

Between me  
and Nami,  
who is cat

Zwaantje Kurpershoek

Part 1, To Nami

Nami,

I know you can't read. Still, I want to write to you.

It's clear we don't understand each other. We are different beings and don't share a spoken or written language. But we do connect. We live together and interact with each other every day. I'm sure we both are a big part of each other's lives. We spend so much time together. That it's evident we are different and unable to understand each other, makes it feel only more real. Our interactions didn't happen because of language. Do you know what I mean? There are no words separating us: I don't expect you to understand me and I don't expect to understand you. That is not to say we don't try to understand each other. It is actually what I am trying to do by writing to you.

What I experience with you is in some way similar to what I experience with games. We share a small fenced reality with each other that has nothing to do with the bigger realities we live in. Which makes you and games such an enjoyable escape route from our dominating realities. Do you experience this too when you are with me? There must

be another world you are living in that I am not directly a part of or an influence on.

When one speaks with the same words, you sometimes forget that you can not always grasp what the other is saying. 'If a lion could speak, we could (still) not understand him'<sup>1</sup>(1) and any human or other animal that is not me could secretly be that lion.

I don't know if you are a lion to me. I want to say you're not. But maybe you are and it's just because I know you are a lion that I can deal with it honestly. I know that I project my own thoughts on you. Sometimes I think you are angry at me for being gone for several days or weeks. Other times I think you are cold when you return wet from the rain outside.

I guess we are in some kind of a relationship, built on expectations and responsibilities. You want food from me. You want my warm lap. I want to cuddle you. I want someone to care for. Someone that will not reject me based on opinions. I want your attention. You want my attention.

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1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)

We expect each other to come back when we leave the house.

You want me to open the door for you as you sit on the seat of my bike leaning against the front of the house. You are outside and I am inside. You look at me through the window. Do you want me to open the door?

If I do, you always immediately enter the house. But do you really want to come in as you look at me from outside to the window? Or do you just come in because you think I want you to, when I open the door? Or is it simply because there's the opportunity to do so?

I try to look at my computer screen, but my eyes keep sliding back to you. Why don't you just go around the house to enter through your own cat door in the back garden? Or don't you know it leads to the same room? Why do you want me to open the door for you when you have your own entrance? Are you training me to open it for you? Or is it just that you like to look at me through the window?

If you are inside and I open the door, you go out.

...

I was playing Viva Pinata. You found me in the living room and sat in front of my screen. I couldn't see my pinatas anymore.

The pinatas are virtual animals that can become a resident of your virtual garden if it meets their preferences. Different pinatas require different needs. You need to make sure the food and fauna in your garden is to their liking.

I thought you probably wanted me to give you food, but I wanted to wait until I would go to the kitchen to prepare my own as well. My pinatas didn't need to wait, I give them food as soon as they want it. Would you be happier if I would always give you food whenever you wanted it? I wouldn't do it though, probably because I am afraid of your health and how to deal with an overweight cat. I feel responsible for you. Do you feel any responsibility towards me?

I wanted to move you while playing to have a clear view on my pinatas again. But I felt that if I reached out to you, you

would meow and maybe even bite me a bit, because my hands would come from below you. So I didn't move you. I just moved my chair a little to the back, trying to invite you to sit on my lap. I don't remember if you did. Sometimes you do and sometimes you don't. Sometimes I just keep playing a computer game or watching a movie with you in front of it. Kind of ignoring you. We have come to accept each other's presence in that way. Or don't you think so?

I realize the bigger the pinata the more eager I am to get it to stay in my garden. I don't care too much for the ants or the moths. Maybe that is because I sometimes kill them when I see them in my home. Maybe it's hard to categorize a being as something you can both love and kill. Though now that I think about it it doesn't sound so plausible. Why would one exclude the other?

At some point, when your garden contains too many residents, they start to get into fights with each other. When a pinata dies the game explains this is part of "The donut of life".

...

Whenever you are on my lap or I see you laying around somewhere, I automatically start grooming you. I search for fleas and ticks, even if there aren't any. Maybe it is just a habit I developed. Or maybe it's to make sure you are clean of parasites. Probably it's just a natural way for me to touch you.

I read that a researcher in the sixties rewarded a chimp in experiments by letting them groom his arm.<sup>2</sup> I would take grooming you as a reward. Though I feel like with us it's more of a trade. If you want to sit on my lap and be stroked and scratched around the ears, I am allowed to groom you. Or that's what I make of it. You can leave anytime.

I know you don't always like to be groomed everywhere. Only around your head and neck you really love it. When I try to touch your legs, back or belly you sometimes start putting your nails in my leg as you turn around your head to get ready to attack my hand. Though normally that doesn't

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<sup>2</sup> Zijn we slim genoeg om te weten hoe slim dieren zijn?, Frans de Waal p.44 (John Falk)

happen. As soon as you get that look I swiftly go back to scratching your neck in the way that you prefer it. We have spent some time this way, going between grooming, scratching and stroking. Whatever I am doing in those moments is not important to me anymore. Many films I watched got interrupted this way, a lot of computer work postponed.

You keep coming back to me, waiting for me to pull back the chair so you can sit on my lap. Somehow this still surprises me, why do you want my attention?

...

The image of the hedgehog I saw the other day keeps coming back to my mind. It was laying in the middle of a small street around the corner of my house. I was cycling with Angel when I noticed it. A car approached us from the front. I stopped in the middle of the street and waved my arms to stop the car. It was around nine pm and already dark. Angel got off his bike to look at the hedgehog. He said it was dead. I put my bike on its stand and went to take a look at it myself. It was a lot bigger than I expected a hedgehog to be. Had I even seen one before? There wasn't any blood, but it didn't give a sign of life either when Angel poked it with his shoe. We asked ourselves what we should do. I remember the line of lights from all the cars lining up the small street. Someone even got out of their car to see why the street was blocked, but I am not sure anymore. Angel started rolling the hedgehog to the side of the street. I was surprised to see its belly. It looked so soft, not only his short beige hairs but also the belly itself somehow, like pudding. It looked really warm and alive.

Two field mice, a tomtit, a black bird, a canary, a small brown bird, a frog and a large green grasshopper.

I think I remember all the dead animals you left in our home. And all the animals I saw you play with. I only managed to save this one toad.

The grasshopper wasn't long ago. I didn't even know we had such large grasshoppers in the Netherlands. I really enjoy the sound of grasshoppers and crickets when I bike home at night.

When I saw you with the grasshopper in the kitchen it already missed some legs. You were making some abrupt movements, touching the cricket with your paw to get it to move. But the grasshopper didn't have much power left and only jumped once more.

I got a tiny panic sweat outbreak like I always do when I encounter these half dead animals you are playing with. Should I still try to save the cricket? It would probably die anyways as it was already missing some legs. Should I kill it at once to release it from its misery? Or just leave it for

you to play with? I did what I found easiest, I just closed the kitchen door and left you to it.

I couldn't find any remains of the cricket when I came back.

Did you eat it?

...

I remember I used to want a pet. I would ask my parents for it over and over. I once had to end a sentence in primary school that went something like "My dream is..". I wrote my dream was to have a very very tiny hamster.

My parents were very touched by what I wrote and the drawing that came with it (me with a line to a small dot). But still we weren't allowed any pets. The zoo was already like our back garden, they would say. We would go there every saturday.

I still have about a hundred stuffed animals in my old room at my parents house. Most of them were bought in the zoo. None of them is a cat like you though, maybe because there aren't any domestic cats kept at the zoo. Though I did have at least three stuffed dogs, the . For some time I really wanted a big black curly poodle with a red collar. I think this idea came around when I was twelve and had more to do with experimenting with style and identity.

Don't worry, you aren't a matter of style. Or maybe you wouldn't have cared. I was actually quite hesitant to get you.

You first appeared on a farm in Germany. The farmer found you eating the food of his cats. He gave you away to a family that lived in Amsterdam. This family already had an older cat and wanted to give him some cat company. You were brought to Amsterdam on a very hot summer day and you almost died of the heat because there was no airconditioning in the car. It didn't go well for you at the family in Amsterdam either. You were always jealous of the older cat and wouldn't allow him to get any affection from humans. You would claim them all for yourself, constantly seeking their attention. So the family decided you had to go and thus as Angel was a family friend wanting a cat, he offered to take you in. And after some thinking I agreed because it felt good to be able to help the situation. We just got a stable place to stay with a garden and all. It could be a nice place for you to stay.

The foundation called Huiskat Thuis (House-cat Home-cat) wouldn't have agreed with that. They went to court arguing house cats shouldn't be allowed outside considering the European nature conservation law. They found there are

too many endangered animals killed by cats.<sup>3</sup> Mary Midgley explains how a problem like this can be approached.

"Any sane approach to life has to contain both an attitude to individuals and an attitude to larger wholes. Neither of them is reducible to the other. It is always possible for the two to conflict, but it is always necessary to try to bring them together. ... The question in each particular case is, what actually - here - is the lesser evil?"<sup>4</sup> This could be a way of thinking about whether to let you go outside. Though I wouldn't be able to, because you are a part of my life and I will probably tend to make the choice that favors you and me as long as it is socially acceptable .

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3 Frits Abrahams, Hou je kat vaker binnen, NRC handelsblad  
4 Mary Midgley, The Myths We Live By (2004), p.222 p.227

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I always love to think about what kind of (other) animal a person would be. Sometimes I base it on their appearance, sometimes on their character, or a mixture of the two. Someone told me I would be an eagle based on a first impression. What do you think?

In a way you are reducing someone to a group, the group of eagles, dogs or frogs etc. Which can become harmful if you are just being viewed as that, but because it is such a personal interpretation I believe it's the opposite. It is viewing and looking at someone as an individual and sharing your perspective.

It is a way of capturing a presence and figuring out others. Or when you ask a friend to tell you what animal they think you are, it is a way of getting to know yourself (or how you are being perceived). In a way it is similar to horoscopes. Though I used to be a bit freaked out by those who took them very seriously, I now see it's not so weird at all. They can be liberating and supportive where the more dominating religions might have failed for certain groups and individuals.

The animal someone makes me think of, comes from a formed image I have about that certain animal. Which is apart from appearance and behavior also created by culture. Most animals we encounter through human made stories, not by direct contact with the animal itself. Maybe it has no meaning to tell you what kind of animal you would be, because we don't share that culture. But I want to share it with you anyways. Maybe it will help you understand me.

Nami, if you would be an animal you would be a goat. If you would be a fruit you would be a yellow plum. And if you would be a tree you would be a lork.

Part 2, Two thoughts

I wish there was a door in between everything. That way you could always see what you have been going through. You would have an explanation for everything. Instead of wondering how you got from one place to another you could just point to the doors. "That is what happened", you would say. And however the door might look, what was before and after the door stays what it is.

You might think that what is behind the door looks like the door. Which is usually the case: A fancy house has a fancy door, a crappy house a crappy door etc. But of course there are also ugly doors that lead to beautiful places and vice versa.

It might be that you stand in front of an ugly door and you try the handle once because you are curious. But then it won't open because it is locked. You might just leave it, because it's an ugly door in which case it probably also leads to an ugly place. But

suppose there was a window— you might have seen that behind the door is the place you would rather be. Then you would do every single thing to get through that ugly, stuck, locked door.

So wouldn't it be nice if next to every door there was a window. One you can look through before you decide to enter the door. That way you would always know what you are choosing. Before even touching the door handle, you quickly take a peek through the window and ask yourself: "Is this really a place I want to enter? Is this door really worth going through?".

Nami, I can't find the doors we went through. It's hard to say what really happened that made us so familiar with each other. When and how did our little habits occur? Why am I feeling so much care for you? Where did my fear for you go? I don't know how all of this happened and I can not see what will happen, but I am happy we have found common space.

You describe something I can't see (or sense in any other way). I have to guess what it is.

Either I am familiar with the thing you are describing or not. If the thing would be a specific object, person or other physical appearance I could be familiar with the exact thing. Like when you would describe the plush mouse toy with the red nose you used to play with.

We might have perceived the mouse differently though. Maybe you would have described the mouse as big and I would say it's small. Maybe you would have called it old and I would have said it was in good condition. Still, I believe if we live in the same physical world, share the same language and live in similar functioning bodies, probably —if your description is elaborate enough— I will think about the exact same mouse toy as you are. I might say “Aaah, this is the object you are talking

about!” “How can you say it's old! You got it just a month ago.” And then you would say “No it is old, there are stains on it and it's damaged.”

If then the mouse toy was brought into our space we could both confirm we were thinking and talking about the same mouse toy.

If I wouldn't have been familiar with the mouse toy, I could still have an idea of what it looks like. Even if I would have never seen a mouse toy, as long as I am familiar with mice and toys, I would be able to imagine something that could be very much like an existing mouse toy.

In the case that you actually would be describing mouse toys in general, the game would hardly be playable. For without any added rules, the phrase itself “mouse toy” would become the description and the answer.

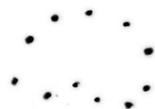
Could I guess a “real” thing that I am not

familiar with and you are describing to me, if it isn't an object? What happens if the thing is a thought, dream, emotion or event? In that case you have to ask when something immaterial is familiar to both parties or not. How would that work in case of an emotion for example?

*to be described:*



*your description:*



*my library:*



*these are similar:*



*in what case (space/color)  
are they the same?*

## Part 3, Your retreat

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I came back home in the evening after a day and night away. You were nowhere to be found. When I went into the bathroom to pee it smelled. You had pooped in the shower. You used to have a litter box, but I put it away because you never used it. I'll take it out again, I thought.

In the kitchen I saw you didn't finish all the food I had left for you the morning before. That was weird, because you always finish it. Maybe one of the neighbours gave you something to eat. I took the jar with cat food and went outside. I shook it and called your name. After some time when there still wasn't any sign of you, I went back inside. I refreshed the water in your bowl and put a new bowl of cat food next to it. I went to sleep without seeing you that night.

The next morning you were still nowhere to be found. I had never missed you for so long. Most of the time when I get home you would either just be lying around the house somewhere or appear out of the bushes running to the front door. This couldn't be good. I called at one of the neighbours' door to ask if they had seen you anywhere. They hadn't. I rang some more doors, but nobody had seen you. Desperate to find you, I walked around the neighbourhood the rest of the

day. When I got home the cat food had been eaten. I immediately started to search all over the house but there was no other sign of you other than some poo in the litter box that I had installed for you the day before. Did I just miss you? Were you just at home, while I was searching for you outside the whole day? Were you really chilling or are you avoiding me?

The next few days I didn't see you. But whenever I came back home there were some signs of you. Sometimes your food bowl was empty when I got home, or I found some poo in your cat litter. One time even the little plant you always walk on to get to your spot in the windowsill had fallen on the ground. Maybe I have really gotten on your nerves somehow. Or did you find another person you like better?

...

I thought of playing some Viva Pinata today. At least I can be sure they will be there when I open the game. But after a moment I closed it again. I couldn't commit myself to my pinatas. I remember I told you I found it pleasant that it is clear I don't understand you. But right now I don't feel that anymore. I want to be able to hope for a reply to my questions.

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Since you are not seeing me anymore, I frequently make rounds around the neighbourhood. Sometimes I try to hide myself behind the bushes opposed to our door to see if I can spot you around the house. I am hoping to bump into you somewhere, but instead of you I am now seeing tons of other cats on my daily rounds. One I call Big Red. He is always laying in front of the parking machine.

Because I don't necessarily feel invited to make contact with any cat I randomly see in the streets, I would first just walk around him, taking my distance. But once some person had to pay for parking their car when Big Red was laying in front of the parking machine. When this person approached the parking machine it didn't look like Big Red had any intention of getting up. But when there was only a meter or so left between them, he slowly got up and walked in my direction. I looked at him as he passed by me. Then he stopped and turned around and walked back gently touching my leg with his tail. It is the first tail that touched me since you left.

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My world became about signs of you. Whenever I leave the house, I try to remember how I left it. I'll leave trails of cat treats around the house, change the order of plants and prepare some soft spots with sweaters and blankets for you to chill at. I get very excited when I get back home. Did you eat the whole trail I left for you? Did you use the cat litter? Did you like the new bed of blankets I prepared for you?

I've been vacuuming the house a lot. That way I can spot the cat hairs you leave each time and track where you have been laying. Somehow, I now better see what spots you like best than before you were not seeing me. Currently I would guess your favourite spot is on the printer under the table. It's quite a hidden spot. I wouldn't be able to see you there through any of the windows.

I want to tell you that I decided to take even further methods. I am planning on hiding on top of the building opposed to our garden which has a flat roof. I have seen people walking on it before. There must be a staircase leading to the roof inside of the building. It is the perfect spot to keep track of your cat door. If I can watch it for a whole day I must be able to spot you going inside.

Somewhere it feels like my eagerness for you is what made this happen, my eagerness and my disbelief. You are a part of the same world everyone and everything is living in. We are not in our own fenced reality. Maybe if I wouldn't have cared so much for your physical disappearance, I would have been able to see you. I would just look down some time and notice you are sitting on my lap.

...

Something wet and rough is touching the knuckle of my hand. I open my eyes. I recognise Big Red in the faint night light. I am laying on the flat roof. I had planned to spy on the cat door, but I had fallen asleep apparently. I'm trying to stand up, but I don't. I look at Big Red. He is lying in front of me. After a moment he stands up and I feel his paws walking over my back. He lays down again on my lower back.

He is much heavier than you. I press my hands to the ground, move my shoulders to the back and imagine a thread is pulling me backward from my tailbone. My tail is growing. I let my shoulders move to the front again. My chin moves inward, the middle of my back upward. I am rounding into a domelike shape. Slowly the weight of Big Red is disappearing or maybe it's rather that his weight is becoming a part of me. I let myself glide

down the roof and land in the garden of my house. I look around to see if anyone is in sight. I approach the backdoor. It seems that my size has changed. My head is at the height of the cat door. I try to look through the cat door but it is really dirty. I should have cleaned it before. I know the door won't open because it only unlocks when it senses your chip. I try anyway. It doesn't budge.

I go around the building block to check the front of the house. I have to jump on the seat of my bike that is parked against the window to be able to look inside. It is exactly the spot you always used to sit at while watching me. Back then I was inside and you were outside, but now I've locked myself out and I don't even know if you are home.

The curtains are almost closed, but I can peek through the split that is left open. I see something glittering. Are those your eyes? I want to go inside, but even if you wanted you couldn't let me in.

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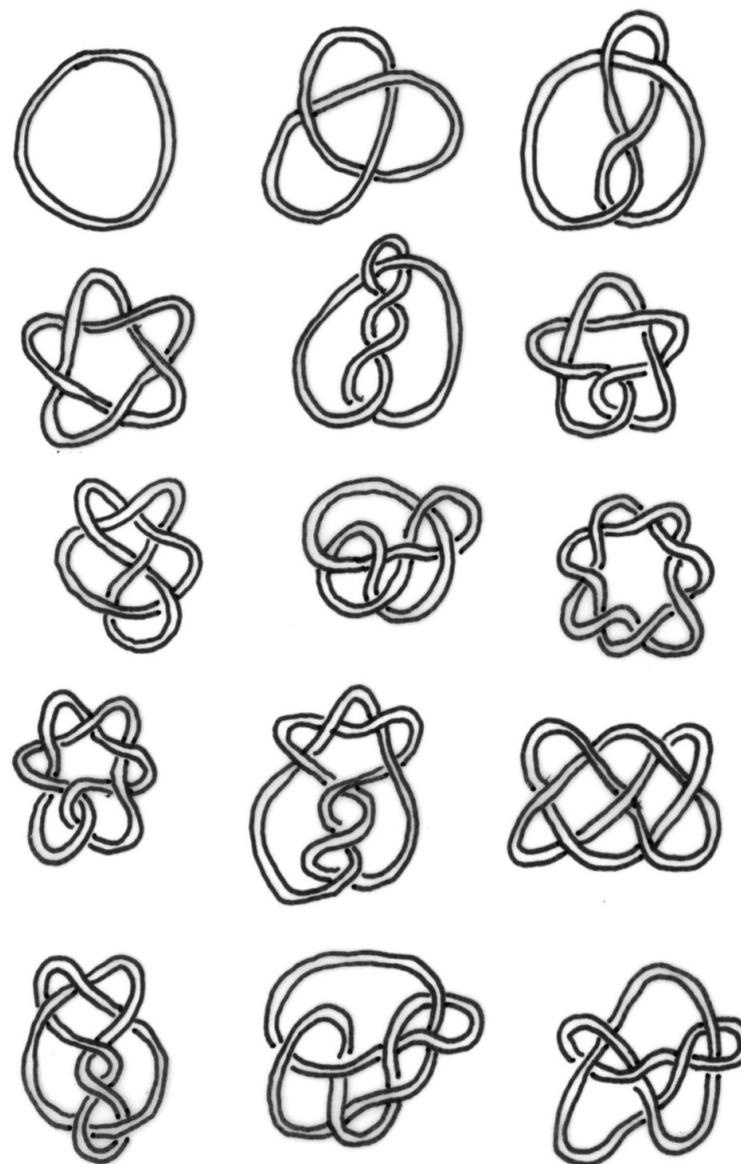
I wake up. Big Red is licking my knuckles. I'm lying on the flat roof again. This time I left the back door slightly opened so I'll be able to get inside. Big Red crawls on my back. We turn into the dome-like shape and glide down into the garden. I look around and slide through the backdoor that I left open. I'm in the kitchen but

there is no sign of you. In the bedroom I climb the closet to see if you are inside the basket that's on top of it. I crawl under the bed, but nothing is there apart from some lost socks. In the living room I see you have thrown the pencil on the ground I had carefully placed for you on the side of the table. It doesn't satisfy me this time. You are nowhere to be found.

Back in the kitchen I walk to the cat litter. There is gravel in front of it so you must have used it. I push the lid with my head and go inside. Carefully I watch where I put my feet, so as not to step on any of your poo. Most of the gravel has been pushed to the back of the litter. As I move around, a bit of the gravel falls from the hill you created. Slowly a small moving spiral occurs. It seems like the gravel is getting dragged down. Before I know it, the spiral gets bigger and starts pulling me in. The gravel is surrounding me. I try to move myself through the gravel somehow. As I move forward the pressure diminishes. I'm in some kind of tunnel. It's dark. I walk on, away from the gravel. It seems to get somewhat lighter as I progress. I feel weight leaving my body. I'm growing bigger, back to my original form. My tail shrinks back into me and I feel my fingers extending to their familiar length. When I look over my shoulder I see Big Red is walking behind me.

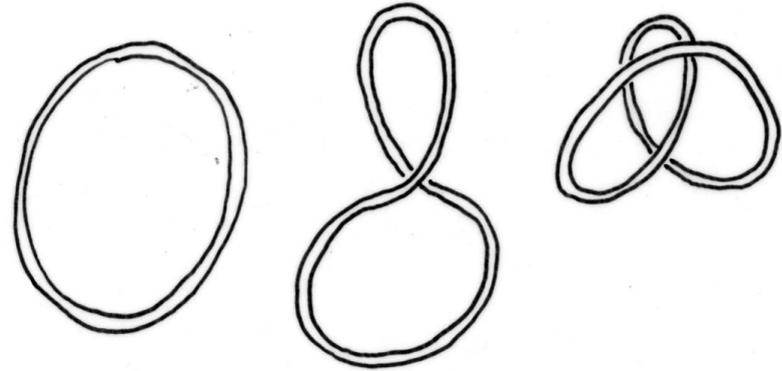
The tunnel expands until I can't see it's walls anymore. There appear to be figures in the distance. They take shape in a growing light as we approach them.

We arrive at the space of prime knots.

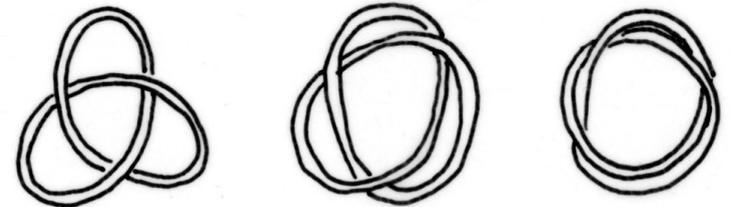


The unknot takes the word: "Thank you for joining us. I am unknot. And these are the fourteen other prime knots that are present. We can not be unknot nor are we breakable. We can take other shapes and move in ways to look like each other, but we can never be the exact other nor can the other be exactly like us. The unknot and the second prim knot start to transform.

The unknot:



The second prim knot (three crossings):



“Don’t we look like the other just did?”, unknot asks. “But I have to say. This is not what we are about. We are still ourselves and not like each other at all! What makes us not “the other” is not what we look like or how big or small we are. What makes us not “the other” is the fundamental way in which we are tangled. We can take many forms and shapes, but there are no steps to take for any of us to transform into the exact other. Or at least, not in the space we exist in. In the fourth dimension all that would be is the unknot. And thus we are happy to be in this space.

Because we can never be the other, we are never afraid to be touched, to be altered, to be interacted with. We all become as complicated as you want us to be. Cat’s cradle<sup>1</sup> is one of the many games played with us.”

I reach out to one of the knots with five crossings. I distribute the crossings evenly over all my fingers. I start forming a pattern with the string. I try to keep the shape symmetrical by moving loops evenly on both of my hands. When I have been busy for some time focusing on the complex figure between my fingers, I let a big part of the string slide off my thumbs. A paw reaches for it. When I look down, I see you are sitting on my lap. Your paw is stuck in the string. I let the whole string figure slide off my fingers and you start

to play with the knot. I join you by moving it, which makes you jump on the knot in excitement.

I notice I can’t recognise any of the knots anymore. What is left is one big tangled mess of string on the floor. Big Red is at the midst of it. The three of us keep playing. When I look at the tangled string, I realize it still exists of those fifteen knots that appeared when we arrived at the space of primeknots. I don’t know if what we are doing would be called Cat’s Cradle, but to us it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Cat’s cradle is a game of string figures. By creating loops that go under and through each other you can create new shapes and patterns. It is often played with two persons picking up the strings from each other’s hands in a way that it changes the shape of the string.

"Cat's cradle", "manger cradle", "cratch cradle"  
are all synonyms for the same game.  
Manger, cradle and cratch have very similar  
properties and functions.  
So what is the cat doing in this row?

Can the cat	contain
	carry
	imbed

Can you	mix	in the cat
	eat	from the cat
	sleep	in the cat

The cat is a bed for lice and a dish for my thoughts.

This writing piece might not touch on much of what's between us. If you could have written me back, I'm sure it would have made a lot more sense. I thought about writing in your name. Or letting the cats that already have voices in literature speak for you. But I didn't want to fill you in with human thoughts and I didn't want you, as an existing cat, to become fiction. Although I did use you to carry my thoughts and fiction.

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## Zwaantje Kurpershoek Between me and Nami, who is cat

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