

# Variations on the very small

Jody Azzouni

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I once heard a philosopher lecture. At length. All things being equal, she said, if fifteen people are happy it's better than if only one person is happy. And if fifteen big people are happy it's no better than if fifteen small people are happy. In fact (and this is still that philosopher opining), it's no worse for fifteen absolutely tiny people to be happy than for fifteen rather gargantuan people to be happy. Utilitarianism (apparently) is the doctrine that the best social policy is to maximize the number of happy sentient beings, regardless of their sizes. Such a policy seems in conflict with the evidently huge and growing number of humans on the planet. The solution, so this philosopher concluded, can't be population control because that policy inexorably leads to smaller numbers of happy humans. And that's less of a greater good. The solution is to make even more humans, but to make them really tiny. Unsaid is this: And to get rid of the big ones.

Chelsea is Todd's girlfriend. She wears a lot of blue makeup, and her feet always point inwards towards each other. She wears bright pink baby clothes and small toys as jewelry. Long straight blue hair with pink tips and black highlights. She's Japanese too. Her real name transcends the speech-productive capacities of many Caucasians, Todd and myself included. "Chelsea" is her chosen name. "New York," she tells me, was already taken by her older sister.

Todd lives at home and I overhear everything they do and say. Don't you guys like privacy? I once asked, hoping they would say yes and move away. But they didn't say yes and they didn't move away. Privacy isn't much valued by young people in their thirties and forties—not if they live at home with their parents. Privacy wasn't valued in the Dark Ages either. What goes around comes around.

Chelsea and Todd practice their relationship daily. And that, I've involuntarily overheard, requires relationship pets. Although Chelsea thinks Todd is really cute and really bright and a lot of fun in bed, she tells him regularly that he's currently too autistic for the long term, a little too much into spinning objects, sports, computer games, and genetic reprogramming toys. *He's too much like the boys back home*. So they have to start practice-bonding with third parties in case they have children. There's always cartoons loudly gesticulating in the background, by the way. Their television is just never off. This is a paradigm of something or other that they think is good, that they think we should strive for: a whole world in a tiny box.

Wherever will the grandchildren fit? I wonder. Will closets suffice? I hate my apartment, I admit. I hate the slick contemporary Manhattan contractors who build these things. Whatever happened to stone, brick, quiet and space? If space is so empty, why is there so little of it? Why is it so expensive? Philosophers just never ask the right questions.

The walls of Todd's room: Framed pictures of *homo floresiensis* bravely taking down pigmy elephants (*stegodon*). Posters of diminutive rock stars (Frank Zappa). Tom Cruise standing proud. Smartly dressed hobbits and dwarves.

My livingroom: large parts of it taken up with several of Chelsea's practice rock gardens. Well, practice pebble gardens actually. Don't walk so hard, she tells me, you're making everything bounce. I take to socks. I take to tiptoes.

Chelsea is cute and small, big on cozy, big on little spaces. Sometimes, when I get home, she's curled up asleep on a bookshelf, neatly fitted between *War and Peace* and *Ulysses*. (My books aren't alphabetically arranged, and there's lots of white space between them.) Okay, okay: I exaggerate a little, I'm making a joke. But she does tell me this: You should sleep in a small box because it's better for the back. And more of us will fit together that way. Fitting together. That's very important for Chelsea. Social feng shui, she calls it.

I open the refrigerator and in my favorite coffee cup is a toe-sized polar bear next to a cube of ice. It's just like magic, only without the fun. This isn't a joke. This isn't an exaggeration.

What's the problem? my wife, Lorelei, asks me when I've stopped yelling. Well...well...well, I say (between hyperventilations), and I admit I'm reaching a bit here, well, they're *dangerous wild animals*, aren't they? Wasn't a boy mauled by one at a zoo recently? Didn't surgeons have to take boyparts out of some polar bear's stomach? Lorelei looks at me with evident and deserved pity. Do you want me to dignify those remarks with answers? she asks rhetorically. Meanwhile, I hear a terrible tiny growling and gnashing from within my favorite coffee cup.

I bet it could take off a whole, um, half-finger, I explain to Todd later. That would be a lot of work, Todd remarks skeptically. It'd be biting off more than it could chew, if you get my meaning. Um, I say. And you see, Todd adds enthusiastically, that's the whole point.

I've become a danger to the living beings in my own home. I open the door to Todd's room because of some weird noises that don't sound like cartoons, and a herd of tiny rhinoceroses fan out from the doorway. This is not an exaggeration. Forty at least. I stumble forwards, inadvertently crushing several despite my socks. (I've been practicing walking on tiptoes, but it's really not that easy to make it a permanent change. You need surgery.) A yelp from inside the room. Be careful, this is Todd yelling, those are going extinct! I'll say, I say. But no one is laughing. Except me, and my laughter turns nervous pretty quickly.

*Bonsai*, I say to Chelsea, *right?* Have I got it? This is after the stampede of the tiny Asian elephants on the kitchen counter, spooked by a roach. Huh? she says, genuinely mystified.

We're watching *Discovery*. I say: Shouldn't we try saving the normal-sized ones from extinction instead of duplicating them in miniature? Save the polar ice caps? The rainforests? *Have fewer children?* Cap our population? Todd, Chelsea, Lorelei, no one seems to agree with me. No one even seems to think I've made a reasonable request. Everyone is apparently buying endangered miniaturized species, keeping them in boxes with some grass and those tiny redwood trees that have become so popular lately. "Preservation gardens" are springing up *absolutely everywhere*, *Discovery* tells us. Even in Africa and South America. Even in those air-conditioned condos that

are being built all over Africa and South America. Everyone thinks this is intelligently executed altruism of a high order, as green as you can get.

Can you really scale down the whole ecology that way? I ask the television set. Even the insects? Even the bacteria? Even the viruses? What about molecules? Atoms? We know gardens, Chelsea says. Then she explains that gravity isn't that important if you're scaled down enough. The other forces get more of a vote for once. Makes it easier to use space. "Gardening Nature to Save Nature," is the new slogan. Everyone is very impressed with English gardens. England, apparently, hasn't had any *real* nature for centuries. Sherwood forest was just a big garden. A *King's* garden, but a garden nevertheless. Did you know that?

Did I tell you that I'm tall? And not thin? I'm ashamed to say how tall. I'm ashamed to say how not thin. I'm sure it's all in my mind but I think Lorelei finds it annoying to look up at me. I've taken to squatting a lot so that she can look down at me, but she's squatting all the time too and I can't squat as low as she can. Suddenly I'm a social liability, a big thing. A feng shui no-no. I'm immoral by virtue of my spacious *infrastructure*. My ecological footprint is obscenely large, like a shadow-vampire feeding itself on others, a selfishly expanding black hole full of gravitational *hubris*. I'm an awful exaggeration, an odious contrast.

I should eat less. I should *be* less. Parasites live at the top of the food chain too, Chelsea tells me. Tigers are big parasites. Bears too. Even dogs. Cats for sure. Oriental wisdom? I ask her. *Whatever*, she says back.

Intelligently directed self-loathing is one of the three paths to wisdom. The numbers, the sheer numbers. I calculate: from birth until now. What have I done with my mouth, by unthinkingly opening and closing it so often? Masticating so promiscuously? Plants *count*, of course.

Vegetarians have no right to be smug. Vegetarians are large too. Reptiles have small ecological footprints. Reptiles are the unsung saints of the ecological kingdom. Turtles for example. Oh god, to be a turtle. Innocence conveniently packed into a shell. It's not just about size, it's about *metabolism*. Being cold-blooded is a virtue. I am an overheated mammal; I am a large overheated mammal.

I involuntarily overhear Todd and Chelsea planning their future. If six inches is the max then we can do forty, *easy*, Chelsea says. That's so cool, Todd gushes, I *love* big families. It's so Italian.

It's so Italian?

Lorelei is building a dollhouse. Um, for what? I ask. A place for our many grandchildren to live in, she tells me. I don't miss a beat. Make sure you build a nice neighborhood around it, I tell her. No strip malls. An unimposing church down the block. A playground. And *two* Starbucks. Do you think you can do that? She nods gravely. And don't forget fences to keep out insects, I add. The little people that are coming, I think, they are going to have such adventures.

Starvation isn't as bad as you might think. It takes several weeks at least, and as long as you're sufficiently hydrated, you're quite comfortable. The hunger disappears after a couple of days, along with the sting of conscience. The altruism of self-deprivation: You slowly sink into a

peaceful and all-embracing coma, longing for nothing. Your tiny descendants sit around the bed biding time with you, some of them strumming guitars you can barely see, everyone murmuring anecdotes like locusts. Yes, you say occasionally to the buzz around you. Sometimes in response to something. Your life flashes by. So many meals. And then.