

Paul Zimmer

an excerpt of

Four Cats and the Pathetic Fallacy

Sego

Our striped hazel cat, Sego, loops and pokes as she gazes up in wonder at the mammoth heaps of snow pushed to the side of our drive by the township road plow. The Ginger Streak, I call Sego. Moments ago she flashed past me when I opened the door to let the dog out, and now she is having a free spree at the great, white base of winter before demanding to be let back in the house. Sego does not walk—she appears in many places at once, giving you golden glimpses, an Eadweard Muybridge time study put down in a strip, capturing movements faster than the eye.

The sun is shining on the snow, and my eyes ache as I watch her gambol. It is minus eleven degrees this morning in Wisconsin, and Sego flicks her front paws to shake off the cold. A fragment of dry leaf tumbles past her over the snow, and for a moment she gives chase.

I must be careful of this kind of thinking, because recently I received a rejection note from an editor who commented on my submission, “Some of your writing suffers from reliance on the pathetic fallacy.”

My God! I wondered. I have been criticized for many things in my days, but what is this pathetic fallacy? A disease? I felt almost unclean. I do not wish to be pathetic or deluded, nor do I want my writing to “suffer” from anything. Dimly, from my shaky student days, I recalled reference to this term, so I went to my books.

The “pathetic fallacy” was an artistic tendency much damned by the irascible nineteenth-century thinker and critic John Ruskin, who castigated writers and artists for ascribing human emotions and sympathies to nature. He saw in it “a morbidity” and “a falseness in all our impressions of external things.” I don’t understand why Ruskin was so grouchy about the *p.f.* Most of us know what is “pathetic” or “false” in a metaphor, and practiced eyes know what is good. Why is it “false” for humans to have the natural ability and propensity to make these connections, which often can be moving, funny, sad . . . or even accurate?

Well, I don’t want to be false or morbid! People in their mid-seventies have a way of slipping into such things—but I had not realized that I was suffering. I would have to do something immediately about this irritating tendency.