

WOODY

by Paul Wiener
Lake Grove, New York

EDITOR'S PROLOGUE: From the dim prehistory of the human race to this very hour, certain people have had special communion with certain animals. To one degree or another, I believe, we have all had such experiences.

The following column is about the relationship between a man and a parrot. It reflects the philosophical, introspective musings and intimate thoughts that many of us have had but have not expressed. Whatever your personal interest in parrots may be, read on. Your spirit will be expanded and warmed by the relationship between the writer and the conure "Woody."

There is no way of exaggerating how much love I feel for Woody. There is no accounting for it either. It is physical and moral, secret, natural, possessive. It has a smell and scorns poetry. It wants to declare itself. I feel it when I leave him alone overnight and worry whether he has enough to eat, or wonder whether he has pulled apart the wire mesh I used to repair his cage, squeezed out between the bars, and jumped off to the floor, and is now huddled croaking in the dark on the handle of a wicker basket we keep in a lonely corner of the hall. I feel it when he crawls up my leg from the living room rug, while I'm reading on the couch, and puts his head under my forefinger for a scratch, or when I'm simply watching him watching me, grinning expectantly from his wooden ring that hangs in front of the kitchen picture window.

Love can make us look ridiculous. Sometimes I just sit with him perched on my chest, gazing at him profoundly, with a melancholy sadness at how happy and alert he is, and yet how different from me, my own birdbrain. Our mutual, tolerant consciousness of this difference joins us in a union that feels much older than our relationship. There we sit, nose to nose, muttering nonsense, him on my hand, a small, green, oblong creature with folded wings that lets me put my lips against its senseless beak. What would the neighbors think? What *do* they think when at night they look through my large living room window and see me, a stranger in his own house, sitting alone and smiling, apparently transfixed by the presence of a bird in his hand, inches from his face, treeless, a bird that

incredibly is not flying, shitting, singing, talking, eating or getting in the way of a perfectly private evening.

I was talking to Woody the other day, after work. We were alone together. My wife was away for the night, a rare treat. Not that I don't love her; but a man has to be alone sometimes, to unravel thoughts. "Woody," I said. "I want you to know I'm proud of you." I emphasized *proud*, to let him know I meant it, but, of course, he didn't understand anything but the noises I'd made. He

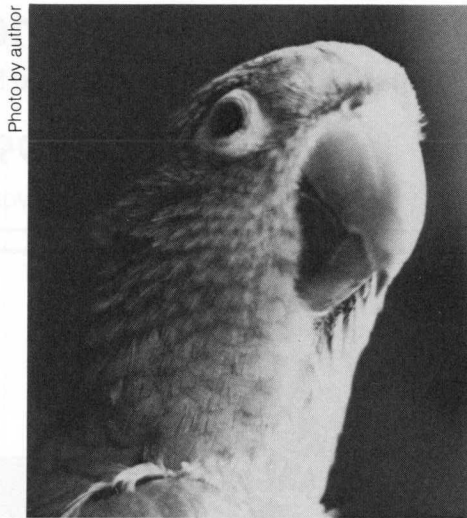


Photo by author

acted as if I'd startled him, and for a second looked worried. "I mean it, Woody, you did a terrific job!" I emphasized *terrific*. "And aren't you lucky I'm here to acknowledge it?" I teased. He seemed indifferent. But you judge his character, his accomplishment, if you think I'm exaggerating its importance. He was free! In the morning I'd left him caged.

He had pulled apart the wires I'd wound into a web-like Gordian knot to block the hole in his cage until they'd formed a narrow, off-center cable, freeing space to let him squeeze out. His body is much thinner than the shape his feathers give it. He'd gotten out! It had taken him seven weeks — longer than ever before — of persistent, angry rearranging of the wire I'd used, as if he'd been undoing a nest. In a small way it reflected on my own ability to trap him

creatively, and on the kind of compromise I'd worked out to deal with my guilt at keeping him caged, at any time.

God knows (no one else dares believe this) I had done nothing today myself. Again. I certainly hadn't freed myself from whatever keeps me going to my isolated office, day after day. I hadn't escaped. Woody had. Even better, he had no idea how pointless it had been. He believed in his work. I was always full of skepticism. As soon as he was out, I saw, he had stayed on top of his cage for the rest of the day. He had camped there — on the point of his vertical stick, near the ceiling; on the back left corner of the cage itself, near the lamp; on his side-jutting perch, level with my eyes, thrust over the rug toward the middle of the room — until I'd come home. I was reminded of how often I'd tried to feel on top of things, too, how often I'd succeeded. Once failure had only spurred me on; now it served as an escape from trying. It was good to see Woody carry on, and I felt grateful for the sight. He seemed to sense this and looked forgiving.

I saw with absolute clarity how I could no more be blamed for forcing him into a career he'd never asked for than he could be blamed for putting me where I was — resting, not turning, on consciousness like a yogi on a bed of nails. Woody may live no longer than I will — and with any luck I'm only halfway there; but he's got ten or fifteen lifetimes left, and is still in the childhood of his illusions. He sees freedom in his prison. I see floors in mine.

Rarely does he greet my reappearance every evening with any fanfare. When he does it feels like love — which is the only reason for having a parrot. Most of that love he saves for my wife, not knowing I end up getting it from her. When Woody does acknowledge my return, though, perhaps he's also greeting *my* escape. From the world beyond the door, unknowable and meaningless, I am welcomed as a fellow inmate to an alternative environment, one which he appears to believe is his own, neither mine nor not mine. ●

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