

The Rememberer

By: Aimee Bender

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 MY LOVER IS experiencing reverse evolution. I tell no one. I don't know how it happened, only that one day he was my lover and the next he was some kind of ape. It's been a month, and now he's a sea turtle.
- 2 I keep him on the counter, in a baking pan filled with saltwater. "Ben," I say to his small protruding head, "can you understand me?" and he stares with eyes like little droplets of tar and I drip tears into the pan, a sea of me.
- 3 He is shedding a million years a day. I am no scientist, but this is roughly what I figured out. I went to the old biology teacher at the community college and asked him for an approximate timeline of our evolution. He was irritated at first—he wanted money. I told him I'd be happy to pay and then he cheered up quite a bit. I can hardly read his timeline, he should've typed it, and it turns out to be wrong. According to him, the whole process should take about a year, but from the way things are going, I think we have less than a month left.
- 4 At first, people called on the phone and asked me where was Ben. Why wasn't he at work? Why did he miss his lunch date with those clients? His out-of-print special-ordered book on civilization had arrived at the bookstore, would he please pick it up? I told them he was sick, a strange sickness, and to please stop calling. The odd thing was, they did. They stopped calling. After a week the phone was silent and Ben, the baboon, sat in a corner by the window, wrapped up in a drapery, chattering to himself.
- 5 Last day I saw him human, he was sad about the world.
- 6 This was not unusual. He was always sad about the world. It was a large reason why I loved him. We'd sit together and be sad and think about being sad and sometimes discuss sadness.
- 7 On his last human day, he said, "Annie, don't you see? We're all getting too smart. Our brains are just getting bigger and bigger, and the world dries up and dies when there's too much thought and not enough heart."
- 8 He looked at me pointedly, blue eyes unwavering. "Like us, Annie," he said. "We think far too much."

- 9 I sat down. I remembered how the first time we had sex, I left the lights on, kept my eyes wide open and concentrated really hard on letting go; then I noticed that his eyes were open too and in the middle of taking off my clothes we sat down on the floor and had an hour-long conversation about poetry. It was all very peculiar. It was all very familiar.
- 10 Another time he woke me up in the middle of the night, lifted me off the pale blue sheets, led me outside to the stars and whispered: Look, Annie, look—there is no space for anything but dreaming. I listened, sleepily, wandered back to bed and found myself wide awake, staring at the ceiling, unable to dream at all. Ben fell asleep right away, but I crept back outside. I tried to dream up to the stars, but I didn't know how to do that. I tried to find a star no one in all of history had ever wished on before, and wondered what would happen if I did.
- 11 On his last human day, he put his head in his hands and sighed and I stood up and kissed the entire back of his neck, covered that flesh, made wishes there because I knew no woman had ever been so thorough, had ever kissed his every inch of skin. I coated him. What did I wish for? I wished for good. That's all. Just good. My wishes became generalized long ago, in childhood; I learned quick the consequence of wishing specific.
- 12 I took him in my arms and made love to him, my sad man. See, we're not thinking, I whispered into his ear while he kissed my neck, we're not thinking at all and he pressed his head into my shoulder and held me tighter. Afterwards, we went outside again; there was no moon and the night was dark. He said he hated talking and just wanted to look into my eyes and tell me things that way. I let him and it made my skin lift, the things in his look. Then he told me he wanted to sleep outside for some reason, and in the morning when I woke up in bed, I looked out to the patio and there was an ape sprawled on the cement, great furry arms covering his head to block out the glare of the sun.
- 13 Even before I saw the eyes, I knew it was him. And once we were face to face, he gave me his same sad look and I hugged those enormous shoulders. I didn't even really care, then, not at first; I didn't panic and call 911. I sat with him outside and smoothed the fur on the back of his hand. When he reached for me, I said No, loudly, and he seemed to understand and pulled back. I have limits here.
- 14 We sat on the lawn together and ripped up the grass. I didn't miss human Ben right away, I wanted to meet the ape too, to take care of my lover like a son, a pet; I wanted to know him every possible way but I didn't realize he wasn't coming back.
- 15 Now I come home from work and look for his regular-size shape walking and worrying and realize, over and over, that he's gone. I pace the halls. I chew whole packs of gum in mere minutes. I review my memories and make sure they're still intact because if he's not here, then it is my job to remember. I think of the way he wrapped his arms around my back and held me so tight it made me nervous and the way his breath felt in my ear: right.

- 16 When I go to the kitchen, I peer in the pan and see he's some kind of salamander now. He's small.
- 17 "Ben," I whisper, "do you remember me? Do you remember?"
- 18 His eyes roll up in his head and I dribble honey into the water. He used to love honey. He licks at it and then swims to the other end of the pan.
- 19 This is the limit of my limits: here it is. You don't ever know for sure where it is and then you bump against it and bam, you're there. Because I cannot bear to look down into the water and not be able to find him at all, to search the tiny waves with a microscope lens and to locate my lover, the one-celled wonder, bloated and blind, brainless, benign, heading clear and small, like an eye-floater into nothingness.
- 20 I put him in the passenger seat of the car, and drive him to the beach. Walking down the sand, I nod at people on towels, laying their bodies out to the sun and wishing. At the water's edge, I stoop down and place the whole pan on the tip of a baby wave. It floats well, a cooking boat, for someone to find washed up on shore and to make cookies in, a lucky catch for a poor soul with all the ingredients but no container.
- 21 Ben the salamander swims out. I wave to the water with both arms, big enough for him to see if he looks back.
- 22 I turn around and walk back to the car.
- 23 Sometimes I think he'll wash up on shore. A naked man with a startled look who has been to history and back. I keep my eyes on the newspaper. I make sure my phone number is listed. I walk around the block at night in case he doesn't quite remember which house it is. I feed the birds outside and sometimes before I put my one self to bed, I place my hands around my skull to see if it's growing, and wonder what, of any use, would fill it if it did.