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Meditation on a Cat Picture and a Flamingo Statue

By Lucas Alexander

Salmon

A large cavernous expansion presents itself. Great, I'm in my own head again. What am I thinking about this time? Thoughts echo in the temple surrounding me.

"Superfluidity! That's what you're thinking about! If you don't, this whole thing is just a pointless waste of words anyway!" shouts a harsh voice.

"Oh, you're *always* going on about that, aren't you? What you'd really like to think about is entropy. Why else do you think you picked that sculpture?" whines another.

"Now, now, I can agree both of those topics are very interesting. But if you don't want to be some kind of fake, some kind of poser, just go ahead and admit it's all about artificiality," a third voice asserts. These three voices are followed by countless others, although the volume of these following ideas decreases to a forgetful murmur. I've had enough time thinking about this alone. I need some visual data.

I crawl down in my medulla oblongata and search for my eyes. It's time to go further. I shrink to the size of an ant's ant and hitch a ride on a nearby blood cell. I dive into the optic nerve, and access the visual data it is capturing. It's all upside down, of course, so I have to stand on my head.¹

Six flamingos build a mountain with a seventh bird on top. All of the birds are covered in a swirly mess of rich bubblegum pink, and, while frozen in time, seem to be melting away, with liquid color pooling in the middle of their grassy pedestal. They might be haunting me. Suddenly, one flamingo pulls out a monocle, and begins to speak to me. The sound sends earthquakes through my head, shaking and nearly ruining my headstand.

"A matured flamingo's pigmentation is caused by diet. Considering this, it may be supposed that the infrared flamingos up for scrutiny at the nearby zoo are incredibly well fed. Captive flamingos might not be starving, but they aren't eating their natural diet, and are provided with added chemicals in their diet to purposefully make pink their plumage.² Human ingenuity hasn't stopped at coloring land animals—salmon are also provided a supplement of coloring nutrients in their food supply before being presented to consumers.³ Controlling something's outward appearance in this way has no benefit for the animal, and only succeeds in making a human think 'Yes, this slab of fish meat sure is salmon, it's red after all!'" the flamingo waves a similar slab of meat in front of my face, slaps my left cheek twice, and gobbles it down to the bone in a matter of moments.

¹ "Now let's make ourselves a little thought experiment. We'll need a hypothetical human." Segre, Liz. "Human Eye Anatomy." *All About Vision*. Access Media Group LLC, n.d. Web. Sept. 2015.

² "Flamingos, Causes of Color." *WebExhibits.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. Sept. 2015.

³ "The Color of Farmed Salmon Is No Dye Job." *Salmon Facts*. N.p., 23 Jan. 2009. Web. Sept. 2015.

man to represent a larger population. Let's call them Noo.

The meat, assuming Noo is shopping at a common American supermarket or restaurant, is definitely salmon (unless the company is lying, which is more than possible). If it ever were, the fish would continue to be salmon without red coloration, or even if it was given some *other*, very un-salmon-like color, such as purple. But who would buy purple salmon? "How could that be good for you, there *must* be something wrong with it if it isn't red! Salmon is *supposed* to be red!" The red is there as a pat on the shoulder, from food engineering scientists to the normal consumer, that everything is alright with their product—after all, it is red. This color is given priority, while the origins of the salmon-unless-it-isn't remain mysterious and unspoken of.

To trace the path of the salmon's existence, it is important to first recognize where Noo, the typical American consumer, is buying it from. Is it in the form of a one-time meal at the cool new sushi bar down the street? The answer, even if it's yes, could very likely be no, as many sushi restaurants substitute salmon with a variety of fish known as tilapia.⁴ A slab of salmon from a supermarket is much more likely to be salmon, but say they wanted *wild* salmon, the real raw deal. There is most likely fish labeled "wild salmon" in the market, but there is an overwhelming chance that it was never any more "wild" than any of the millions of cows being farmed for meat in overcrowded conditions. Noo *may* find it tempting to utilize the internet in their search for the perfect fish.

But there's no hope. You can't find wild salmon, and you can't make those *zoo flamingos* any less flamingo than they already are. So why do humans still try? I'm not sure. Maybe you're all insane, in fact, I'd believe it." The flamingo shrugs and adjusts its monocle.

"All that and you couldn't give me a decent hypothesis? What's the deal?"

"Hey, it's better than anything those brainwashed *zoo flamingos* can give you, I assure you that!"

I open my eyes.

Chat with a Cat

Six hours have passed.

I slip into my body and to the year 2020 of the world of written thought. My left leg slips. I tumble 80 feet from my perch atop the bronze maple tree⁵ of meditation, landing painfully in the net of distracted meditators. I speak to the denizens of the net, many of which had long ago fused together with the net and linked their minds into a sole consciousness. Luckily, I have sustained only minor injury, and am able to hop off the net with light bruising and rope burn.

I enter my small hut and approach Noo, the hypothetical human from the flamingo's thoughts, hunched over a laptop and browsing a link aggregating website.

"Did you ever find out where to get the salmon you wanted?"

"No. I gave up a while ago. Half the places I went said to buy it where I got it, and the

4 Lange, Larry. "Grocers Sued Over Artificial Color in Farmed Salmon." *SeattlePI*. Hearst Seattle Media, n.d. Web. Sept. 2015.

5 "Tree Species That Grow Over 70 Feet Tall." *Garden Guides*. Demand Media, 2010. Web. Sept. 2015.

other half said to go to a sushi restaurant and just get a meal there! I tried asking on an anonymous forum, but some of them just told me to look it up online and stop wasting their time, others said that if I didn't raise the salmon from birth there was no use ever eating them, and one just sent me a video of salmon being slaughtered in a factory with show tunes playing in the background! So I went back to the supermarket and bought the salmon there. Even got some sushi on the way back! It was red anyways, so what's the big deal?"

"Wow. Well, what are you doing now?"

"Just checking up on current events, politics, that kind of stuff. This website is my favorite, because I can customize it to suit my interests!"

I turn and begin to leave.

"Hey, wait! Some guy named Mr. Engo came by a few minutes before you and told me to give you this."

I pull a photograph to my view. I've seen it before. I see a cat's short, bristly fur. A paw rests softly on hardwood floor. For a moment I am taken back to my home in Tallahassee, Florida.

I hug my parents. I see the cat, still sitting there, his head stuffed inside the sandal. I take off a shoe. An offering to the gods.

"How've you been, Coacoa?"

"I chased some dust earlier. Your parents cooked salmon the other day. It smelled really nice. You should tell them to save some for me next time," the cat ponders, lifting his pudgy body from the occupied sandal and slowly trudging towards its next target, "This shoe is extremely sweaty. Have you been doing anything physically exerting today?"

"Yes, I've been up in a tree staring at a statue all day, writing down my thoughts."

"Weird. Why can't you just accept what's going on around you and make the best of it? I'll never understand you humans," Coacoa says as he presses his face passionately into my shoe. I reach out to stroke his back, but it is too late. I am back in my room, holding the photograph, standing by Noo.

"So, who'd you say that guy was?"

"Uh, Mr. Engo. Think he said his first name was *Phlam*. Pretty odd."

"Mr. Engo. His first name is *Phlam*. Phlam Engo"

"Yeah. He also said you could borrow me for some journey you're going on. Creative control, too."

"Figures. In that case, I need to show you something."

I exit the room.

Average American

I return to the same room, shaking in pain, holding the flamingo statue. I set it on the ground with a sigh of relief. Noo chuckles at my lack of physical aptitude.

"Here we go. What do you think? I need to explore every crevasse of its existence."

"That's super creepy. What's the grass set on top of...a repurposed chandelier? A bunch

of old lamps?”

We take a moment and stare at the statue’s base, which supports the aforementioned patch of grass. It’s as if someone chopped golden legs off a bunch of identical and extremely fancy ottomans and melted them together at the top.

“I’m not sure. Definitely something ornate. Here, help me pick it up, let’s take it to my car. I need to take you somewhere.” Noo nods and picks up the statue with a grunt.

“I’d think you’d have made me hypothetically stronger than this...”

“You’re here to represent an average American, if anything, you should be in worse shape! In fact...”

“Oh, you asshole!” mutters Noo, my overweight hypothetical companion.

“But hey, you’re married now. You’ve been to college, no degree though. You have a pet, a home, a job, a cell phone, and no idea which party holds power over the House of Representatives.⁶ It could be worse.”

We approach a car. Its make and model are of no consequence, though it is unmistakably a 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green. We lift the statue down into the vehicle, and by Noo’s mistake, the top flamingo’s head finds itself snapped off by the unforgiving roof of the 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green.

“Sarah Knouse is never going to forgive me for this! First I borrow it without asking and now it’s *ruined!* Thanks a lot, pal!”

“Are you serious? I’m purely hypothetical! This couldn’t be anyone’s fault other than yours!”

I slide into the 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green, closing and locking the doors. The statue sits in the center of the automobile between me and Noo. I angle my rear view mirror to fit the entire statue within. I set the picture of Coacoa on the dashboard—only now he’s got his face pressed in a shoe. I in turn press a large red button. The 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green descends into the road.

Supposed To

A few moments of darkness. The 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green is now sitting at the end of a long, dark tunnel. I begin to drive ferociously. The statue shakes. I give it a longer glance, as my conscious self may notice aspects that I in meditation earlier passed over. Noo was correct, it is creepy indeed.

The flamingos are melting. There is a large pool of pink goop laying in the patch of grass. Incredibly, it seems to be growing in real time, though the flamingos refrain from shrinking.

“Is it *supposed* to be doing that? I have a hypothetical life, you know, and—”

“There! That word! You said that earlier today, didn’t you! About the salmon!”

“Well, yes! Salmon *are* supposed to be red, after all.”

“The more I think about that word, the less it means. Is anything supposed to do any-

6 Russell, Cheryl. “50 Facts about the Average American.” *New Strategist*. New Strategist, 2015. Web. Sept. 2015.

thing? Salmon, at least *naturally*, have red coloring due to pigments in the food they eat.⁷ It's just a *side effect*. It's not a determined law."

"Well, what about flowers? They're supposed to grow, aren't they?"

"I'm not sure about that, either. Flowers grow because being exposed to the sun, which plants use directly to create energy (in case you forgot what you learned in your hypothetical biology class), is beneficial to their lifestyle. They grow large buds and petals because they attract bees, and bees will spread their flowery genetics all over the place! It's all things they evolved to develop over years of practice. It's not what they're *supposed* to do, it's what they *must* do to thrive. I'll remind you, the average American thankfully believes in evolution, so it seems that you do, too!"

"I mean, you've got me there. So, does that mean supposed has no purpose? Why's it a word?"

"It's not useless, but it gives human connotations to things that aren't human. *Supposed* only works as a word to describe people in relation to other people because it's a concept created by the human mind, and often specifically one's own culture. Religions can define what you are supposed to do. Managers at your workplace can tell you, too. Society can say you're supposed to be one thing or the other, but it only means as much as people like *you* value it, because it's all in your head!"

"Uh, sorry to kill the mood, but do you think we should do something about all this pink stuff?"

Copyright Law

I look around the interior of the 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green. It has become half-filled with the pink goop melting off the flamingos. They do not seem any smaller, and the fluid continues to leak with gusto.

"This better wash out!" I groan and open the left door of the 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green. "Get your door open too! Can't have this mucking up our discourse! We're already halfway there!"

"Where exactly is *there*? You never told me!"

"I figured it was obvious. We're driving to D.C. through the secret tunnel I had installed years ago after writing a paper about this very statue! I'm going to talk to President Trump about all the injustices in the world and the millions more he himself has caused."

The 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green (and now also bubblegum pink) abruptly comes to a stop.

"I sense your fear, my beauty. But it has to be done."

The 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green's engine revs and a detached voice resonates from the vehicle's speakers.

"Your Trump related task holds no meaning to me. I am simply shutting down and detonating, as my license with Lamborghini has been violated due to the introduction of bubblegum pink to my trademarked color scheme. You have twenty seconds to run for cover."

"So much for 'of no consequence'...quick, help me get the statue out of here!"

7 "The Color of Farmed Salmon Is No Dye Job."

“Man, if I weren’t your own mental construct, I’d be out of here.”

“We’ll be fine! Just be careful not to-”

I and Noo both slip, dropping the statue. Upon its landing, the base and the flamingos separate, and all but the beheaded bird spring to life, still melting.

“Now. Now Sarah Knouse is *really* going to kill me.”

The 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green and bubblegum pink explodes. Debris flies everywhere, luckily completely avoiding me and Noo, as well as the six surviving flamingos.

I turn my head away from the smoldering remnants of the 1989 Lamborghini Countach in lime green and bubblegum pink to face two large helmeted figures in slick suits. Noo fades into nonexistence in fear.

“Halt. We have business with you,” rasps a metallic voice.

“Who is *we*? Come to stop us from getting to Trump? Because that’s not happening!”

“No. Your Trump related tasks holds no meaning to us,” asserts the other automaton, “We are business associates from Lamborghini. You violated our copyright. We’re here to *sue* you.”

“Oh. Great. So you’re here to beat me up, but with money, and also completely legally. You could ruin my whole life, you know.”

“Oh, we know. And we intend to. Lamborghini is a company that does not take its licensing lightly. We are of the very *strong opinion* that it should be near if not completely impossible for someone to actually *own* one of our vehicles and tarnish our company name. It’s not a sentiment held only by us! Ferrari killed the modified “*Purrari*” that weird musician Deadmau5 made without permission!⁸ Have you ever tried using an Apple product? Do you think anyone wants you *customizing* their devices to fit your *disgusting personal preferences*? They want you to fit the *mold!*”

“And have you ever *purchased a video game*? It’s not like you own that, either! Almost if not all video game companies can revoke your ‘permission’ to play the game at any time, no reimbursement, no reasoning, no *anything!*⁹ Same with music and television! Media ownership is insanely flawed, especially in a world where you can get almost anything for free off the internet, and while copyright is broken, it has to be brutal to squeeze out every last drop of money possible! So don’t come up to us at *Lamborghini*, acting all high and mighty, when all we want to do is control *how* “your” *car looks!* That’s how you *build* a brand name! We have to maintain our image or we have *nothing!* Sure, *maybe* it would be better for the environment if people spent their money on those tiny little boot shaped cars that don’t run off dead dinosaurs, but we’re *COOL* and *SLEEK* and you can make *obnoxious engine noises that infuriate everyone around you* as long as you don’t mess with our *brand!* We’re practically saints!”

The robot lawyers suddenly realize my absence. During their rant, the six remaining flamingos had conjoined into one large bird, on whose back I am now sitting as I ride down the tunnel.

Noo joins me at my right, atop a large hypothetical salmon.

8 Phillips, Zan. “Ferrari Takes Legal Action Against Deadmau5 Purrari 458.” *The Supercar Kids*. N.p., 27 Aug. 2014. Web. Sept. 2015.

9 “Steam Subscriber Agreement.” *Steam*. Valve Corporation, Sept. 2015. Web. 2 June 2015.

“Good to see you again. It seems like this mess just keeps getting worse and worse. If we can just reach it to the office, to *Trump*, everything can be accounted for.”

“Going back to salmon *again*? How is that even possible?”

“Look, I’m just hungry! I never got anything at the supermarket or the sushi place. But I also wanted to talk to you about the concept of everything and its relation to the statue...uh, statue conglomerate.”

“Oh, really.”

“Well, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, the statue has been melting away for a while now, it seems almost endless. It’s theorized the same will happen to our universe, except in an opposite manner through its heat death. Instead of everything melting away, it will all freeze. Maybe the flamingos in the statue are not melting away. Maybe they are melting because they are warm, and because they are alive. It certainly seems that way, even explains this “conglomerate”, it’s a flamingo *planet*.”

“Hey, what’s the deal?”

I look check my peripherals in search for a face to put the voice to. There, on my left, riding on an enlarged version of my cat Coacoa, is Sarah Knouse, the artist responsible for the flamingo statue herself.

A Dirty Shoe

“What have you done to it? I don’t even know you, how’d you get it?” Sarah Knouse demands of me.

“I looked it up online. I’ve been using it as a meditation object for a few days, and I—”

“More like as a nuclear test facility! You need to cool it, salmon man!”

A harsh rumble fades in as Knouse’s accusation rings throughout the cavernous expansion. Snow begins chasing us from behind. An avalanche. Everything is falling apart.

“Hey now, don’t berate me while you’re here in my mind! It’s a very touchy place.”

“I can tell. It’s blowing everything out of proportion as we speak,” Knouse’s rant is interrupted by the sudden beadiness of her eyes and beakishness of her nose, “Now look, I want all of this back to normal at the end, okay? I won’t stop you from going in Trump’s office. But if you do not hand me my statue, clean of all your crazy thoughts, at the end of your ‘meditation’ or whatever the hell you want to call this, we will not be on good terms. Understand?”

“Uhm. Yes. Sorry about all this. I just wanted to talk about how these flamingos and how they’re melting and—”

“They’re just melting. That’s what it is. It looks awesome and was a challenge to sculpt. I’m glad you’re enjoying them so much.”

“I guess all of this was in my head. Perception shaped how I felt about the flamingos. But isn’t that what this is all supposed to be about, anyways?”

“Your own perception? How should I know, I’m not writing this! What are you trying to do here?”

“I thought I knew, but now I’m not really sure. I want to wrap everything up! I want it to all make sense and I want to fix everything by talking to Trump!”

“Sorry to but in, but I want to add something. You really should try smelling dirty shoes. I wake up every morning with faint thoughts about the universe, I grudge through my days of many naps and personal licking sessions and occasionally being doted on but at the end of the day, the thing really keeping me sane is a good whiff of shoe. I can just sit for hours and hours and take in all the shoe’s memories. Where it’s been. Where it will probably go again. That unpleasant dog excrement it was forced to wallow in. Maybe vague hints of sweat shop here and there, especially around Nikes. But that doesn’t last long, as terrifying as it is. And I know that, no matter what, there will always be a dirty shoe somewhere. And life goes on.”

“So instead of trying to do anything about the sweatshops, you just keep smelling the shoe?”

“I’m just an old cat who likes shoes! What else do you want from me?”

“I’m not sure. Sarah, what do you think?”

“I think you should talk to Trump. It might help you figure out what you’re trying to say.”

I nod. Everything disappears.

Trump Card

I stand in the president’s office. The light overhead is dim. The president’s desk chair is faced ceremoniously away from me, as well as his own desk. Very convenient for note taking, I’m sure.

“Look, Trump, I’m here to tell you you’re doing *everything wrong* and explain how to *fix this horrible world you’ve created!*”

“I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created,” projects a loud voice as the chair swivels, revealing Donald Trump, whose cranium has been gruesomely outfitted with a large machine. He is obviously unaware of my presence, as well of the presence of the universe itself. The flamingo statue is in my hand. I hand it to Sarah Knouse. It drips as she carries it away. The hypothetical salmon is still there, but now I’ve realized it’s actually a tilapia. Could’ve fooled a lot of people, I guess. But why? What was the need?

“I think it’s just what they’re used to. They’re only human, their minds may be incredibly more advanced than mine, but they can’t process everything, they can’t get a hold of everything like they can get a hold of a fish. Neither can you.

Everyone wants the world to be better than it is. But, assuming you’re lucky enough to sit around worrying about it instead of having to actively fight for your life, maybe you should find something constructive, purposeful. At least to you. There’s nothing wrong with personal value. Find your own dirty shoes.”

I smile at the fish as it swims off into nothing. In my hands sits a plate of large smoked salmon, or maybe tilapia. An uneasiness sets in. The feeling seeps through each and every pore of my body and mind. What does this mean? Is everything there is a cheap imitation? Is everything fake? Or is it just different than it seems? And how does it seem, anyways? What is the difference between smoked salmon from a fish farm and smoked salmon from a fresh lake? Are there any fresh lakes? What is fresh? Am I about to devolve into postmodernism?

I hand the plate to someone else. *Too bad I’m vegetarian.*

Referenced Work

Knouse, Sarah. Pastoral Flamingos. Digital image. [Http://sarahknouse.com/](http://sarahknouse.com/). Squarespace, n.d. Web. Sept. 2015.