

1 KEENING FOR CARSON THE CAT

The home of my friends Karen and Ron Flowe in Gloucester, Virginia, is decorated merrily. Candles shine a welcome in each window. An all-white Christmas tree graces the entrance, and a multicolored tree sparkles upstairs. The special music, food, and holiday anticipations of December have long enchanted the household.

This year, though, the air is scented with sorrow. Willa, a Siamese cat, wanders from room to decorated room, pausing first at the ottoman in front of the fireplace. With a glance at the soft, warm cushion, she lets out a wail. Moving on to the master bedroom, she jumps to the head of the bed and pushes her face and body into a cozy cave-space behind the pillows. She looks, and looks; another wail escapes her. It's sudden and terrible, not a noise one would expect from a cat.

Willa cannot still herself. The only thing that helps is when she's folded into an embrace by Karen or Ron, or when she's reclined in one of their laps. She is searching for her sister Carson, who died earlier in the month. For the first time in fourteen years, Willa is no longer a sibling, no longer the more outgoing and dominant half of an enduring partnership.

She's Willa, alone. And she grieves.

Willa and Carson—named for famed writers Willa Cather and Carson McCullers—arrived in this literary Virginia household on Shakespeare's birthday, April 23. Willa had been the plump pick of the litter. Carson had been offered at half price. Runty, a bit, the seller acknowledged.



WILLA AND CARSON. PHOTO BY KAREN S. FLOWE.

Carson acted in some peculiar ways right from the first week. Showing unusual sensory acuity, she fluffed up at the smallest sounds or movements. During one windstorm, she climbed to Ron's shoulder and pressed tightly against his neck. Sometimes, and strangely, she would progress across a room not in a linear path but by walking in circles. She did not meow, and even her purrs were faint; the Flowes concluded she was mute.

Then came the declawing. Willa and Carson went together for the surgery (like many of us, the Flowes routinely declawed their indoor cats for years but no longer subscribe to the practice). The veterinarian, however, missed one of Willa's claws, so back she went for follow-up care. Left at home, Carson began to scream, recalls Karen. Carson searched the house for Willa, and cried.

The sisters were soon reunited, and a contented life ensued, ruled by sun patches, excellent food, and loving laps. Always the leader, Willa would strike out for a favored spot—the warm ottoman or a preferred corner of the bed—and Carson would follow. Once settled, the pair often

pressed their bodies lightly together, like the joined wings of a butterfly. If one fell ill, the other would tend her sister and groom her.

As she aged, Carson struggled with severe arthritis and developed a troublesome bowel-impaction problem. She lost weight and required surgery. Trips to the vet became routine. When Carson was away from the house, Willa acted out of sorts, but these separations were brief, and Carson always recovered enough from her bad patches to sustain an active relationship with her sister.

Then, on a December day, Carson began to shake, a symptom she had not experienced before. Her body temperature dropped, and at the vet's recommendation, she was put into an incubator. Cocooned in the incubator's warmth, Carson went to sleep that night and never woke up.

Ron and Karen felt grateful that Carson had died in her sleep, with no suffering. Yet their grief was substantial. As for Willa, she at first expressed that mild, something's-not-quite-right, out-of-sorts mood that one sister typically exhibited when apart from the other. The Flowes anticipated a stronger response might ensue, but they were unprepared for what did happen.

"Within two or three days," Karen says, "Willa started acting bizarrely. She was looking and looking for Carson, and she began emitting these sounds that we had never heard from her, that I have never heard from any animal, as a matter of fact. If I'm going to be literary, I've read Irish literature and it talks about the keening for the dead—and keening sounds like the closest to what she was doing. Willa was searching all the time, and all of a sudden she'd let out this horrific . . ." Karen's voice trails off, then picks back up: "As soon as Willa got into my lap, she would stop. She was grieving. She is getting better now, just like humans do."

Was Willa expressing grief? Couldn't it be that she was just unsettled by the sudden change in her day-to-day life? Writing for the magazine *Modern Dog*, Stanley Coren remarks on just this point, one that applies equally to cats: "In the animal behavior world at large, the jury is still out on whether dogs are actually mourning the loss of a loved one, or simply exhibiting anxieties related to the change in routine."

Skeptics love to cry "Anthropomorphism!," suggesting that animal lovers too readily ascribe human emotions to other creatures. And the

skeptics have a point: Rather than accepting uncritically the existence of animal grief, or animal love, or any other complex emotion in non-human animals, we should first weigh other, simpler explanations. In Willa and Carson's case, we know something relevant from their long history together. We know that after the declawing surgery, Carson cried out for Willa even though Willa was out of the house only temporarily.

But Willa's response after Carson's death was an order of magnitude different from anything that had happened before. Karen is convinced that Willa had intuited a finality in her sister's absence. In part this may have been triggered by Karen and Ron's own mourning, visible and audible as it was to Willa. And in part, too, it may relate to the choices that the sisters made, day after day, to intertwine their bodies. Mightn't that physicality have led to an embodied sort of knowledge? Wouldn't Willa somehow grasp, when she no longer could curl up with her sister, that Carson's absence was permanent?

I want to emphasize that animal grief does not depend upon a cognitive mastering of the concept of death. That's a recurring message of the stories and the science in this book. We humans anticipate—sometimes dread, sometimes welcome—death, and after a certain point in childhood, we grasp what it means to die. Maybe some other animals do have a sense of that finality, as Karen posits for Willa. Yet as I noted in the prologue, my definition of grief is linked not to some feat of thinking but instead to feeling. Grief blooms because two animals bond, they care, maybe they even love—because of a heart's certainty that another's presence is as necessary as air.

When it came to Carson, Willa's heart bore that certainty. Karen wondered what to do for Willa the survivor, other than dosing her with extra affection. She mused about acquiring another adult cat, in order to restore the household's Siamese symmetry. But she knew a powerful if simple truth that cuts across species lines: loved ones are irreplaceable.

In *Histoires Naturelles*, a nineteenth-century collection of essays devoted to animals of the French countryside, Jules Renard writes of an ox named Castor. One morning, Castor emerges from his shed and heads as usual to his yoke. "Like a maid drowsing, broom in hand, he goes on chewing while waiting for Pollux," his longtime partner.

But something has happened. What precisely it is, Renard does not say. The dog yaps nervously. The farmhands run about and shout. And next to him, Castor feels “twisting, hitting . . . fuming.” Turning to look, he sees not Pollux but another ox. “Castor misses his partner,” writes Renard, “and seeing the troubled eye of this unknown ox next to him, he stops chewing.”

How much feeling Renard crams into this understated passage. Castor isn’t content with just any ox; it’s Pollux he knows, Pollux he misses. Animals matter to each other as individuals. Sisters matter.

Eventually, Karen and Ron did adopt a young cat named Amy, a gorgeous Russian blue with a pretty “locket” of white hairs on her upper chest. Amy had been left at an animal shelter by a breeder of pure Russian blue cats; those few white hairs, not standard for her breed, reduced her value. (Amy’s rejection by the breeder strengthens my resolve to adopt animals from shelters or other rescue organizations, as we have done with our six indoor cats.) When Karen visited the shelter in search of a companion for Willa, Amy climbed into her lap and settled into a purr. And just as Amy chose Karen that day, Karen chose Amy.

In bringing Amy home to Willa, Karen hoped to tap into a phenomenon that animal-behavior scientists discovered decades ago: When emotionally troubled, a social animal may reap great benefits from caring for a younger companion. This principle was driven home in the aftermath of the “separation experiments” done in the 1960s by Harry Harlow and his colleagues, who sought to understand the nature of the mother-infant bond in monkeys and what happens in its absence.

These scientists famously demonstrated that six months’ or a year’s worth of isolation caused young rhesus monkeys to become psychologically disturbed. Without the company and comfort of their mothers or other companions, the monkeys rocked back and forth, clasped themselves, and acted exactly like what they were, severely depressed primates. It’s painful to read about these experiments now, because the monkeys suffered so much to prove a point that in retrospect looks startlingly obvious.

When introduced to other monkeys their age who had been reared normally, these disturbed monkeys couldn’t cope well. Lacking social

experience, they knew nothing of the right signals to give their peers to bring about positive encounters. But when given a chance to spend time with normal younger monkeys, even the harmed, broken, motherless monkeys began to improve. The younger monkeys functioned, the scientists found, as therapists of a sort. In a classic paper published in 1971, Harlow and Stephen Suomi wrote, “6-month-old social isolates exposed to 3-month-old normal monkeys achieved essentially complete social recovery.”

What the monkey experiments demonstrated is the balm of responding, even when in emotional pain, to creatures who are younger and less threatening. Of course, Willa was not a social isolate, so the analogy with the monkey experiments only goes so far. But the idea is broadly similar. When Amy first arrived in the house, Willa vocalized her objection. She made a noise wholly unlike her Carson-wail, a growl more like the roar of a tiny lion. And with it, the point was made: Willa was not thrilled to have this unfamiliar cat, however young and unthreatening, on her turf.

Soon, though, Willa began to engage more actively with what was happening around her than she had in months. She actively sought to be in the same room as the new arrival. “Willa had something new to think about,” Karen told me with a smile. Even though her first response wasn’t a warm one, Willa was coaxed by Amy’s presence out of her diminished state, the condition of mild emotional detachment in which she had dwelled since the loss of Carson.

At first, Willa and Amy, even if in the same room, kept their distance. Only in one situation did they tolerate each other’s nearness: when both wanted to be physically close to Karen. When Karen relaxed on the couch or reclined in bed, the two cats took up positions on either side of her—safely separated by the person they loved. This went on for about six months. Then, one fall day, Karen fell asleep on the couch with Willa snuggled close. After perhaps an hour’s nap, Karen awoke to find Willa still in place near her hip, and Amy up at her shoulder. The two cats were in fur-to-fur contact. “And,” as Karen puts it, “there were no ugly noises!”

Willa and Amy’s relationship entered a fresh phase. Once, Amy licked Willa from head to toe; Willa expressed no blissful purr, but she did allow the intimacy. And then the two cats began eating side by side, from

the same bowl. The relationship that Willa and Amy have developed is far less intimate than what Willa shared with her sister for all those years. Willa and Amy never knot themselves into a tight circle or press close in the siblings' butterfly formation. Willa has selected a new favorite sleeping place, one she never frequented when Carson was alive. She burrows into the space between Karen's pillow and Ron's, and faces the wood of the headboard. Once, Karen caught Amy investigating this spot, as if to see what the attraction was for Willa, but Amy never tries to sleep there.

A remnant of that tight two-sister circle remains. Willa, when napping on the bed or on the ottoman (a spot she shared with her sister), still makes her half-moon. To Karen, this is an evocative image because it's so incomplete: the empty space speaks to her of Carson. "There's an emptiness in Willa's posture now," Karen says.

Karen knows that Willa's physical and emotional well-being have improved since Amy's arrival. Willa has put on weight, grooms herself more fastidiously, and is more vigorous in her overall approach to life. Are memories of Carson still rooted in Willa's mind? Do images of sharing the fire-warmed ottoman with her sister flicker through her dreams? This realm of the cat-mind goes beyond science.

In 2011 I began writing a weekly post on anthropology and animal behavior at National Public Radio's *13.7* blog, which is devoted to science and culture. In a piece about animal grief, I offered a short version of Willa's and Carson's story. Back came responses about readers' own experience with animals who mourn.

Kate B.'s story has powerful parallels to Willa and Carson's. For fifteen years, two Siamese cats, brothers named Niles and Maxwell, lived with Kate's parents. Niles became ill from pancreatic cancer, and when it came time to put him down, Maxwell accompanied his brother to the vet. Soon, Maxwell found himself back home, surrounded by familiar places and favorite things, but without his sibling.

"Maxwell spent the next several months," Kate remembers, "constantly wandering the house and crying the most agonizing cries, looking for his brother." As it turned out, Maxwell lived just several more months. During this time, he derived the most comfort from the visits of Kate's three young cats, who were brought to see him and who bonded with him. Now, when Kate brings the trio to her parent's house,

they search for Maxwell, and one of them often sleeps exactly where Maxwell slept.

Sibling ties, like those between sisters Willa and Carson and brothers Niles and Maxwell, are powerful connections that, when broken, may give way to mourning. Cats may mourn a lost companion, though, even when no blood tie exists. Channah Pastorius described the friendship between Boris, a brown tabby she adopted from a shelter, and Fritz, a kitten her son brought home. The two felines play-wrestled and slept with their front legs entwined. At age eight, Boris developed kidney failure, but with good veterinary care and lots of TLC, he managed to live two and a half more years.

Finally the inevitable came to pass, and Boris was put down. What happened next has a familiar ring. “Fritz mourned the loss of Boris with sad yowls and depression,” Channah wrote. Fritz was lethargic, uninterested in his favorite toys or much of anything else.

But a second common thread links Fritz’s story with those of Willa and Maxwell: when a tiny black kitten showed up on the family’s patio and ran indoors, Fritz perked up. He began right away to play with the kitten, named Scooter by the family. Once again, a new and younger partner abated at least some of the grief.

Mourning may cross even species lines, as we will see again in later chapters. Kathleen Kenna’s fifteen-year-old cat Wompa reacted strongly when the family dog, eight-year-old Kuma, died after a long illness. Wompa had regularly allowed the dog to groom her, and the two acted like best buddies. (Meanwhile, the other cat in the house had nothing to do with the dog.) A few days after Kuma succumbed to cancer, Wompa began to moan loudly. The strange, intermittent crying, which sounded “like a banshee” to Kathleen, lasted for several days. The cat also shifted her nighttime sleeping place to the spot at the end of the bed where Kuma had slept.

After I discussed animals’ responses to death on a radio program, listener Laura Nix e-mailed me about two cats called Dusty and Rusty, who had lived with her friends for many years. They were sisters, but they were no Willa and Carson! Their relationship was downright antagonistic, to the degree that they carved up the house into two territories:

Dusty lived upstairs, and Rusty lived downstairs. When Dusty began to fail, in her old age, she was cared for lovingly by Laura's friend. On the night that she died, indeed, at the moment she died, Rusty—who was, as always, downstairs and apart from her sister—let out a single howl. Laura notes, “It was the only time I ever heard her make such a sound. I can't tell you how she apparently knew.”

Although I live surrounded by cats and am attuned to the possibility of animal grief, I have never witnessed cat mourning. We have lost cats to illness and old age, but the only emotional disruption in the household came from our own grief. Perhaps part of the explanation is that the cats we lost were primarily attached to us rather than to the other cats. Our cats are rescues, and we have a lot of them. Six live indoors with us, and twice that number reside in a spacious pen in our yard. Nestled under trees, sturdily built, with a two-story cat hotel and other hidden grottoes for warmth and shelter, the pen offers sanctuary to these cats, most of whom had lived as part of a feral colony at a public boat landing on the York River, not far from our house. At one point, a few people, annoyed by the colony's presence, threatened to harm the cats. Building the pen was my husband's answer to that threat. As hard as we work to reduce the feral-cat population to zero through spay-neuter programs, we want to help the cats who need us right now.

We enjoy the company of these small creatures, no longer have to fend for themselves against hunger, dogs, coyotes, and uncaring humans. When I walk outside and enter the pen, I enjoy watching shy Big Orange sleep soundly under a bush, one-eyed Scout jump at a bug, and friends Dexter and Daniel relax together near the picnic table. Haley and Kaley, nicknamed “the white sisters,” have never been feral; when a friend called urgently seeking someone who would adopt the two together, before they were euthanized as unwanted, we took them in. These siblings are the most closely bonded of any cats in our care. Kaley is a bit heavier than her sister, with one eye blue, the other green. Haley has a darker smudge atop her head and “talks” more to us humans. The sisters seem hyperaware of each other's location in the pen and most often choose to eat, rest, or bask in proximity to each other. We don't know their precise ages, but they've been together since birth, at least

three or four years. Haley and Kaley are far closer to each other than any other pair of cats we have had. What will happen when one of the white sisters dies? I hope we won't find out for many years.

Clearly, I'm cat-preoccupied. Yet there's another reason why I chose to launch this book with a chapter on cat mourning. Words like "aloof" and "independent" are often used to describe cats' personalities. When my former dean at the College of William and Mary joked that trying to achieve consensus among faculty members is "like herding cats," everyone laughed. Immediately, we grasped the cross-species analogy. It's an old stereotype, pitting independent, almost rogue cats against ultraloyal, comparatively tractable dogs. And there's some truth to it: dogs evolved from pack animals and are, on average, more attuned to humans than cats. But individual cats, depending on their personalities, may bond with other cats and with people just as deeply as dogs bond with other dogs and with people. And when death comes for one cat, that bonding may lead to mourning for the survivor.

Willa is a survivor. By all appearances, she enjoys Amy's company. Even so, Amy isn't Carson. Willa lives on without her sister—but in a very real sense, it's a sister that Willa remains.