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“Oh, sweetheart,” Grandma Donna said. “I think that must have been a dream. You must know your father would never, ever do such a thing.”

If anyone was eager to see the worst in Dad, it was my grandma Donna. Her instant dismissal was enormously comforting. It gave me back the things I knew—that my father was a kind man, that he would never do such a terrible thing. To this day, I can feel the bump of the tire over the cat’s body. And to this day I am very clear in my mind that it never happened. Think of it as my own personal Schrödinger’s cat.

Was my father kind to animals? I thought so as a child, but I knew less about the lives of lab rats then. Let’s just say that my father was kind to animals unless it was in the interest of science to be otherwise. He would never have run over a cat if there was nothing to be learned by doing so.

He was a great believer in our animal natures, far less likely to anthropomorphize Fern than to animalize me. Not just me, but you too—all of us together, I’m afraid. He didn’t believe animals could think, not in the way he defined the term, but he wasn’t much impressed with human thinking either. He referred to the human brain as a clown car parked between our ears. Open the doors and the clowns pile out.

The idea of our own rationality, he used to say, was convincing to us only because we so wished to be convinced. To any impartial observer, could such a thing exist, the sham was patent. Emotion and instinct were the basis of all our decisions, our actions, everything we valued, the way we saw the world. Reason and rationality were a thin coat of paint on a ragged surface.

The only way to make any sense of the United States

Congress, our father told me once, was to view it as a two-hundred-year-long primate study. He didn’t live to see the ongoing revolution in our thinking regarding nonhuman animal cognition.

But he wasn’t wrong about Congress.

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections, including *Sarah Canary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Her collection, *What I Didn’t See*, recently won the 2010 World Fantasy Award. A new novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, is scheduled for publication in May of 2013.

GEORGE HITCHCOCK

La Cena, 1997
Acrylic on Canvas, 16 x 22 in

