



# WOODY

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*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."*

## Hard Lips

Many people ask me how I dare put my mouth so close to the unpredictable weapon called Woody's beak, but as far as I'm concerned he only has hard lips. The beak sits right where the lips ought to be and judging by the way Woody uses it, it does most of the things lips are supposed to do. Lips are supposed to talk back. They are supposed to help you eat. They are supposed to release sweet, self-centered nothings. They do special things with affection, give the gentlest tugs on a mustache hair, the faintest squeeze on my own nasal protrusion.

You will never see me sitting on the couch with my lovely, unfeathered wife standing uneasily in my palm, my lips pressed solidly against her nose as I, stroking her wings, imitate her croaks of pleasure. But it is as natural to me to be nuzzling Woody, lip to lip and beak to beak, forcing him to allow me this preposterous, tyrannical, selfish manipulation of his trembling, freedom-seeking body, as it is for me to be lying in bed at night, skin against willing skin, with a fellow human being. I have my way of holding the small, highly-egoed, unembraceable Woody, but it barely meets my needs and makes of my beloved, as all love does, a captive, hypnotized and traumatized, an enemy.

## Woody's Musical Heritage

Because it is so upsetting — so disappointing, so shocking, really — it has taken me three years to accept the truth: Woody does not like music. There are times I think he hates it, but that's probably my anger talking. I will play Mozart, Springsteen, Phillip Glass, *The Goldberg Variations*, Stevie Wonder, Mahler, Billie Holiday, the heavenly Fauré *Requiem*, Olatunji, Astrud Gilberto, for god's sake. It doesn't matter. Woody will get irritated, he will make his objections. I have seen him, in the middle of Schubert's beatific *Mass in G*, climb his perch, cling to it upside down, and beat his wings furiously, as if he were trying to drive the amens from the room, all the while asserting his high-pitched, rhythmic jungle quack.

He will make certain to get in the way — not of the sound, but of the music. He's not jealous of sound, of noise. Much of the time he is making it he's really asking for it, calling to it. The TV can be on all day and he won't even notice; the sound is part of his natural habitat: he'll sleep, he'll work, he'll eat, he'll talk to me, he'll be himself. But he won't squawk at the television. He won't screech or grouse or caw or bark or yell at the television like he will when there's music on. There's something different about music, he knows, and whatever it is it rubs him the wrong way. It's not *natural* like the other sounds in my house — voices, cars starting, the hairdryer, the furnace kicking off, the toilet, the phone, shoes falling, the faucet running, voices again, voices associated with me and my wife, tired, angry, excited, pleased, routine voices that move like bodies, voices as strange and familiar as food, voices with people attached to them and in no way ever to be confused with the louder, hollower sounds coming from the flickering box across the room that never moves or gives — that never does anything, in fact.

But music does something — to Woody, certainly: it gets a reaction. It gets on his nerves just when I am most given up to it — to its passions or its peace, to its questions, to its claims. If Woody's there, there's no communion with music that his running commentary will not shatter as surely as music shatters his self-absorbed vigilance. And since I listen to music because it creates in me a state of gratifying alertness, he obviously opposes my deepest nature. Though he cannot help it, it is a terrible blow, this wary, instinctive disrespect for one another's needs.

How very human it is to shatter expect-

tations, to make music, to keep pets, to marvel at reports of parrots that sing Puccini arias, to dream of a world where birds take as much music as they make, birds grateful to be singing the same songs men and women pass reverently along the generations, songs commanding enough to become part of nature. Ignorant of all this, unable to learn, always able to respond, Woody suffers music as he suffers me. He is shaped by experience he doesn't understand or like. He hates music, perhaps, but his reaction is charming, gives him character and style. It's my house, I tell him, and he croaks possessively. A clash of cultures? But I have bequeathed to Woody a heritage he finds a burden even as it provides him with a future he doesn't know he needs. How adolescent! ●

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