

# The Guilty Animal, Observed

"I think I've finally identified my type," Karen exclaims. "I'm into lost boys!" She and I walk along a coastal trail, carrying garbage bags and filling them with the litter we're picking up from the sand. The air full of minerals, the oily smell of Manzanita, birds back from migration. A primatologist, Karen is a keen observer of animal behavior—in marked contrast to me, a keen observer of animalistic behavior.

"I guess it's still an improvement from what used to be my type..." she continues.

"Imaginary men?" I quip.

"Thanks, Nick."

"Like that Pearl Jam song," I reply. "It's evolution, baby!"

"Funny that you'd say that," Karen says, slipping into her professional voice. "In my work, I'm frequently struck by two things. First off, evolution is happening constantly, on the level of the organism and of the environment." She pushes up the sleeves of her burgundy North Face fleece.

"Here's a great example—all this Scotch broom you see around here?" Karen asks, gesticulating toward the bushes growing thickly along the trail. Her porcelain-white hand is stark against the deep green. "Highly invasive. It's crowding out all the native species on this coast." Delicate yellow blossoms extend along the trail to the horizon.

"Scotch broom got here as an ornamental



## REMEMBER TO BREATHE

by Nick Mattos

I think of all the times that I hesitated in my life. ... Of not living up to standards that were impossibly high, for leaving relationships I knew wouldn't work, for making my life the way I needed it to be.

plant, but now it's so dominant in the ecosystem that it's become integral. In other words, the ecosystem evolved to include Scotch broom."

"But humans brought it here!" I object.

"Sure, but seeds and spores travel all over the place, on winds and water currents and in animal shit," Karen says, picking up a plastic bottle from the side of the trail. "Why is it okay or 'natural' when it happens like that, but not okay when we spread those seeds and spores?"

I hear a hawk cry in the distance, the sand crunch beneath my boots. "That's a

great point."

"In nature, everything is constantly changing. While humans certainly have the tools to change things very quickly—cases in point, oil spills or the beetles we've introduced to fight the Scotch broom—we're still primarily animals, and still included in the ecosystem. This is the problem I find with conservationism. It overlooks the fact that environments and organisms evolve and change, and draws a very arbitrary line between people and the environment."

"I guess you're right," I concur. "There's a human tendency to think of ourselves as outside of nature, or somehow above it. It's easy to forget that there isn't really a clear distinction between us and the ecosystem at large. Except, I suppose, in our perception."

"That's totally in line with the second thing I've noticed," she continues, pushing her blonde hair behind her ear. "Humans really are the only species that even gives a second thought to altering their environment. The primates I've observed have absolutely no qualms about changing the space around them. If they want or need something, or have a desire to change something, they simply go out and do it. Humans don't fault them for it, either. We find an evolutionary explanation for the actions. Animals don't hesitate to act, but we do—and then feel guilty for our actions."

I look at the bay to our left, and know that

Karen is correct. I think of all the times that I hesitated in my life. I swallow and feel the lump of guilt, the reminder of not living up to standards that were impossibly high, for leaving relationships I knew wouldn't work, for making my life the way I needed it to be.

Karen's steel blue eyes look over the still water, the sandpipers picking delicately at the earth. "Maybe what sets us apart from the other animals is guilt," she says. "It's not that we change our environment, or are conscious of the environment. Lots of organisms are. We're just the only ones who feel culpable for it, who feel guilt about being animals."

We reach the end of the trail—a minivan full of children is unloading in the parking lot, birders with their binoculars drink water from plastic bottles. We walk alongside the gravel parking lot, the smell of dust mixing with the salt, and reach the garbage cans.

There among the Scotch broom and the sandpipers, the gravel and minivans and Karen and I, amid the terrible guilt of being a human animal, I drop the bag of litter into the open can. I hear the bottles crash against the metal and each other for a moment, alarmingly loud. Then, there is silence.

*Nick Mattos may be accused of tokenism, but really does believe that everyone needs a primatologist in their stable of friends. He invites you to share your reactions: [nickmattos@justout.com](mailto:nickmattos@justout.com).*

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