

Marion Douglas / ANDREW AND THE BEASTS

Although I had known about Andrew for years, it was not until I was ten years old that I got a really close look at him. He was an object of some discussion in the community, which held him to be “not right.” There were medical problems too, people said, one kidney, a hole in the heart, aneurysms, the speculation never ceased. When Adeline was living she had kept a close watch over Andrew, confining him to a paddock in the orchard, the barn and the house. People saw him in the screened-in front porch making bird noises or arranging things in rows or triangles or squares. The Avon lady told my mother once that when she pulled into the yard to deliver Adeline’s moisture cream, Andrew had run out and sniffed the tires of her car.

Andrew was the only child and people used to say that Adeline read to him every night—*The Little Prince*, or *Alice in Wonderland*—even though Andrew did not seem to hear. Adeline was small and pale and resilient like a mushroom. People treated her with delicacy. Perhaps they were afraid that with her burden she might break under the strain of exposure to rude comments and gossip.

Adeline died in the winter, leaving Eugene and Andrew. Without Adeline’s benign presence people came to their farm only on business. And most of those people were strangers, hunters and trappers who drove around the country blocks in their pickup trucks, ignoring the road signs and shouting, as if the normal rules of civilization did not apply in places where there are a lot of trees.

Eugene was a dairy farmer but his passion was taxidermy. He had a dark, earthen-floored shop where he practiced his ghoulish art. There were specimens here and there, an owl on a shelf and a pig lying on its side in the corner, as a joke on the goons as he called his customers.

Eugene kept to himself. He did a lot of hunting and regularly word would get around that he had shot a fox or a deer. It seemed logical that he would stuff these creatures. Eventually some folklore sprang up about Eugene. The story went that in the attic of his house he had designed and created a murky and violent forest scene, with a pack of wolves and a black bear. At one time, when no one had heard from or seen Eugene for weeks, it was believed that he had had an anaconda shipped in from Brazil and was planning a change to a torrid South American jungle motif. People joked that soon Eugene would be wanting humans for his tableaux. His attic light was seen on at ungodly hours.

With Adeline dead, Andrew began to roam around to neighbouring farms. Eugene had no time to look out for him. "He's a teen-ager now, he needs his freedom," Eugene said once to my brother and me. And, "When he doesn't come home for a meal, that's when I'll call the cops." It was inevitable then that he would show up one day, apparition like, in our yard. I watched him from a distance as he stared at the dog, a grotesquely fat German shepherd breathing wetly in the summer heat. Andrew had one hand outstretched toward Shep, his fingers so tense they curved back in thin white arcs. I thought of the sprouts growing on the potatoes in the lightless basement. He stood that way until the dog got up and began sniffing at him. Andrew then raised both arms above his head and looked up into the tree with an expression of gratitude and dopey sublimity. You might have thought it was Christmas morning.

My younger brother, Peter, and I came closer. Andrew's chin was fuzzy and his two black nostrils were like sinister little passageways that led to the brain that was not right. I stared into them as Andrew gazed at the branches of the tree, ignoring us completely. The tuberous hands fluttered. Nothing else moved. So Peter, uncomfortable, threw a stick for Shep and in flawless symmetry both Andrew and the dog took after it. For me, this moment was no less miraculous and supernatural than the time when, alone in the barn, I had attended the birth of a two-headed calf.

We took turns throwing the stick. Each time Andrew barked madly after, Shep always beating him. Andrew became increasingly excited by the game, taking on more and more convincing dog mannerisms. As he waited for the stick to be thrown he got down on his hands and knees or crouched with his chin in the grass. He snarled, then feigned uninterest. But soon Shep tired of it all and

padded off to his water dish. And as abruptly as Andrew had joined us, he departed, his body becoming flaccid, his face egg-like. Away he went, over the fence and across the field.

This was not the last we saw of him. Andrew began to make regular appearances, always in the guise of some animal. He never sought us out. We would simply come across him. Or sometimes we would walk to his place and sit in Eugene's disgusting shop with him. One time Eugene said, "Andrew's got about as much sense as that owl over there," gesturing toward the dead and turgid bird. "Now the clock," he went on, "the clock has more sense, though it's cuckoo too." At this Andrew put his hand over his eyes and made a funny inward whistling noise, like a calliope. Peter and I looked at one another. The bright and wooden cuckoo bird popped out and I wanted to smash it. Eugene was angry then also. "Now get outta here before I stuff you all," he shouted and we scurried off.

Andrew never spoke to Peter and me. Eugene claimed that he did talk at home, that occasionally he would recite books that had been read to him, entire passages of *Alice in Wonderland*. Eugene said it spooked him because it was like hearing Adeline, the same words, the same inflections, the same comments she would interject like, "Andrew, you know what a caterpillar is. We see them on the tomatoes in the summer."

Every day we watched for Andrew. We looked for him or waited some place in the sunny shafts in the barn. Once we were sitting in the oats in a flat, mysterious oval; it was like being in a basket or a straw boat. I looked up and there was Andrew with his back to us, the sun shining through his black spikes of hair. His skin was always very white, like those powdery fungus plates that grow on dead wood.

The challenge then was to guess what animal he had on his mind. Sometimes he would tell us right away by an action or a sound. And sometimes he made us think. Sometimes we never divined it and he went home with his arcane knowledge.

The favourite was cow. Usually on those days he would moo and low and nudge us with his head. Then it was essential for me to get a rope and tie it around his neck and lead him to a stall in the barn. There he would make urgent cattle noises until we gave him hay or oats. He insisted on straw to lie on; kicked at us if we got too close. Once I kicked him back and it felt good and shameful at the same time.

One day we found him crouching in a shaded little corner between the silo and the barn. There was a hole there that Peter and I had aimlessly dug. Andrew squatted, looked at us and moved his nose. We were at a loss. Finally, on a hunch, Peter went into the house and got a carrot. Andrew ate it and then we knew. He looked so scared that I began to stroke his back, as if it had fur. I did this for a long time as my father rattled around and around the field, swathing. The dust just sat in the air. Peter and I eventually went into the house for lunch and when we came back Andrew was gone.

Another day Andrew was a pig. It was clear that day what he was. He walked right up to us in the barn where we had been waiting and emitted several remarkable, high-pitched squeals. He headed over to the pig pen and looked in. The pigs were all lying in the straw snorting intermittently in a bored, flabby manner at the flies. With two startling calls Andrew marshalled them all around him. In a moment he was in the pen on all fours, being examined in a friendly, curious manner. Peter and I watched with renewed amazement. The pigs were not conspirators as we were but actually seemed convinced of Andrew's authenticity. After a few seconds of ecstatic hesitation, we jumped in and began cavorting with Andrew.

I think maybe that he had fun with us that day. At least once he knelt next to my brother and rested his head on Peter's back. Pigs do this occasionally; it's a familiar, almost intimate gesture.

After that though we worried that things had gone too far. What if my parents or older brother had come across us in the pig pen? What kind of looniness was this? Pretending to be animals with this funny boy who never looked you in the eye. We laid low for a while. Peter and I drank chocolate milk on the front porch, catching glimpses of Andrew now and then ferreting behind the wood pile or barn. We ignored him; rode our bikes out the lane.

Andrew stopped coming over. Peter and I watched his red brick house across the fields, expecting it to move or wink or signal in some manner. This did not happen so one afternoon in late August we tramped through the stubble to his house. Eugene was in the shop listening to the radio and playing solitaire. It was a garishly blue day and there he was in his gluey salon. "Don't know where Andrew is. He doesn't usually inform me of his plans. Ha ha... Maybe with his rabbits in the shed, talking voodoo at them."

He wasn't there. We found him in the barn leaning against the whitewashed walls. A couple of flies manoeuvred around his forehead. I shoed them off. Andrew was holding some harness that he had dug up somewhere. He did not seem to see us, did not look at us, but for the first time he did speak. He had a robotic voice, directed at no one. It was a radio commercial for the local harness races. "And they're off," he said, "with today's favourite Delta Dawn taking an easy lead." He ran through the entire commentary, then handed the harness to Peter. We stood for a moment in the wet, buzzing passageway. The windows were opaque with dirt and fly specks but the quality of the light reminded me of church.

We went out to his paddock. There was an oval course around the perimeter of the field. It was apparent that Andrew wanted to be the horse. But at the same time he was still using his radio voice. He was changing channels, going up and down the dial, producing static and disjointed messages. "Left to mourn his passing are... Hot today and very humid... So come on down to our Chev-Olds dealership."

For the first time ever Andrew was staring right into my eyes. His skin was whiter than usual and his brown eyes shone with some idea. More channels, "Interment to follow at... The Motown sound of... Donations to the Cancer Society gratefully accepted." He kept getting stuck on a programme I recognized called In Memoriam. It was sponsored by the local funeral homes and was a recitation of the week's deaths, giving details of where remains were resting and where burial would follow. Up and down the dial he went again. I was getting the creeps. Even Peter, standing near the gate, looked like some sort of changeling waiting stupidly in the heat. Andrew came back to the harness races, then In Memoriam again. I couldn't stand it any longer so I looked him in the eyes and yelled, "They're off."

He took off with the harness on, Peter being dragged by the reins. I stood in the middle of the paddock shouting, "C'mon, c'mon, faster, faster." Andrew ran and crackled radio talk. He ran and his baggy old brown pants sloshed around him, trying to fall off. Peter laughed for a while but then he stopped. More sodden running. The radio voice turned off. And that is when Andrew fell. He simply stopped running and fell in the soft dusty path and rolled and the harness dug into his cheek.

Peter ran to get Eugene and I stood over Andrew. I was horrified by his stillness but I looked. I knew that he was in a peculiar state, someplace far away, although I didn't dare think how far. Wherever it was, he had left the disguises behind, the animals and machines, and now looked like a regular boy whose hair blew in the wind.

When Eugene arrived he put his ear against Andrew's chest, then announced, "It was his ticker, never was any good." He picked him up and carried him to the house. Still, we did not know that he was dead. Peter asked, "Will he be all right?"

"No son. You two run home now."

The funeral was held and afterward there was a gathering at Eugene's house. All the neighbours came, some out of curiosity but most out of respect for Eugene. People stood and sat everywhere eating the sandwiches and cakes they had brought and drinking tea. There was nothing exceptional about the house. I had expected to find a stuffed grizzly bear in the livingroom but there were only chairs and a worn out couch which Eugene called the chesterfield and Adeline's good dishes in a china cabinet. They had tiny violets on them. I hovered in a state of giddy chaos, my stomach a sack of uncooked eggs.

Repeated trips upstairs to the bathroom were necessary. Each time I stood in the hallway, then ventured a bit closer to the foot of the attic stairs. I tried not to think the horrible thought that bubbled up and down, fish-like in my mind, but there it was anyway—there is no control when it comes to thoughts. What if Andrew was stuffed up there with the wolves and the bear? The entire situation began to feel so distant and unreal that I decided to take the insane risk of snooping in Eugene's attic.

I ran up the stairs, opened the door and there I was. My head felt as if it were filled with all the flies from Andrew's barn, buzzing and screaming and walking out of my ears. The room was grey with the light from one small gable window. Of course, Andrew was not there. But there were beasts, not anacondas or bears, but rabbits, maybe a dozen, and three foxes and a deer standing behind an artificial Christmas tree. They were all placed in a way that Andrew would have arranged them, in perfect triangles and squares, nothing haphazard, except for the deer who watched it all, empty-eyed and slightly askew.

Four of the rabbits sat in a square, looking outward. I knelt and touched one of them. It was white and stiff like Andrew's funny, useless fingers. I lifted it and held it next to my cheek and moved the three remaining into a triangle, all facing one another. It seemed like the right thing to do. Then I stuffed the white rabbit under my sweater, slipped down the stairs, out the front door and ran across the fields to my home.