

SUSANNE ANTONETTA

# Language Garden

*Does an orangutan find freedom in the gift of words? Do we?*

A MAN I KNOW, NED MARKOSIAN, teaches a doctrine called presentism. In presentism the past and the future don't exist. Aristotle is dead; therefore, there was no Aristotle. We meet to talk about this over coffee, maybe the ultimate nonpresentist drink. He has applied for and gotten tenure, and writes and publishes, hurling himself into that unreality, the future. How does a presentist philosopher allow for promotion, allow for Aristotle's thoughts, those justifications of tragedy?

I have been thinking about presentism lately, and consciousness, and language. Linguist Derek Bickerton wrote, "Only language could have broken through the prison of immediate experience in which every other creature is locked, releasing us into infinite freedoms of space and time." To theorists like Bickerton, language is the tearing apart of temporality. To others, like Jaron Lanier, consciousness, kissing kin to language, traps us in time, in "the very concept of a present moment."

Wondering about all this, I fly to speak with an orangutan named Chantek. He lives in a habitat on the grounds of Zoo Atlanta in Georgia, where he was placed after a stint at Yerkes Primate Center and before that, life in the home of his "cross foster-mother," as anthropologist Lyn Miles calls herself. She raised him as a signing infant from the age of nine months, rearing him as much as possible as a human child. Lyn toilet-trained Chantek and gave him chores, like cleaning his room,

and an allowance. His favorite thing to spend it on is fast food from McDonald's, and his weight threatens to be a lifelong problem. He has ballooned to twice the weight of a normal male orangutan. If he's granted legal rights, as Lyn would like him to be, he could join a fast-food class-action lawsuit and become not just the most verbal but the richest orang in the world. (But in the interests of Chantek's heart, no McDonald's for now.)

When our van pulls up to Chantek's habitat he swings out onto one of its inside branches and asks for bottled water, which he calls "car water," since Lyn usually has some in her car. He's particular about bottled waters, preferring Naya, but he'll settle for this, Dasani. Chantek appears as harmlessly shaggy as a Sesame Street figure, the color of a November pumpkin, the size of an enormous easy chair. Because of his strength, though, we're not allowed into his habitat, so he kisses and strokes Lyn through the bars.

I know very little sign, so Lyn asks Chantek to teach me some. Chantek has an active vocabulary of about three hundred words and a passive vocabulary of a thousand or more, which he can comprehend either by speech or by sign. We start with the basics.

Teach her apple, says Lyn.

Chantek shows me apple, brushing his cheek. I mimic him, and Good, he signs, then asks Lyn what's wrong with her hand, which has a scratch on the knuckle.



I did it cleaning, she tells him, and he makes a grimace of sympathy, then asks to touch and kiss it.

Lyn introduces me as Writer—which becomes my sign name—the friend of Dawn You Made A Necklace For. Chantek has had surgery recently on his laryngeal flap, the long black fold under the chin that makes oranges look like some kind of colonial barrister, and she asks him how he’s feeling, if the suture’s healing okay. Yes, says Chantek, he’s fine. He has missed Lyn and wants to play ball. Oh, and there’s poop on the other side of the habitat, presumably left there by his companion, Sibü; it’s dirty and he’d like it removed.

Lyn and Chantek speak head to head; her disorderly reddish hair makes them look for a second like mother and son, a repetitive mother, a leaning son anxious not to misunderstand. I stand there like anyone hanging around two family members who chat familiarly, neither of whom you know very well; you try to find ways to interject yourself into the conversation. Mine turns out to be no more mysterious than a bag of yellow raisins, which Chantek loves and my five-year-old son, Jin, who flew here with me, got tired of. In other words, with one part of my mind I’m aware of the fact that I’m doing this slightly unreal thing, talking with an orangutan. With another, I’m just a socially awkward person in a group, hoping I don’t say anything stupid, and that I can perhaps say or do something a little memorable.

“Sad,” Chantek says when we, or more precisely, Lyn, leaves.

CHANTEK USES WORDS plus gestures to speak: He might tell Lyn “I you talk,” indicating the other side of the cage, when he wants privacy from me—from my keen and almost predatory listening—as he does several times when I’m there. (He insists on privacy to discuss the poop situation.) His inability or unwillingness to use complicated syntax puts him at a child’s linguistic level, as do other behaviors. In some ways, his resemblance to Jin and every other human child in the world cracks me up. When we give him an apple and ask him to share it with his habitat-mate Sibü, he carefully pulls off a crumb of apple-flesh and hands it to her, the way Jin will share a bit of cookie. “Really share or you can’t have any more,” Lyn scolds orally, and he resignedly breaks off half. He signs over and over—begs—for ice cream and cheese-

burgers. Other things I see show a sophistication a child wouldn’t have—Chantek, as always, dabs his mouth clean after eating but surprises both Lyn and me by folding the napkin to a fresh side and sponging out the sutured part of his laryngeal flap, which tends to catch food crumbs. He has never cleaned this area in the past and seems to realize the suture needs special attention. Sibü, an orang who has never had human acculturation, grabs a napkin and begins wiping her own mouth as she watches his slow and deliberate swipes. It’s not quite the apes throwing bones in the air in front of a monolith from the film *2001*, but Sibü has clearly, at that moment, absorbed a piece of culture.

After visiting with Chantek, Lyn and I drive to the zoo’s McDonald’s to talk for a while. I’ve jotted down a few questions

to ask, and Lyn responds by diagramming Chantek’s intelligence; she ranks him at about human age five to eight in mental development, with a striking skill in art.

“And that makes sense,” she tells me. “Orangs spend most of their time foraging in dense jungle. They’re very visual.” Jane Goodall commented at a conference that Chantek’s art was the most remarkable thing she ever saw an ape do.

Lyn tells me how she sees Chantek’s mind, grabbing a thin napkin and drawing on it, her

Chantek-hair bent forward. She draws Chantek’s mind as three circles and an oval, a wedge of each circle overlapping the oval at the base. One piece of Chantek remains the ape mind as it’s existed in the wild, one resembles normal human intelligence, one alternative human—an autistic human, for instance, might share Chantek’s visual sense of the world. The long oval that juts far from the rest covers pieces of the other circles but represents something new: enculturated ape. Apes who will put at least some experiences into words, who will look to their world to provide glitters and shapes and colors for their art, who will have an aesthetic we can only start to admire, as we admire the navigational abilities of a blind man crossing the street.

A project called ApeNet is working to put video feeds into Chantek’s cage, to enable him to talk to Koko, a gorilla in California who also signs—an interspecies chat undertaken in terms of human language but not directed by humans.

“We want to find out what challenges them, what gives their life meaning,” says Lyn. It occurs to me that we have no proto-



col that answers these questions about ourselves. Maybe we are, like the proverbial screwballs who go into the field of psychiatry, posing the questions we would like to force ourselves to answer.

Whatever meaning we find in the world must be crammed into a mighty short space. Marcus Aurelius reminds us: "...the longest life and the shortest amount to the same thing. For the passing minute is every man's equal possession, but what has once gone by is not ours. When the longest- and the shortest-lived of us come to die, their loss is precisely equal. For the sole thing of which any man can be deprived is the present..."

Consciousness—in the sense of self-awareness or inner narration—is our prison to Lanier and our freedom to Bickerton. Most would agree it's a small world. As consciousness studies have grown over the past decade, as we think about our thoughts, we realize how much thought itself is an inconsequential thing—our present lasts about two to fifteen seconds, according to Merlin Donald, author of the book *A Mind So Rare*. Our mind's a blip, elegantly borne in the litter of a body that's mostly four-billion-year-old water. We're the ultimate May-December marriage.

I LIVE IN A LANGUAGE GARDEN. When I moved into my house I decided in one of my obsessive fits to plant every plant I'd ever seen mentioned in a Shakespeare play. This meant, because I have something of a photographic memory, lying awake at night reading off fragments of the plays in my head—on the page (smudged and creased sometimes) and in the type in which I'd first encountered them. I drove to Seattle for wormwood and rue; I didn't tell anyone what I was doing but regarded my garden as a kind of conjure, a sphere of magical protection, a planting of voices ("There's fennel for you, and columbine").

My yard now blooms with unintentional comedy: the balm wants to overtake and bury the rue, and I weed and weed it back; the wormwood died, not liking my soil's particular brand of gall. The rue returns every year from a gnarled stump the size of a large sweet potato, bleached and dead looking; when the tiny sprouts emerge they're so improbable I expect them to grow into something else, something less rueful. Fennel, Ophelia's gift to Hamlet's uncle and the licorice-symbol of untruth, wants like the prolific balm to take over the garden.

Shakespeare's plants, sprung from the mind of a dead man, felt more lasting than the always bolting, drooping, jaundicing things outside my window. ("I'll give violets away; they withered all when my father died.") Shakespeare's present—the present that quilled the plays—can stay present, or at least can recur in this way, a whisper of pleated color outside my window. And this too we can give Chantek, along with hamburgers and coins: the present embedded as memory, through the fine point and ink of words.

THE TERM PERSONHOOD gets used a lot in the field of animal intelligence. The website Lyn set up proclaims Chantek the "World's First Orangutan Person and Ambassador for the Rainforest" over a head shot of him, looking solemn and ambassadorial. Personhood means conscious awareness—language, acculturation, socialization to such a degree that rights would have to be conferred under the law. How, I wonder, might animals see us, who fast-forward them, or subvert them, with our system of mental coding; as those mythical small gods, like Hermes or Prometheus, who always annoy the hell out of the great gods, or as a defect given to them, an interspecies virus maybe, "a disease that's in my blood," as Lear said, "that I must needs call mine"? We construct for them the world of what autistic Temple Grandin calls neurotypicals—those who think in normal ways—and neuroatypicals, those who like her think differently. Then we test them, calling their intelligence four-year-old, five-year-old. I can imagine ape-raised humans, tested in the intelligences that keep oranges going in their world, like the ability to read body stance and facial expression, and asked to judge, for instance, an array of smiles or display the visual and tracking skills to find litchis and mandarins tucked into the dense jungles of Indonesia: we would seem childlike, very dim.

Thomas Huxley once tried to describe infinity by saying that infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters would eventually produce the works of Shakespeare. No cleverer than saying that infinite humans with infinite caves and infinite predators would eventually echolocate like bats (in fact, that would no doubt happen a hell of a lot faster). Enough monkeys with enough time will produce their own version of Shakespeare—maybe have—and it will have all that uplift and melancholy beauty, and will most likely be dumb to us. It may be a sequence of grunts or leaves chewed and spat out on a litchi branch. We may stomp it out or cut it down because we do not see it.

LYN WANTS CHANTEK TO HAVE FREEDOM. He grew up in her trailer on the campus at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and escaped from his living quarters to look for food. When Chantek was eight, the university shipped him back to Yerkes, his birth facility, which allowed Lyn limited visits for a few years, then declined her the right to see Chantek altogether.

"They said they wanted to put the animal back into him," she tells me. Lyn says this with some bitterness, and while I mean to come back to the comment later I forget, a sign of my information-gathering ineffectiveness. Looking at my notebooks I wonder what the comment means. Yerkes pioneered primate language. Would an ape troubled by his own shit be too much? Lyn finally regained control of Chantek and had him placed at the zoo, moving to Atlanta to stay close. Chantek is not part of any zoo

exhibit—he lives a short ride from the main zoo grounds—and while he has a roomy habitat with plenty of branches for swinging, as well as a hammock and private space, it's still a cage.

When I meet Chantek I stare into his eyes, wondering, wanting to feel a kinship: that he knows me, that I can know him somehow. Orangs are the stillest of the apes; they can swing and swing and then freeze. Buddha-like, Chantek watches me back without expression. I want to say that he tells me (Buddha-like)—figure it out for yourself. But he probably wants to tell me nothing. He probably sees something as inexplicable as life in me, in my humanness.

Consciousness, most theorists say, is language: it's what lets you know yourself, know time—become self-aware. If you're a Lanierist you can argue that we have given Chantek, in the gift of language, a more terrible prison than the steel one: the jail of the present, with its fine-honed edge. (Now Lyn is here, Chantek hears in his head. Now she leaves.) Or you could argue with Bickerton that the doors of Chantek's cage have been flung open in a way no key could ever do. Out of his jungle garden and into mine (here's apple for you, and water; you must wear your rue with a difference).

I read that Koko the gorilla calls death, in an extraordinary string of thought, “comfortable hole byebye.” Before coming here I imagined myself having talks like that with Chantek, finding out what the hole is, what the comfort. But he teaches me a few words and, satisfied by my basic sufficiency, turns to Lyn, occasionally cadging my raisins. Or he sits still and regards me thoughtfully from his pale, fur-curtained eyes.

MY YARD, MY LANGUAGE GARDEN, swarms with fruit flies, celebrating their daily birthdays. The flies love my raspberries—unpickable in their plenty at this time of year, so they end up getting that grayish patina of rot and rucking in on themselves on their canes. Rotting makes the fruit alcohol the flies love and they hang out there in jittering waves, or in my open compost pail, or in my kitchen. Fruit flies are a mandala of nature, living a week—a drunken week—then dying to be swept up by some wind, beautiful and intricate for all that: red eyes not too different from the darkening drupelets of the raspberries, brown wings and a black body. They live with a jiggery, intoxicated intensity, Marcus Aurelius insects, drunk with raspberry wine and rue.

CAN I ADMIT TO BEING A WIMP OF A WRITER, a herd mammal? I hate to be away from my family. I love them. I love our mornings, when we all climb in bed together and, if it's not a school day, read the paper and watch cartoons. I love the way Bruce and Jin smell.

My attachment to my family flies in the face of what I was taught to consider a right dedication to the creative, Romantic spirit. But they challenge me and give my life meaning and it's our habit to do most things together. Both have flown with me to Atlanta—I sched-

uled this visit around some poetry readings of Bruce's. Right now he takes our son Jin through the zoo, seeing the other caged creatures, while Chantek teaches me a language he knows and I do not.

Chantek calls himself an Orangutan Person. Presumably this term would refer to any orang who'd been enculturated and given language. Untaught orangutans, like his cagemate Sibü, he's given the rather snide name of Orange Dog. He sees himself somehow as the ape in the web photo, stiff, solemn, buttoned-up as a character in *Planet of the Apes*. His title sounds exalted as well as lonely: the only one of his kind in the universe, as far as he knows.

Three circles and an oval. I wonder what in my own circle of alternative, obsessive thinking might be caught in the wedge Chantek's oval covers: if, for instance, he feels any of the multiplicity we record in his intelligence. Given what we know of his mind it's not hard to imagine that there may be a part of him he sees as Orangutan Person, whom he might visualize clothed, like us, holding a bottle of named water. And a part that remains Orange Dog, warm in its fur, smelling its way through, like the blinded Gloucester in *Lear*.

Chantek's oval is an oval because it arcs out into the future. There's no sense yet of what enculturated ape will become, because, as Lyn points out, social groups cocreate themselves and their “personal forms of meaning, in groups and subgroups, much as a family does.” ApeNet's next step will be to develop ninety acres on Maui—which the group already owns—into a habitat that will allow a separate culture of socialized apes to form. You can see, in Koko's words about death, a difference already between us: we tend to imagine going up at the end; she saw down.

As I look at Lyn's drawing again, I see that long oval of new ape consciousness as an infinity sign, untwisted. A new mind is evolution, after all, which reeks of time, placement in time. The oval forms a complement to its cousin the infinity sign—an oval that's been looped or kinked. Aurelius and Markosian put their money on those things that jam into the present, but others, like Augustine, deny the reality of anything but the celestial or infinite. Tyler of garden knots and wringer-out of far too much laundry, I tend to see how the twisted shape of infinity will wriggle to unbend itself. We may be placing Chantek in a smaller place than we know.

It shocked me to see Chantek in a cage, something my imaginings of him, inexplicably, did not contain (Lear said: “Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal”). I watched him string necklaces out of leather and beads, knotting the spaces between beads with his teeth, his black palms like car leather. I yearned toward him and imagined singing to him a slave spiritual about the time when we will leave our cold iron shackles behind: “O what joy when again we meet/I'll fly away.” My son once belted out this spiritual in a Krispy Kreme donut shop, but unlike Jin, I don't have the chutz-

pah to sing my melody-soaked beliefs in public. I just got flummoxed and sat down on the rocks and felt like an idiot.

NEUROATYPICAL AND OBSESSIVE, I know whole acts of Shakespeare's plays by heart, and, when I've wanted to enjoy them and not just search for plant references, I have staged many of them in my head when I should have been sleeping. I have actors for each part, and line readings, costumes, gestures. It hurts, in some ways, to see actual plays performed: directors cut them, the actors look wrong, and I tend not to like their deliveries. When a play arrives in my head it comes wholly, as a strain of music and a scene with the players in motion, maybe King Claudius in burgundy and gold holding a chalice before his lords, and then the words. Thought is obsessive in the best of us, language and memory a Pandora's gift, and I wonder if Chantek or his descendents will find themselves likewise overcome, unable to walk through a jungle or touch a flower without tying it to words.

I would like to visit Chantek's memory. It seems very likely he's begun to store material as language; not just a simple object like a ball (surely a dog can do that much), but past events, which I imagine he stores as simple sentences (Mother Lyn hurt finger, Writer visit with Mother Lyn). Perhaps he sees them again, relives them, the way humans have become so adept at carrying and replaying hurt and shame. We have inner critics, depressive realism where we narrate our lives to ourselves with deadly precision, as King Lear comes to do ("Is man no more than this?" the king says, and "A dog's obeyed in office ..."). Chantek's not such a good presentist anymore. We have given him the quality of useless repetition, as we've hammered it into ourselves, so that even humans who've devoted their lives to voiding the existence of the past and future live in them regardless. "You need to cut out the negative self-talk," a therapist scolds me. "You need to let go of the past." My child development books tell me children put down virtually no memory until they have language.

That spark in Chantek's mind, that language skill on the genome—we stand in front of it with our bellows. Words may mean nothing to Chantek ultimately, or they may mean negative self-talk and depressive realism—"I am a fat ape among apes"—or a flood of dialogue like mine, of nonexistent existence.

I MET CHANTEK IN THE SPRING, and then flew back with my family to Bellingham, Washington, where I live. I think of him every day, swaddled as a newborn in his folds of flesh, in the ginger coat we his relatives have thrown off. He is magnificent. His magnificence is in front of me, and the numbers: fifteen to twenty thousand left in the wild and maybe ten years to go at our current rate of extinction, and the difficulty of changing that. All this I remember.

Right now, within the bonds of the present, the neighbor boy's reggae music blasts far too loud and Mars' path has brought it closer to the Earth than it's been in sixty thousand years, so that the Red Planet flames at night over Venus and the moon, usurping the North Star's glow. When it last appeared like this, Neanderthals looked up at it as I do now, at an eye in the sky like a saber-tooth cat's, gleaming. I have taken to being outside all the time, to doing nothing, a statue of myself. My son sleeps and my husband reads in a skirt of light. What could matter? Things disappear in days; they stay gone for epochs. But I like to look at the bald eagles here, the black squirrels, the pleats of the pink mallow and the fuchsia, crazy offerings to the gods of the present. And the momentary fruit flies, whose lives and mine are precisely equal.

I don't think I'm a total presentist yet. What existed, existed. I just see in language that which dissolves into nothing, in seconds, even if someone tries to make it live again in her garden bed. When we come together—ape and human, author and reader—we settle for demonstrating that we both know the grossest objects of the Earth, ball and hurt and water, while what we would want to name is fluid and intestinal: the melancholy in the eyes of a caged ape, or a man and a boy, hand-in-hand at a zoo. We have given Chantek a way of knowing the past, the gift of the void. Of remembering the dark-haired woman named Writer who looked at him hungrily, and the question his speaking mind must have framed: of what she could possibly want. 🐼

## That Moment

BY MOIRA LINEHAN

last night just before it froze. That final  
moment when the pond was still open water,

a fierce wind must have let go one long rush  
the breadth of this pond, as if there'd been time

for it to go under, churn the water,

but not surface. Wind just as it was  
coming back up, gasping through water turning

fixed. That moment caught now on the pond—  
thick brush strokes of gray curls, little trapped mouths.