

Anthropocentrism **By Sam Hounsome**

“Hi, Miss, how are you doing today and what can I get for you?” The animal behind the counter is rosy and warm and *loud*. The speech is spoken aloud, harsh and jagged, not the hum of communication that It is used to, born of roots in the dark and the dirt. The animal behind the counter has brown hair with white-yellow streaks that smells acrid and like honey and is pulled up out of the face. The eyes are facing forward—predator, probably—and deep brown. Glass covers the eyes in huge rounds that make them seem unnaturally big. There is a black cloth covering the other cloths that clad the body of this animal.

It stumbles further into the building and closer to the counter that is mostly wooden except for the front side which covered in slats of rough stone. The room is bright. Huge glass panes at the front offer a facsimile of sun but that can't be where the light is coming from. The room is too cold for the light to be from the sun. A dark scent, nutty and bitter, is imbued into the walls, and a cloying sweetness comes from behind glass in the counter It stands at. More of the animals hunch over wooden-wire tables with stone cups of liquid that smell like the building.

Shelves cluster in corners, filled with dusty houseplants. It feels a sharp bolt of longing and reaches out towards them. The pulse of sap and sugar through Its capillaries could be mistaken for a quickened pulse. The others and their hum were a part of It, as much of It as It was of Itself, and the warmth and song It had is gone. The plants in the pots do not reach back. They are old and clipped to silence.

A sharp metal sound cuts through the noise of what It can now tell is chatter, as the door opens and a new group of the animals walk in and stand behind It. They step

through the dirt It had dragged in by Its roots, and don't notice the muddy footprints they now make as well.

The animal behind the counter speaks again. "Miss? What can I get for you today?"

It doesn't know what 'Miss' is. It doesn't know what It can or should get. Its roots are cold and bare and trail behind It, sloughing off mud and covering most of the fake wood floor. Its branches and leaves brush the soft paneled roof and scrape where the boards meet each other in metal seems. It feels every inch of space It takes up.

It tries to hum again with the plants in the stoneware in the corners of the room. "Can I have a coffee?"

Was that sound It? Has It done the right thing?

"Alright, what size would you like today? Small, medium, large?"

It doesn't know what the correct answer is. It left Its home when the others vanished. It pulled Itself out of the earth and dragged Itself here in a daze. The animals are bustling and unafraid. It wanders into their buildings and is greeted cheerily before it leaves. It likes that. It doesn't know what the pleasantries mean.

It tries out Its words. "Can I get a medium?" The sounds feel gummy and syrup-thick in Its veins and hurt to expel.

The animal smiles, mouth moving, eyes still, and says, "Absolutely! Is that all for today?"

"Yes."

“That’ll be 2.99, then, thanks!”

2.99 of what? It panics and shimmies slightly. It mimics the movement of the wind through its leaves to soothe itself. Three of its leaves snap loose and flutter down to the counter between the two of them.

The animal grabs the leaves, then fiddles with something out of sight. It can hear sliding on metal, a lever flipping, and leaves crinkling against other paper. The lever snaps again, the metal slides again, and the animal looks up.

“Perfect! You can just wait over there—” the animal gestures to the side of the counter with the glass display, closer to the exit— “While I make your drink!”

It pulls itself in the direction that the animal gestured. A chair clatters to the ground. One of its roots is stuck in the curl of the chair’s thick wire legs. A different animal in crisper, darker cloths with scruff on their face steps back to avoid the chair’s fall.

“Hey, what was that?”

The animal sounds violent, sharp, but so does all of the speech of the others. It drags the chair a step further in its attempt to free itself.

“Aren’t you going to apologize?”

It doesn’t respond. It doesn’t know what the animal wants from it. It shuffles another step away.

“Hey, you bitch—”

The animal behind the counter looks up at that, face pinched and lips pursed. “Woah, that was an accident, she didn’t mean to. You’re next in line anyways, what can I get for you?”

The sharp animal scoffs and moves up towards the counter. They speak with each other for a moment. The animal behind the counter smiles at the sharp one just the same.

A stone cup filled with the strong-smelling liquid is pushed across to It and the counter It waits at. “Here, your coffee. There's sugar, milk, and cream at the table just there.”

The table is the same as the others but without a chair placed neatly nearby. There's a bowl with pink paper packets and two metal pitchers wet with condensation with black scribbles on white tabs on the handles.

It reaches out for the cup with Its lower branches. It wants to mimic the others, how they’ve grabbed and cradled their drinks close. Its leaves brush against the handle then sags under the weight of the full cup. It *hurts*, Its bark bending beyond recognition. It can feel every crease in Its stems and Its petioles feel like they’re going to pop.

The cup spills.

The sound is soft, just a dull *thud* of stoneware against the wooden countertop. The coffee flows off the counter and onto the animal behind. The smile is gone.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the animal says. Behind the glass and wire frames, the undereyes are creased and a bruised purple. “But that’s the second commotion you’ve made. I’m the only one here. I think you should leave.”

All of the animals are looking at It. It doesn’t know what *ma’am* means. The building is silent and ghostlike. Why are they all so angry? The room smells just the same as the liquid. But the smile is gone and all the eyes on It are sharp and cold and predatory. The plants in the pots won’t reach back and nothing is the same.

It cradles the feeling of the past pleasantries and connection close. Perhaps those could’ve been Its hum. It flees the building. Its leaves scrape the ceiling panels and shake dust into the room. It hears a crash of another chair toppling. It feels quiet and deadened and holds the loss in Its leaves. The only proof of Its presence is the dirt on the floor and the anger It escapes, humming, humming, humming.