long time, and then she frantically looked around and felt at her pockets. Standing on the stairs with my jack-o-lantern full of candy,

I felt dumb somehow, like we had intruded on a burrowing animal.

“Oh, we should go,” I said to Josi and to her.

“No, come in,” she demanded, and she turned around and scampered further into the house. Against better judgement, Josi and I joined hands and followed her into the mess. The woman shrunk in size the further she scurried in,
out, and over piles of toys and things. We tried to replicate her steps, but we were unfamiliar and clumsy.

We were eventually led to a buried living room, which was habitat to toys of all sizes. The wall behind a couch was completely covered by hundreds of postured Beanie Babies on shelves, looking eternally in the same direction. The couch itself was full of stuffed animals, teddy bears, and rag dolls. On another wall, a lit shelf displayed dolls with glass faces. The dolls were set up in scenes. Some dolls had dolls that had dolls. Standing next to the shelf of glass faces, Josi looked like a life-size doll herself in her dress and wings, which gave me a pang of fear.

Papers and puzzle pieces littered the floor. I noticed the eyes of an animal in one of the pieces. Maybe a dog—some creature trapped here. The collected lives of dolls and toy animals all stuffed together in this house for eternity was beginning to close in on me. I pulled Josi close.

The woman stood next to a recliner that lost all practical purpose to the stuffed animals arranged on top. I could tell that she sensed my fear and had second thoughts about inviting us inside. She told us to hold on, and she scampered away. We heard a few clashes and cupboards opening and closing from another room.

“I have no candy,” she said as she crept around a corner of Loony Tunes memorabilia—knocking down a stuffed Taz with her hip. She looked around at the blur of possessions and then finally to us standing side by side, hand in hand.

“But please, take anything you want.” Her words came so quickly out of her mouth that I think she even surprised herself. She stood defensive, like a magpie
guarding its nest of treasures, but then she flashed us a sad, grey smile, sensing our uneasiness.

“I’ve been meaning to clear this out anyways,” she said with a gesture to the thousands of toy characters.

Carefully, I walked over to a stack of boxes on a TV tray and examined a jumble of plastic jungle animals desperate to be rescued from the extinction of claustrophobia. I reached for a plastic dog, and jumped when the woman said “not that.” I moved my hand toward a bobble-head jaguar, and sensing her approval, my hand closed over it. Josi took my lead, and she walked over to a shelf of dolls. The woman’s eyes followed Josi, as she chose a ballerina troll doll with a pink tutu resting below its jeweled belly.

“Thanks,” I said. “We should go now.”

“I hope that you enjoy that one,” she said, staring at the troll doll in Josi’s hand before glancing at the jaguar. “And that—what a pretty cat. It should be somewhere nice—nicer than here.”

Then we saw our way out by walking through the narrow path through heaps. I was grateful to feel the breeze when we opened the door. The stranger stood with exhaustion in the doorway, barely waiting for us to get to the curb before closing the door. I imagined her pawing back through everything to retreat in her burrow. It can be just as tiresome to open your door as to go out it. She seemed to bring the outside world inside, as to not have to leave.
My bucket seemed heavier with the jaguar resting in my jack-o-lantern on top of the candy—its head bobbling with each motion. We stepped back on to the street to join the store-bought costumes of Darth Vader and Little Red Riding Hoods. We were tooth and tooth fairy again, begging for cheap treasures in costume, while others begged to be rid of them.

At home, after sorting candy and making sweet trades, the tooth fairy fell asleep on the floor with the troll doll in her hand. I retreated to our room holding the jaguar in my hand—its plastic arms stretching away. Its tail curled up with life.

I imagined the stranger’s home, not too different than other homes—only swallowed by one too many toys. When do things become a collection and collectors become hoarders?

In my room at the shelf of my plastic animal kingdom, I gazed at the arrangement and couldn’t bring the jaguar to the ranks. Its plastic teeth chattered in its bobbling head. Its muscly paws stretched toward the window, where a street light backlit the trees in the night. No more crowded interiors, no artificial wild.