

Angela Woodward

FREEDOM

Some parts of the brain are free to roam over the world, and in so doing are free to map whatever object the organism's design presents them to map. But other parts that represent the organism's own state are not free to roam at all. They can map nothing but the body itself. That is, they can evaluate heat or cold, but say to themselves only 'this organism is cold.' The organism lies in bed under an open window. Over the course of two hours, the weather has shifted. Or the organism has been locked overnight in the trunk of a car. When her captor opens the trunk, the slit between the two lips of metal fills with a landscape of distant, snow-covered mountains against a pale blue sky. The organism cries out, 'Where are we?' automatically including her captor, the driver, in the world of the exclamation. Yet much of the organism's sensory mechanisms are pointed internally, and never observe that threatening mountain range.

The organism is tired of other people telling her what to do, but it was only when she rebelled definitively by moving back in with her sister that she landed in this state of fairly restricted destiny. 'Necessity,' you might remember from the diagram in the preceding chapter, means all available avenues are blocked except one. The problem may be that some avenues are so slender that they appear blocked at the very outset, the walls collapsed, concrete rubble, tires, rusted truck bodies, obscuring a disused entrance. Even something as fragile as a blade of grass or a spider web may have fallen across it. The one open way that necessity chooses for us is the clear, well-swept one. Many organisms have passed this way. Lit signs beckon over marriage, death, the selection of a popular brand of car, while trash blows against a chain link fence that clearly could be scaled by an organism skilled in somewhat bolder options.

Look up from the page, at whatever is directly in front of you, observe intently, and return to the page. Which vista offers you the

greater freedom? Your lover, on the other end of the couch, is still playing with his phone. He's been that way a lot since his mother got sick. Why does he have to be the good kid, while his brothers and sister have all their excuses? You could forgive him, but you still feel he could tell you about it a little more. Maybe he doesn't really trust you, or else he'd let you see his weakness. Here, on the page, I promise to show you four things: a bookkeeper, a frog, boats, and a cormorant. You know what that is, the black bird that dives under the water and reemerges with a fish in its mouth. But because the master has placed a ring around its neck, the bird can't swallow its catch. The cormorant offers it up to him instead. Little girls put leaves over the basket of fish to keep it cool, and pour buckets of water through. The boats turn at sunset, the fleet in staggered unison. The sun reflects off the sails ping ping ping. The bookkeeper keeps two sets of books, one for the physical, palpable world, and one for the numinous. They are the same world, one sliding into the other, rippling from one to the next like the cormorant, air, water, air, and then the fire of the gleaming sails. But he marks some things in the one set, and at night, makes other notations in the other volumes.

You see how easy it is for me to offer you a scenario. He came to her sister's house crying, a beer in his hand. "I haven't been drinking, I swear," he sobbed. "This is my last one." Her sister told her if he bothered them one more time, she'd have to find another place to stay. She didn't have any money, because he cleaned out their joint account. She had thought of doing that herself, but thought it would be cruel. So she just took what she thought she needed. This was not necessity, but a conditioning that emphasized being nice and expecting others to be the same. If one night she had seen him come in, take his skin off, hang it by the stove, and reveal himself a cruel, metal-headed ogre, then she might have known that she needed to be a little more prepared in order to deal with him. But she always saw him as a vulnerable person who responded strongly to her care.

In order to map the visual aspects of the brain, he and his research assistants altered frogs. While still in the tadpole stage, they took the tiny glob of ocular cells and rotated it one hundred and eighty degrees. Then when the tadpoles metamorphosed, one eye saw as most frogs did, while the other took things in at the perpendicular. Fly after fly

zoomed in at the new visionaries. But the frogs were unable to adapt. The conflicting messages, though perfectly consistent, outraged the animals. In protest, they slumped in the terrarium, rarely letting their tongues loose at anything. They became very thin. Their skin, deep green mottled with black trails and dots running to yellow under the jaw, remained a painterly study.

He had a shovel in the back seat. He began digging her grave. If she didn't agree to marry him, he would bury her. She knew he didn't have a gun. He didn't think things through enough to carry out a plan this complex. So he'd have to hit her with the shovel. That seemed so awful. He could kill her if he wanted. She'd let him do it, just to spite him. But he should find a quicker, neater way. As the shovel chunked into the earth, this became her obsession—his total unfairness at intending to brain her. She went through many alternatives. He could slit her throat. It would be messy but it wouldn't hurt too much. He could poison her. Stab her in the heart. He might even be so stupid that he'd try to run the car over her. She watched his arms and shoulders move. He didn't even know how to hold the shovel properly. He wasn't after all very good at doing things. His shelves were crooked, the cabinet doors loose.

To study the visual adaptability of owls, they clamped glasses on some juveniles. My partial notes don't make clear whether these glasses made their vision sharper or duller. But the young ones learned to hunt just fine. Who knows what impression their spectacled faces made on the shrews as they descended over them. When the team removed the glasses, the owls shook their feathers out and sat, dumbfounded. The suddenly clearer or blurrier world nauseated them. But after two weeks, their weight had gone back to what it had been in their opulent days. Most of them then suffered a puncture in the neck, and had their brains removed and sliced up. It didn't hurt them at all, as they were beyond pain. And they didn't see it coming.

It was no good trying to reason with him. "I want to hold your hand," she told him. That was her only request. He untied her and they stood together at the lip of her grave, the sun hitting its mid-morning stride, wind fluttering the flimsy tee shirt she'd been wearing when he surprised her by the garbage cans. Shivering and hungry, she felt suddenly tender towards him. This was because it occurred to her

that if only one of them could survive the disaster of their love affair, it might as well be her. She was the one who had always taken his head in her lap and told him it would be okay. That made her the strong one, not the weak one.

“I’ll ask you one more time,” he said, his proposal to either encofnate herself while alive with this unstable, dictatorial man-boy, or to lie peacefully in the earth, gloriously, serenely alone.

“Okay,” she said, and slammed into his knees, knocked him halfway into the trough, grabbed the shovel, brought it down on his shoulder, then again his neck, at last his head, probably just hard enough to stun him. She slammed it into him once more, so he wouldn’t get up. The shovel, because of its weight, fell with a lot of force, though her arms felt weak, unskilled and unpracticed. Without the car keys, she ran downhill, a simple enough direction.

“My boyfriend is hurt,” she heard herself tell the hikers she met some time later. Nothing about that statement was true, and yet it was an appropriate option for the situation. Look up from the page, then down again. Evaluate where you are now, and if this is a different place from where you were at the beginning. That’s all I want you to do.

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