

THE REMEMBERER

by Aimee Bender

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
“The Rememberer”	3
Interpretive Questions	6
Craft Questions	6
Writing Prompts	7

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Introduction

Charles Darwin’s seminal work of evolutionary theory *On the Origin of Species* (1859) marked the introduction of an important thread of thought for both biologists and writers. In it and subsequent works, Darwin lays out the idea that species have changed over time through natural selection—that the members of each species who are best suited to their environments live on to reproduce, passing on their desirable traits to their descendents. Eventually, a species becomes ideally suited to its environment—until its environment changes.

It is easy to lay a moral veil Darwin never intended over this process, especially when it applies to humans. Many in the late 19th century came to view the human species as not only capable of becoming perfect (a loaded adjective if there ever was one) but as actually approaching perfection. But dark doubles lurked just below this rosy narrative of human progress. If species evolve over time, becoming (generally speaking) more biologically complex, why can’t the opposite happen? If humans represent the apex of civilized progress, who is to say that they cannot slip from this summit—devolve or degenerate? Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) explores this idea. Dr. Jekyll, an upright citizen of taste and learning, has Mr. Hyde lurking within him—a crouching, hairy-handed, morally bankrupt man with insatiable appetites for drink, debauchery, and violence. Eventually, Hyde wins out, and the civilized parts of Dr. Jekyll are subsumed by Hyde’s animal appetites.

The late-19th-century literary movement of Naturalism also questioned just how civilized civilization was. Novels like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) transferred the concept of natural selection from competition for survival among animals in nature to humans in society. Carrie, the title character, succeeds because she is young and resourceful. Hurstwood, a rich bar manager who falls in love with Carrie, fails because of his soft spot for her. The strong and unsentimental survive, while the old and infirm wither away. Civilization, naturalism insists, has not succeeded in filing away the sharp edges of life. The fight for survival still pricks and stings.

A century later, Aimee Bender’s “The Rememberer” probes the concept of devolution in a fresh and vital way. A piece of speculative fiction, the story steps away from realism to explore what happens when devolution is literalized. Annie, the protagonist, recounts the plight of her lover Ben, who is rapidly devolving from human to baboon to salamander. Ben laments the way humans are changing. He says, “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.” His devolution is, perhaps, an involuntary reaction to this idea, a way to recapture the “heart” in life. But for when exactly is he nostalgic? Was there ever a time at which humans lived by their hearts, or when other species did? What waits in our evolutionary past but pure instinct and drive for survival?

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by Aimee Bender

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.

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.

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.

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.

Last day I saw him human, he was sad about the world.

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.

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."

He looked at me pointedly, blue eyes unwavering. "Like us, Annie," he said. "We think far too much."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

When I go to the kitchen, I peer in the pan and see he's some kind of salamander now. He's small.

"Ben," I whisper, "do you remember me? Do you remember?"

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.

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.

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.

Ben the salamander swims out. I wave to the water with both arms, big enough for him to see if he looks back.

I turn around and walk back to the car.

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.

Aimee Bender is the author of the short story collections *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (1998) and *Willful Creatures* (2005), and the novels *Invisible Sign of My Own* (2000) and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010). She lives in Los Angeles, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California.

Interpretive Questions

- 1) Do the different animals Ben becomes (baboon, sea turtle, salamander) have symbolic significance, or are they simply a way to dramatize the steps of reverse evolution?
- 2) Annie talks to a scientist who gives her a timeline for Ben’s transformation that quickly proves inaccurate. Why does Bender include this detail in the story? Does it help readers to suspend their disbelief of Ben’s transformation?
- 3) Annie mentions her limits several times—when Ben reaches for her as an ape, when she finds that he’s turned into a salamander. How are the ideas of limits and violations of limits important to the story?
- 4) Annie regularly thinks about wishing. She wishes as she kisses Ben’s neck and as she looks for a star no one has wished on before. She even thinks about the people on the beach wishing. Why is wishing important to her?
- 5) Before Ben begins to change, he says “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.” Why do you suppose Ben devolves while others remain the same? Is there evidence that Ben might want to change into a simpler creature?
- 6) “The Rememberer” blends surreal and fantastic elements with realism. Where does the story employ fantastic events, images, or choices by characters? Where is the story more rooted in the ways and rules of the world as we know it? Are there any points at which the realistic and the fantastic blend?
- 7) What is the significance of the story’s title? How could it apply to Annie? How could it apply to Ben?
- 8) Annie says she and Ben would “sit together and be sad,” and that this “was a large reason why [she] loved him.” Are there signs of other reasons why Annie is attracted to Ben or Ben is attracted to Annie? Can a relationship based on shared sadness be successful? What is Annie sad about?
- 9) What do you think might have happen to Ben now that he is in the sea? Why does Annie release him there?

Craft Questions

- 1) “The Rememberer” is only about 1400 words long. What limitations do short-short stories have (besides the obvious—length)? What can short-shorts do that longer stories cannot?
- 2) “The Rememberer” covers a relatively long time period. What techniques does Bender use to write through so much time without making the story feel rushed?
- 3) How might the story change if it were told from Ben’s point of view rather than Annie’s?
- 4) “The Rememberer” has a retrospective narrator—Annie is looking back at events that happened in the past. Why did Bender choose this sort of narrative voice rather than one that has less temporal distance from the events?

- 5) Do you think Annie copes with Ben’s transformation in a way that feels emotionally honest and probable? How else could she have reacted?

Writing Prompts

- 1) In “The Rememberer,” Annie is forced to watch her partner go through a drastic change before she eventually has to let him go. Write a story using a similar theme but a very different situation.
- 2) Retell “The Rememberer” from Ben’s point of view.
- 3) Retell “The Rememberer” so there is no temporal distance between the events and the narration of them.
- 4) Write a short piece that catches up with Annie two months after she drops Ben in the sea. How does she explain the events in the story to his family? Does she feel better or worse than if he had died suddenly? Does she report him as a missing person? Do the police get suspicious about his disappearance?
- 5) “The Rememberer” uses a scientific concept—reverse evolution—as a way to dramatize Ben’s existential dread. Try using another scientific or pseudoscientific idea (maybe genetic inheritance or phrenology) as a characterization tool.