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Indigo Was Our Class Pet: An Exploration of Death in Children's Literature

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Indigo Was Our Class Pet:

An Exploration of Death in Children's Literature

By

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Abstract
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Indigo Was Our Class Pet: An Exploration of Death in Children's Literature

Death is a complicated and emotionally weighty subject. Therefore, discussing it can be taboo in early childhood classrooms. Although this is meant to protect children, the lack of discussion limits their mental and emotional processing of bereavement and ultimately undermines their understanding of death. After teaching in a Pre-K classroom with a terminally ill reptile, the author was inspired to write a children's book about the death of a class pet.

The text reviews typical developmental milestones for five-year-olds, the target age of the book. Fives are at an age where their frameworks for understanding the world are shifting; therefore, this is an appropriate age to discuss death directly.

In the following section, the author researched the field of children's literature for picture books that address death. Such books have the important job of guiding children and adults through these difficult, but necessary, conversations. The paper concludes that the author's book would be a worthy addition to this collection of literature, as no books that specifically address the death of a class pet were found.

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Rationale

In the fall of 2014, I went to Petco to buy a leopard gecko to be our Pre-K class pet. My head teacher vetoed rodents of any kind, and leopard geckos were small and ideally-suited to first-time reptile owners. We hoped that a pet would teach our students empathy and responsibility. I was especially passionate about having a pet in the classroom, as I believe that structured interactions with animals could have a profound effect on the emotional development of children. My enthusiasm for - and my head teacher's aversion to - animals made the gecko my responsibility. The students voted on her appellation, and she became a classroom institution.

For a year and a half, the children in my Pre-K classroom doted on the (democratically named) Miss Indigo Stripes. The most coveted job in the classroom was the Animal Caretaker, who got to help the teacher with feeding her. Students liked to come over and watch Indigo during snack and choice time, even though she was usually only sleeping. They practiced speaking quietly and moving slowly so they did not scare her. I handled Indigo daily so that she became very tame and relaxed. The children practiced using gentle hands so that they could pet and hold her, too. In science class, I taught the students about Indigo's natural habitat and why it was important that her tank have hiding places and proper heating. We used magnifying glasses to look closely at her scales and marveled that we could see clear through one ear hole through the other side of her head. Other students in the building would sometimes poke their heads in our door and ask to visit Indigo. Teachers in other rooms would sometimes bring in small groups of their students to have an "Indigo playdate." One teacher even included Indigo in a student's behavior plan; a weekly visit with Indigo was his incentive for good behavior. In a relatively short amount of time, Indigo had become a fixture within the school community.

One morning in the winter of 2015, while helping a student release a cricket into the gecko tank, I noticed one of Indigo's front legs was bowed at an odd angle. "I don't think her leg is supposed to bend that way," I said to myself, attempting to mimic the pose with my arm.

"You can take her to the doctor," suggested the little girl next to me. "You take care of the people in your family." I worried about asking my division head for the money to take a tiny lizard to the vet, but my student was right, of course. It was, as Indigo's caretakers, our responsibility to look after her health.

I bundled the gecko into a taxi and brought her to a veterinary clinic that specializes in exotic pets. X-rays confirmed that Indigo had suffered multiple sympathetic fractures due to metabolic bone disease. The veterinarian and I went over Indigo's diet and habitat, but were unable to pinpoint what could be causing the issue. Indigo was eating the right kind of crickets dusted with the right kind of calcium powder. Her tank had the proper heating gradient and light bulbs, the latter of which were on an automatic timer to ensure a consistent day/night cycle. The vet posited that it could be congenital, but she had no real way of knowing. In lieu of a direct fix, I was sent home with a specially formulated high-protein food and liquid calcium supplement.

I grappled with what and how much to tell the students. They had seen that there was something visibly wrong with Indigo and they knew that I was taking her to the vet, so I had to say something. I refused to lie to them - they deserved to know what was happening - but I also didn't want to upset them. I also didn't want to give them false hope. What do you tell children when a closely-watched member of their community has a chronic illness?

The next morning, I told the students what the vet had told me, albeit in simpler terms. I gave them the bad news first, that the vet said Indigo had broken a few bones. Indigo's bones

were weak because she was sick. We weren't sure why she was sick, but we did know she couldn't spread it to humans. We couldn't fix her, couldn't undo the damage already caused, but we could feed her special food to make her bones stronger. Then, hopefully, time would help her heal, and her body wouldn't get broken again. I wasn't sure how much the students understood, but at least no one seemed traumatized. Mostly, they just seemed keen to finish morning meeting and play in the gym.

My worry that the students did not understand or care about Indigo's illness was soon alleviated. Because of her special diet, Indigo now required daily feedings with an eyedropper. I often found myself sitting in the block area, surrounded by students as I did this. Some offered to help feed her, and others simply liked to watch the process. In the following weeks, the children continued to rally around Indigo. Several times a day, students dutifully came to check on Indigo in her tank just to make sure she was doing okay. Students built toy figures for her out of manipulatives and structures out of blocks. These creations were always tailored to Indigo's "needs" in some way made things for her. For example, one group of children spent an entire free play period making geckos out of Zoobs so that Indigo would have playmates. The budding architects of the class built pet stores, hospitals, and gecko-sized apartments. Children who preferred the art table wrote "get well soon" cards or drew her pictures of crickets (her favorite food). I overheard one student proudly proclaimed to another, "Our class is like a family, right? And we're all brothers and sisters. Indigo is really little, so she's our little sister!"

I was honestly a little surprised that the class became so invested in the health of a tiny lizard. Being a gecko, Indigo did not express pain or affection in a way that would be easily recognizable to young children. Even more challenging, geckos are neither fluffy nor cuddly, and

might not be considered cute in the traditional sense.¹ Emotionally connecting with such an animal, I had thought, would be difficult. And yet, my Pre-K students were able to make the leap and empathize with Indigo.

I was deeply moved by the students' outpouring of love and their eagerness to take on caretaking roles. This kind of socioemotional development was the reason I had wanted a class pet to begin with, but I could not have imagined this result. We had taken a sad road in building our classroom community, but I was proud to see my students act with such compassion. I wanted to share their actions with others.

A few months later, I arrived in the classroom on Monday morning to see Indigo struggling to walk, dragging her limp back legs behind her. I immediately took Indigo back to the vet, fearing the worst. The vet concluded that Indigo had probably suffered a spinal fracture over the weekend, paralyzing her from the waist down. (The vet added that Indigo's special diet had appeared to be helping, and pointed out that she had gained weight and even straightened her front leg. How unfortunate for such a severe fracture to happen now.) Indigo was officially on deathwatch; if she did not regain movement in her back legs by Friday, we planned to euthanize her.

Indigo died in the night two days later.

The following morning, I discovered her body in the cave where she slept. Not wanting the students to see, I put her body in a box and put the box in our mini refrigerator. The Division Head came to morning meeting to break the news to the students. They looked as upset about the news as I felt. I admit that, as her primary caretaker for the past months, I had become deeply

¹ They are *very* cute.

attached to Indigo; it was a struggle not to cry in front of the children. Though the students wore worried and sad expressions, there were no tears. I think we had all been preparing for her death, in a way. The meeting ended abruptly, and I led the students down the hall to the gym.

During the gym period, students kept coming up to me to ask about Indigo. What had happened? Why did she die? What did she look like? Was her body in pieces? I called over another teacher to cover for me and headed back to the classroom. I took the box out of the refrigerator and lined it with teal tissue paper, then positioned Indigo's body inside it to look like she was sleeping.

When the children returned from the gym, I had everybody sit on the rug in the meeting area. I told them that this could be their time to ask all their questions and share their feelings about Indigo. We talked about what death meant. We talked about other people and animals we knew who had died. We hit a lull in the conversation, so I told the students about our next activity. We would be drawing our favorite memory of Indigo, and I had some printed photos of her to use for art references. One boy asked if we still had Indigo's body. It was then that I offered Indigo, curled in her box, as an option for a reference. I told the children that I understood seeing her body could be sad or scary, so they didn't have to look if they didn't want to. My head teacher and I then set up tables and clipboards so the children could work on their drawings.

Only a handful of children drew their memorial pictures from Indigo's body, but by the end of the work period, all the children had come to the table to see her. Some even asked if they could pet her, only to be surprised that she felt exactly the same as when she was alive. At the

end of the school day, the class decorated Indigo's tank with their pictures. The little memorial stayed up until the end of the year.

I initially started to write for this project as a means of processing Indigo's illness and subsequent death myself. In the classroom, I took photographs and contemporaneous notes as events unfolded. I was determined that this experience, however sad, be meaningful. It was cathartic to share "the gecko saga" with friends and family as Indigo's health was failing. I searched for mentor texts about death and loss, but I couldn't find any about the death of a pet in a school setting - despite the fact that many early childhood classrooms have pets. Perhaps the message here is that the subject of death, as one of life's big questions, is best left to family. Death is often considered a taboo subject, especially with young children; it is uncomfortable to remind others of their own mortality. I believe, however, that "avoiding any discussions of tragedy, loss, and death only serves to isolate and repress the emotions, thoughts, and understandings of children" (Maguth, Boit, Muenz, & Smith, 2015).

My classmates at Bank Street gave me helpful feedback as I guided my class along the trajectory of Indigo's illness, offering suggestions and moral support. I continued to take notes, documenting what language I wanted to use with the children. I also started sketching geckos in the margins of my notebooks. Talking to my friends and colleagues, I realized that "the gecko saga" would be a valuable classroom resource. Illness and death are difficult subjects, and many teachers must struggle when it becomes an unavoidable presence in the classroom.

"You should really turn this into a picture book," a friend said.

And here we are.

Child Development

Introduction

The target audience for my book is four to seven-year-olds. Because five is in the middle of this range - and because I teach kindergarten - I will focus my analysis on this age. At five years old, children experience a period of “changing cognitive patterns as [they] move from pre-operational learning, bound by the senses, to new and more complex, yet still concrete, thinking patterns” (Wood, 2007, p. 61). They appear to be on the cusp of middle childhood, the very beginning of a time in which children are “increasingly able to think more deeply and logically” and therefore “become responsible for behaving themselves” (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 383). At this point in their lives, many children have encountered death, or at least the vacuum that death leaves behind. Some children have personally experienced bereavement, having lost grandparents, other family members, or pets. Five is an age of shifting frameworks and identities, and is therefore an interesting time to reassess the meaning of death.

In this section, I will be examining how these developmental milestones influenced the content and presentation of my book. Because the story is based on true events in my classroom, the characters and setting were predetermined. Luckily for me, five-year olds are often interested in the subjects of “pets” and “our school,” and my story handily combines the two (Wood, 2007, p. 71). This project challenged me to write about death in a way that was accessible and comprehensible to young children. “Most children like animals,” so a story about the death of an animal “would be an appropriate approach to this difficult subject” (Maguth et. al., 2015). Since death is often considered a taboo subject in the early childhood classroom, I wanted to make sure my approach to the topic was palatable to parents and teachers, as well.

Physical Development

Fives are active and energetic beings, and need lots physical activity throughout the day. They have better control of their gross motor skills, such as running and jumping, but their fine motor skills are still somewhat awkward. Their physicality influences their perception and understanding of the world; they use “fingers and toes, eyes, ears, and nose to find out what they want to know and to act upon the knowledge they have” (Cohen, 1972, p. 59). As a result, five-year-olds “learn best through active play and hands-on activities” (Wood, 2007, p. 63).

Death itself is intangible and is therefore a difficult concept for five-year-olds to grasp. Fives are grounded in the physical world and their understanding relies on sensory input. I decided to appeal to children’s trust in visual information to answer the question, “what does death look like?” I characterized death as a lack of physical ability and negation of sensory input. Hopefully children will be able to relate the way they interact with the world with the way Indigo no longer can.

Cognitive Development

In early childhood, the brain continues to develop through myelination (especially in the frontal cortex) and the branching growth of neurons. It is during this period that children exhibit preoperational thinking, in which they “are unable to decenter their thinking or to think through the consequences of an action” (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 275). As a result, young children “think intuitively, rather than logically” (Wood, 2007, p. 63). Five-year-olds best learn through direct

experience, as their “thinking process remains heavily dependant on the sensory base” (Cohen, 1972, p. 68).

Five-year-olds have strong imaginations and therefore subscribe to magical thinking, in which they “may confuse fantasy and reality” (Maguth et. al., 2015). This is commonly seen when children “ascribe life and movement to inanimate objects such as stuffed animals” (Wood, 2007, p. 62). With regard to death, fives “often fail to immediately understand the profoundness or permanence of the situation” (Maguth et. al., 2015). This is evident in their fantastic belief that death is only temporary or reversible. In order to address the misconceptions derived from magical thinking, I wrote in the book that “[Indigo’s] body doesn’t work and it won’t work again.”

Social-Emotional Development

The kindergarten classroom is the site of “immense social interest,” a perfect environment for five-year-olds to test their new, if unpolished, social skills (Wood, 2007, p. 58). The “development of empathy in early childhood may correspond to [children’s] decreasing egocentrism,” though they still have trouble seeing things from another’s viewpoint (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 337). Increased empathy drives five-year-olds to engage in prosocial behavior, “[seeking] attachment and approval from their caretakers and peers” (Wood, 2007, p. 62). As they explore these relationships, they develop their identity as a member of their social group and are “increasingly able to understand others’ mental states and to be aware that individuals have a responsibility for regulating social relations” (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 337).

I decided to write my book in the first person, from the perspective of an unnamed child in the class. The collective “we” of the narrator allows the reader to adopt the viewpoint and emotional state of the characters, who are members of an early childhood classroom. Though Indigo is the main focus of the story, the students are the emotional conduit for the tale. The classroom setting and collective classroom identity mirrors the reader’s developing sense of their place in their own community.

Language

I wanted to make sure that my book provided readers with emotional anchors throughout the text, especially if they found the subject matter daunting. At the beginning and end of the story, there is the recurring sentence, “Because we loved her.” Repetition serves to draw the reader’s attention to a certain theme, in this case, the love and care of the classroom community. Even in sadness, the students felt safe; I hope this bittersweet feeling is imparted to readers, as well. I also used repetitive sentence structure to highlight the significance of the conversation between the students and their teacher, in which the teacher straightforwardly answers questions about death. The rhythm of the dialogue makes the content memorable and appeals to children’s “natural enjoyment of language” (Giorgis & Glazer, 2013, p. 126).

Five-year-olds are “literal, using and interpreting words in their usual or most basic sense” (Wood, 2007, p. 63). Figurative language is usually lost on them, “even though they may use metaphors that seem very inventive themselves” (Giorgis & Glazer, 2013, p. 133). Despite this, children’s books about death and loss often use metaphorical language, such as “passed away” or “put down.” I assume the intent is to soften the image of death into something less

ominous and sad, but these euphemisms only serve to confuse the child. When grandma passed away, where did she go? Can I visit her? Did they put the dog down on the floor? Why can't I play with him anymore?

I decided to use more blunt language when discussing Indigo's death in the book. I wanted to frame my classroom's experience in concrete, scientific terms: what happens to the body when something is dead. Though this phrasing may seem overly harsh to adults, it is more appropriate for children than the flowery alternative. The direct delivery of information allows children to make "death" a meaningful word.

Literature Review

I began my search for relevant literature using the two books my parents read to me when I first encountered death in my childhood. When I was six years old, I came home after school and found my pet hamster Daisy unmoving in her tank. I was devastated. The following day, my mother brought home her classroom's copy of *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* and read it to me at bedtime. That weekend, my parents and I buried Daisy in our neighbor's big planter on the roof, which my family now refers to as the "pet cemetery." Reading and rereading *Barney* seemed to be a comfort to me. Just as Barney was put into the ground, my hamster, too, would help the flowers grow.

Later in the school year, my parents woke me up early to tell me that my uncle had just called and that grandpa was dead. My parents quickly arranged travel plans to fly to Texas, where he had lived. I have faint memories of attending a military-style funeral, the strongest of which being the rows of white crosses rising from the earth and the unexpected gunshots of the

three-volley salute. Much clearer in my memory are the happy weeks I spent with my extended family before and after that funeral. As the adults divided up grandpa's belongings and cleaned out the house, my cousins and I were free to play in the backyard and enjoy the warm spring air.

(While helping sweep up the garage, I found the desiccated skeleton of a lizard curled up inside of a light socket. I kept the delicate white bones in a plastic playing card case and brought them back to New York with me.)

After we returned to the city, a family friend gifted me a copy of *Badger's Parting Gifts*, which soon joined *Barney* in my bedtime reading rotation. I loved animals, so the anthropomorphic characters instantly appealed to me. On a more personal level, the contemplative gatherings of woodland creatures reminded me of those bittersweet weeks I spent with my family in Texas. To this day, whenever somebody uses a euphemism for death, my brain supplies the imagery of Badger going down the Long Tunnel. I don't know why that particular metaphor made such an impression, but it has stayed with me.

These two books greatly influenced my understanding of death as a child. I wondered what stories there now existed for children who had experienced loss. It had been my initial plan to group books by author tone and viewpoint, but the amount of overlap across categories made such sorting impossible. Many of the books I gathered featured animal characters, either as pets or as stand-ins for humans. As a result, I divided my book list into two categories based on whether the characters in the story were humans or animals. These categories were further divided under fiction and non-fiction subheadings.

There were some commonalities among my collection of books. Each book, whether religious or secular, instructive or purely empathetic, referenced death as a part of life and a part

of nature. Another shared feature was the length of the books. Most were the average picture book's thirty-two pages, with the exceptions of *Lifetimes* (due to large print and full-page illustrations) and *I Want A Leopard Gecko* (a chapter book for older elementary students.)

Apart from the subject of death, my book also features a leopard gecko, an animal that is sorely overlooked in children's literature; therefore, I included a (very brief) section of gecko-related books.

Annotated Bibliography

Animals - Leopard Geckos

Fiction

Sterling-Malek, J. & Friend, J. (2013). *Lily the Leopard Gecko*.

Self-published. Printed by CreateSpace, Charleston, 2013.

A boy brings his class pet, Lily, home for summer vacation. Using a conversational voice, he tells the reader some basic information about leopard geckos and what his responsibilities are as Lily's caretaker. He will have to clean her tank and feed her - and even deal with the occasional cricket jailbreak! The cartoonish ink and watercolor illustrations imbue the naturally inexpressive reptile protagonist with personality and humor.

In addition to being a lighthearted introduction to leopard gecko ownership, *Lily the Leopard Gecko* has the distinction of being the only fictional picture book featuring a leopard gecko as the main character. For the family boarding the class pet over vacation, this book could be used to help prepare their child for the responsibility of caring for a small animal.

Non-fiction

Pulsifer, J. & Johnson, J. E. (2016). *I Want A Leopard Gecko: Best Pets For Kids Book 1*.

Nova Scotia, Canada: Crimson Hill Books.

This book provides prospective leopard gecko owners with plenty of information, from favorite foods to training tips - and, of course, how to set about the difficult task of preparing a tank for a reptile. Written in a conversational style, the book teaches responsible pet care to support healthy, happy pet-family relationships. True to its title, *I Want A Leopard Gecko* is a solid manifesto for any child who wants to convince his parents to get one of these cute fat-tailed lizards.

Though the language used is more appropriate for pre-teens, the large color photographs appeal to younger children. The photos vividly capture the charm of these small reptiles, instantly endearing them to the reader. Though younger readers will probably find the abundance of text in this early chapter book to be intimidating, the inclusion of photo captions and phonetic pronunciations of key words allow the book to support their developing skills.

Death (Animals & Nature)

Fiction

Brown, M. W. & Robinson, C. (2016). *The Dead Bird*.

New York, NY: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1938)

One day in Central Park, a small group of children finds a dead bird. Its eyes are closed and its heart isn't beating. The children feel sorry about the bird being dead, so they decide to give it a funeral so that they may say goodbye. Every day they come to visit the bird, to sing and lay flowers on its grave, until they forget about it.

The direct language of the book speaks to children's natural curiosity about death. Many parents forbid their child from seeing a dead body, much less picking it up to inspect it. Without this hands-on experience, children may wonder, "What is 'dead'? What does death look like?" Caldecott Honor-winning Christian Robinson's digital watercolor illustrations enhance this re-issue of Brown's classic story by giving it a poignant, cinematic scope, depicting the diverse community of the bustling metropolis that surrounds the intimate focus of the book.

Buscaglia, L. (1982). *The Fall of Freddie The Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages*.

Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Incorporated.

The seasons are changing, and Freddie and his fellow leaves are changing along with them. The story follows Freddie, questioning his purpose, as he anticipates the coming cold of winter. Clarity comes after he falls from his branch during a snowstorm. Looking up from the ground, Freddie finally sees the beauty that is the whole tree, and he is proud to have been a part of it. At the close of the book, spring returns and new leaves unfurl on the branches.

The Fall of Freddie The Leaf uses the cyclical processes of nature to illustrate the delicate balance between life and death. Though Dr. Buscaglia presents a beautiful allegory in Freddie's journey, his writing style strikes a somewhat proselytizing tone. The book is predominantly text and is, therefore, best used as a read-aloud when shared with younger children. The photographs of leaves, while reflecting the current season and peaceful tone of the book, do not do much to deepen the reader's understanding.

Demas, C. & Hoyt, A. (2004). *Saying Goodbye to Lulu*.
New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

A young girl and her dog Lulu are the best of friends and they do everything together. Lulu was there when the girl was a baby, so she is now an old dog. Slowly, Lulu becomes unable to do the physical activities she once loved, and her body starts to fail. The girl's parents say they will get another dog after Lulu, but the girl insists that she doesn't want a new dog, she wants *her* dog to get better. After Lulu eventually dies, her parents plant a tree over where they buried her in the yard as a memorial. The seasons change, and the girl visits with a litter of week-old puppies. She knows her new dog will never replace Lulu, but she will love him just as much.

This story is told from the perspective of the girl, whose confusion, anger, and sadness over her dog's illness are instantly recognizable to children. The soft watercolor, colored pencil, and ink illustrations show the steady progression of Lulu's age and illness. The writing gives similar attention to how her bodily processes fail, one by one. These are essential details for a child who is curious about what it means to die. In an endnote, the author acknowledges that death is a difficult subject to talk about with children and hopes that her book will be used to start important conversations. This book is especially well-suited for children who with an ailing or recently deceased family member.

Varley, S. (1984). *Badger's Parting Gifts*.
New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Badger is so old that he knows he will soon die. He tries to prepare his friends for his journey down the Long Tunnel. After Badger's death, the woodland creatures mourn the loss of their friend and mentor. Remembering all the practical things Badger taught them, the animals come to term with his death and realize that Badger will live on in their memories.

Susan Varley's soft, sketchy ink and watercolor anthropomorphized animal characters help young children access a challenging topic. Though Varley does not shy away from using the word "die" and the actuality of death, her characters speak euphemistically of death. It seems that "going down the Long Tunnel" serves as a burrowing creature's version of "going toward the Light." The imagery of the Long Tunnel invokes both mystery and comfort, and imbues the concept of legacy with spirituality.

Viorst, J. & Blegvad, E. (1971). *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*.
New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

When a boy's pet cat Barney dies, his mother suggests that he make a list of ten good things about him. By the time of the funeral, the boy could only think of nine. Blegvad's sketchy monochromatic pen and ink illustrations follow the protagonist's first experience with loss. Unsure of what will become of his cat, the boy talks to his family about whether Barney will go

to Heaven or not. After a gardening session with his father, the boy comes to have a deeper understanding of death, the renewal of life, and Barney's place in it all.

This classic book provides contrasting views on whether or not there is an afterlife, and what happens to the body after death. The story ultimately concludes with the scientific viewpoint, that "things change in the ground," Barney included. This brings solace to the boy, happy that his beloved cat will help the flowers grow.

Wild, M. & Blackwood, F. (2011). *Harry & Hopper*.
New York, NY: Feiwel and Friends.

Harry and his dog Hopper are inseparable. When Hopper dies in a traffic accident, Harry struggles to accept his death, even refusing to say goodbye before the burial. Harry dreams about his dog as if he were still alive, warm and wriggling and solid in his arms. Looking forward to their next play session, Harry eagerly anticipates nighttime. With every passing night, the dream Hopper gets wispier, weaker, and colder. Harry is slowly learning to let go with love; Hopper fades away, but not before Harry can tell him goodbye.

Blackwood's smudged watercolor, gouache, and charcoal illustrations capture the energy-fueled activities of a boy and his dog. At first, the loose outlines in Hopper's wake show us his course of action. By the time Harry comes to term with his pet's death, these outlines have come to represent Hopper's ethereal form. When a loved one dies, we find ourselves surrounded by echoes of their lives - their belongings, their influence, their smell. *Harry & Hopper* gives shape to the endurance of memory and helps young children recognize that it is never too late to say goodbye.

Non-fiction

Mellonie, B., & Ingpen, R. (1983). *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*.
New York, NY: Bantam Books.

There is a beginning and an ending for everything. In between is living. Death comes to plants, to animals, and even to people. *Lifetimes* uses blunt prose to explain that death is as much a part of nature as is birth. By framing death as a natural occurrence, the book helps children appreciate the varied lifespans of the living things around them and, ultimately, how people fit into the circle of life.

While many children's books about death address grief, coping mechanisms, and ritual, *Lifetimes* is a book that focuses on the big picture. The language in the book is clear, accurate, and precise, delivering information to children in a direct and age-appropriate way. Opposite each page of text is a full-page watercolor painting, beautifully rendered with the detail of a scientific illustration.

Death (Humans)

Fiction

Clifton, L. & Grifalconi, A. (1983). *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*.
New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Everett has a hard time coming to terms with his Daddy's death, the cause of which is left ambiguous. Through poignant verse, the reader follows the protagonist's emotional turmoil as he adjusts to life without his father. Each of Clifton's poems represents one of the five stages of grief, breaking the book into five parts. Everett's fierce emotions are conveyed through his large soulful eyes, lovingly captured in soft and sketchy pencil drawings. Even if the reader is not able to fully understand the poetry, they still can know precisely how Everett feels.

All aspects of this book speak to Everett's deep sorrow. The spare verse, as well as the high contrast of the positive and negative space in the poignant illustrations, evoke a feeling of emptiness and loss. Moved by both words and images, children - especially those who have lost a parent or older family member - can identify with Everett's emotional journey. Because the arc of the story follows the five stages of grief, *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* can be a useful tool for children to identify and track the evolution of their feelings.

dePaola, T. (1973). *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*.
New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Every Sunday, four-year-old Tommy visits the home of his great-grandmother and grandmother, Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs. In DePaola's sweet signature colored pencil and watercolor pictures, the book explores Tommy's treasured memories of his two Nanans. One morning, Tommy wakes up to learn that Nana Upstairs died and won't be around anymore. That night, he looks out the window and sees a falling star, which his mother says is a kiss from Nana Upstairs. When Nana Downstairs dies, Tommy is a grown man, again looking out the window at a falling star. Watching its descent, he muses that now both women are "Nana Upstairs."

In *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*, dePaola shares his childhood memories of his two Nanans in gentle and loving prose. Many children can identify with the young Tommy and the close relationships he shares with his Nanans; therefore, this book could help children cope with the death of an elderly relative in their own family. More broadly, the book serves as a wonderful example of a loving multigenerational family.

Raschka, C. (2007). *The Purple Balloon*.
New York, NY: Schwartz & Wade Books.

Talking about dying is hard work. Dying is even harder. It's hardest of all when it is a young person dying. Community members, friends, and family can gather to help; "good help

makes dying less hard.” This disarmingly gentle and succinct book, intended for terminally ill children, is a useful tool for talking about death. The simple language and the sense of calm it evokes act as a starting point for richer conversations.

The people in this story are represented as boldly colored potato-print balloons on soft watercolor wood-print backgrounds. This depiction of people as balloons was inspired by an anecdote Raschka heard about terminally ill children who are asked to draw their emotions. Across cultures, children who are facing their mortality typically draw themselves as balloons, released and floating away into an endless sky. While most young readers may not understand this metaphor, they will be amused to the large print and the boldly colored balloons with their simplified evocative faces.

Reagan, J. & Pollema-Cahill, P. (2009). *Always My Brother*.
Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, Publishers.

Becky and her brother John are best buddies. They love to talk, be silly, and play soccer together, and John always tries to make Becky laugh. Abruptly, John dies, and the family is plunged into a world of somber wakes, grey skies, and empty silences. The laughter in Becky’s life disappears, as do the bright, happy colors in the pencil and watercolor illustrations. Becky struggles to come to terms with John’s death, but her mother reminds her that her brother would want her to laugh. After a year has passed, Becky returns to the soccer field, and it is this connection with her brother’s memory that Becky needs to move on.

Always My Brother chronicles the tragedy of losing a child - son, brother, friend - with honesty and grace. Though it is hard for children to understand the unimaginable pain of losing a sibling, the readers are presented with several relatable situations in which the protagonist feels at odds with her peers, her family, and even with herself. The book reminds children that the ones we love stay in our memories, through which we can bring them into the future with us.

Non-fiction

Brown, L. K. & Brown, M. (1998). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.
New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

The helpful Dino Life Guides for Families series returns with a frank discussion of death. The book begins with explaining why people die, including in its examples troubling causes like drug abuse and suicide. It continues by describing the feelings people may have about the death of a loved one and the ways to memorialize those we have lost. Employing plenty of speech bubbles and Marc Brown’s iconic art style (rendered in ink, colored pencil, and watercolor), *When Dinosaurs Die* puts a friendly face on a daunting conversation.

The simple language and charming anthropomorphized dinosaurs provide both the familiarity and the distance, respectively, to make a potentially overwhelming topic accessible. Children can identify with the many young dinosaurs who appear in the book. Readers who are

not yet able to understand the text can still glean relevant information from the detailed comic-like illustrations.

Thomas, P. & Harker, L. (2001). *I Miss You: A First Look At Death*.
Hauppauge, NY: Barron's.

I Miss You guides children through their first experience with mortality. The book follows an unnamed little girl through the mourning process, conversationally answering common questions children have along the way. Why do people die? What happens at a funeral? How long does it take to feel happy again? Every few pages, the book asks, "What about you?", prompting the reader to process their thoughts and feelings. With its direct language and bright watercolor and ink pictures, *I Miss You* appears as a friend to both children and their adults.

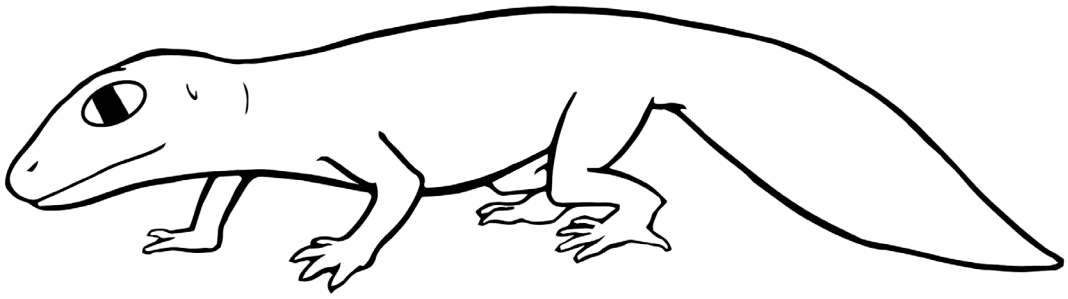
In addition to offering practical advice on what to expect when someone dies and how to identify one's own emotions, Thomas acknowledges the variety of religious and cultural beliefs about death. None of these beliefs is presented as fact, but the author uses the near-ubiquitous idea of the soul to tie the spiritual to the natural; a soul joins those who passed away before, just as a single raindrop joins the ocean.

Original Material: Book

Indigo Was Our Class Pet

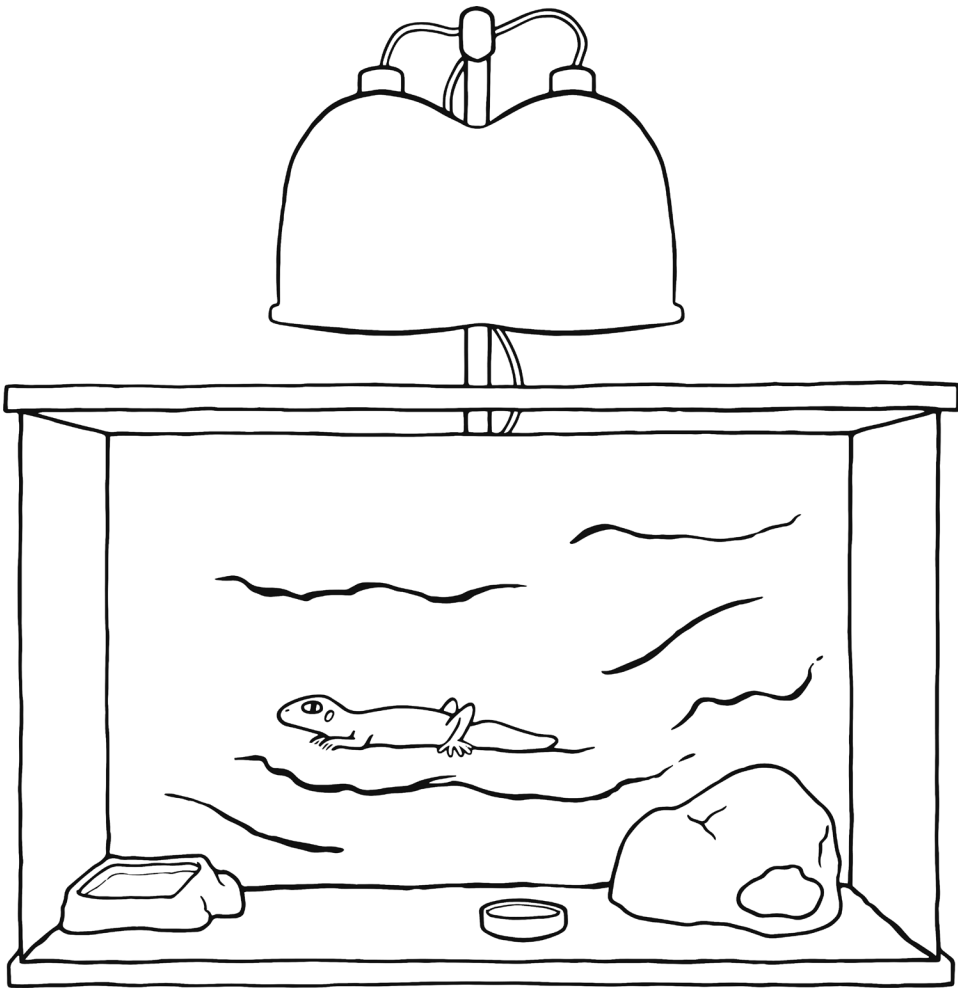


Written & Illustrated by
Nella Loree Williams



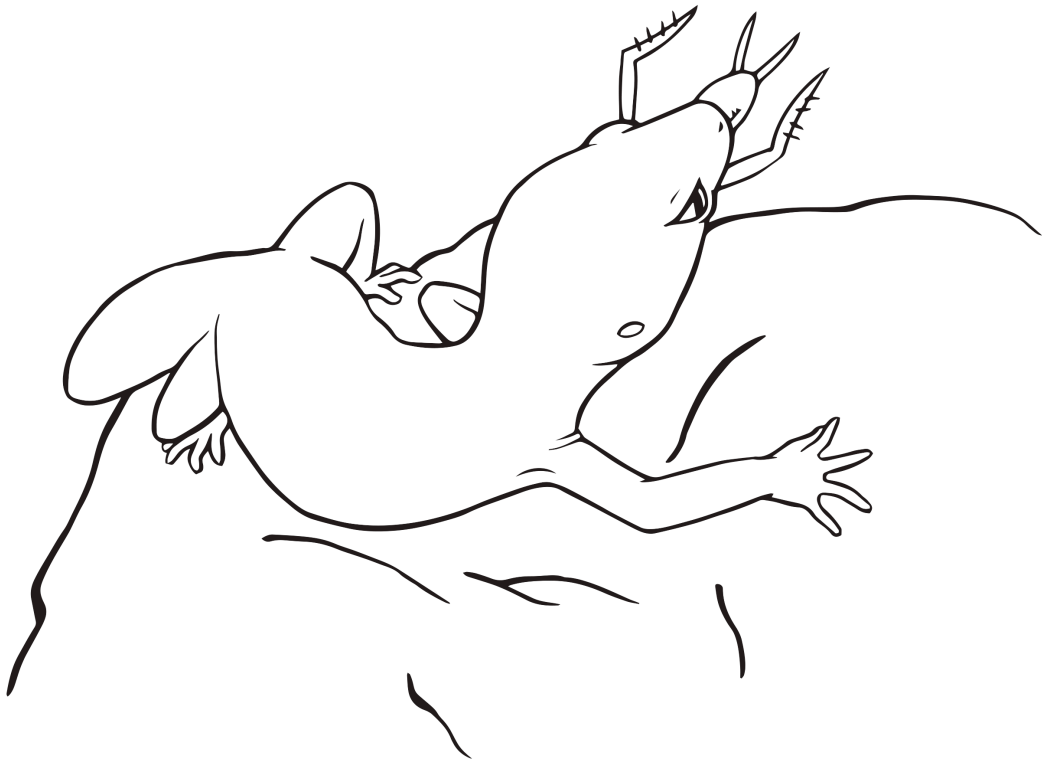
Indigo was a gecko.

She lived in a glass tank in our classroom.
Her tank was her home.

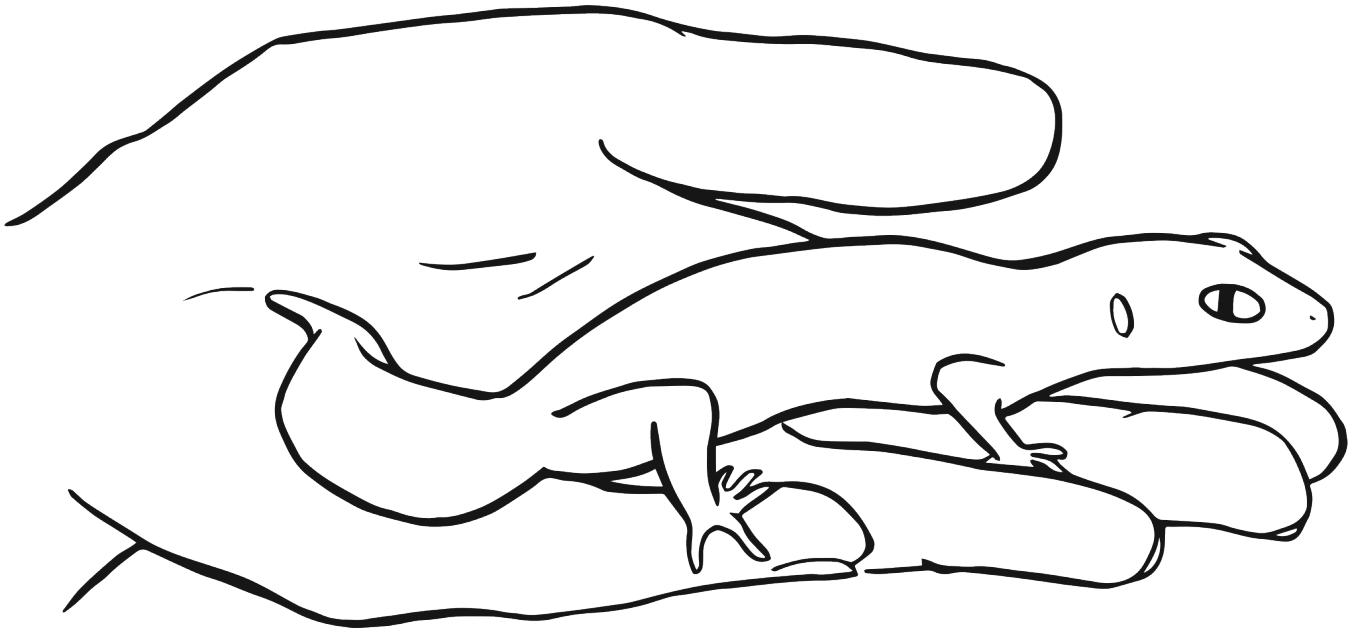


She had a little cave to rest in, lights to keep her warm,
and a small dish of water.

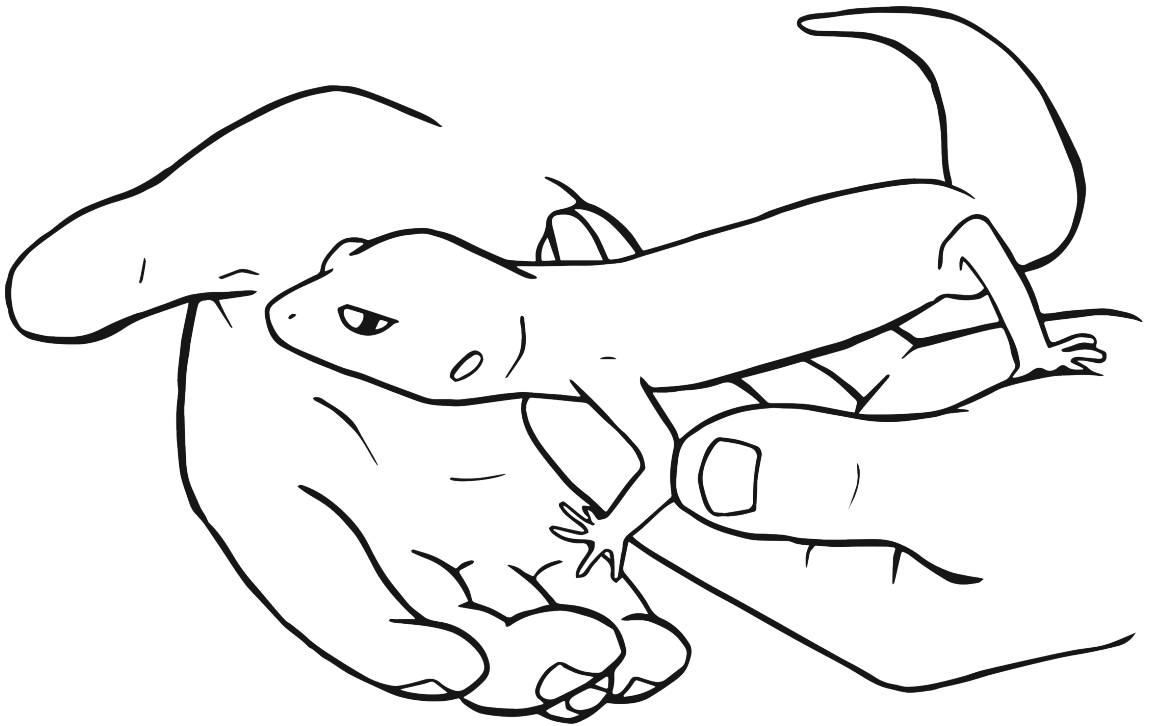
She liked to sleep during the day
and her favorite food was crickets.



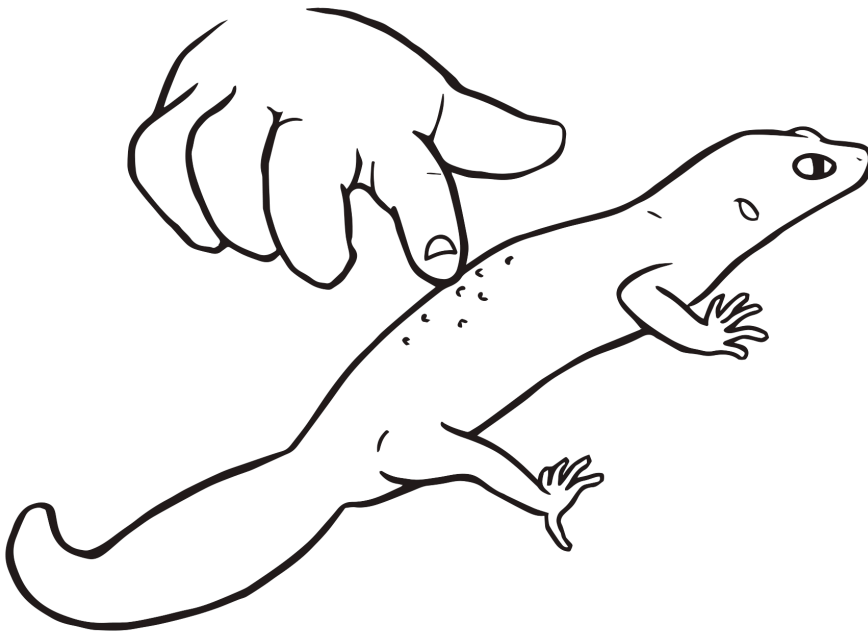
Indigo was very small.
She fit into the palm of our teacher's hand.



If we were very calm and gentle,
we could hold her, too!



Her skin was cool and bumpy,
and her tiny claws tickled our hands.
It was hard to stay still.

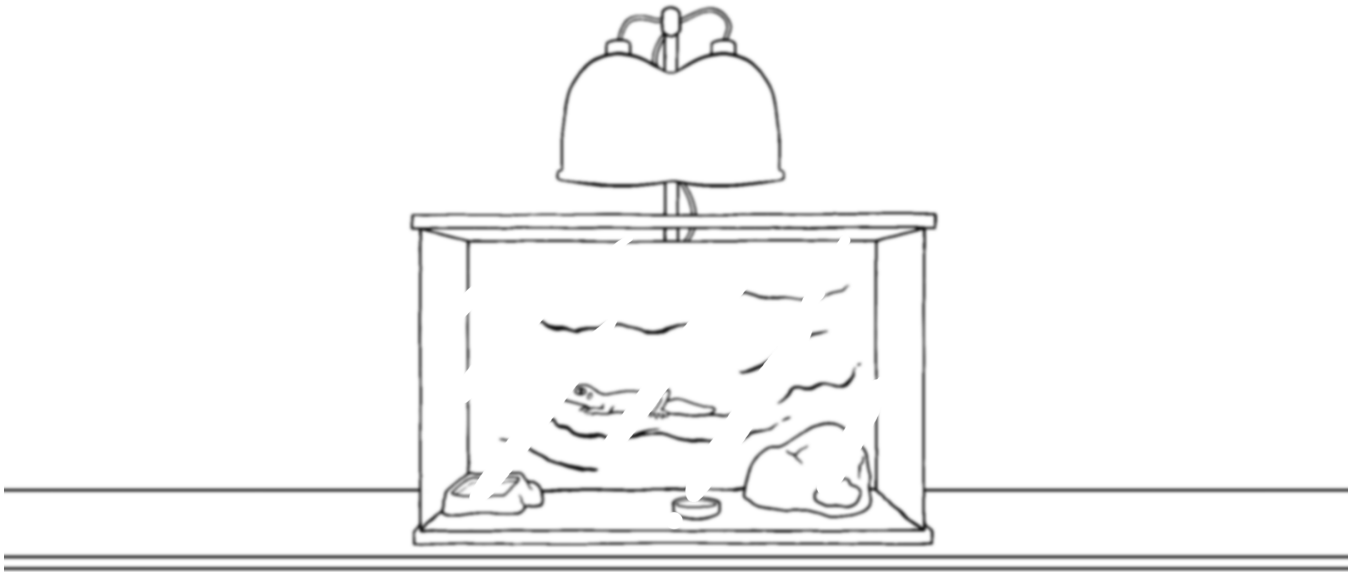




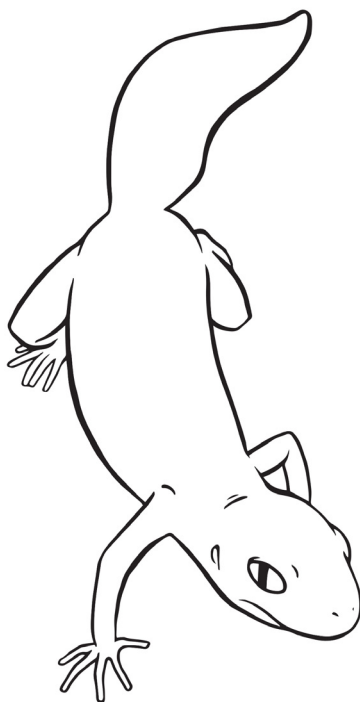
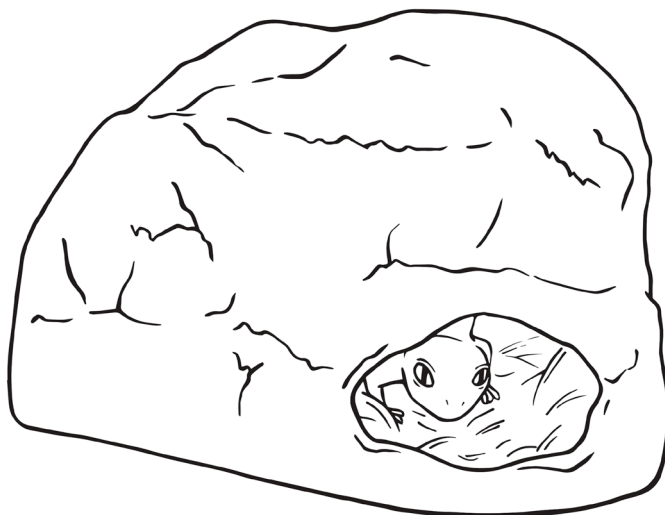
But we did.

Because we loved her.

Slowly, so slowly we didn't even notice,
Indigo got sick.



She didn't move
very much.



She wouldn't eat the
crickets in her tank.

Our teacher was worried,
so she took Indigo to a veterinarian.



Our teacher found out Indigo had an illness
that could not be cured.



The veterinarian said her bones were weak.

“Will she get better?” we wondered.

“No,” said our teacher.

“Her bones will never work the way they should.

But we can feed her special food

so she can live a little longer.

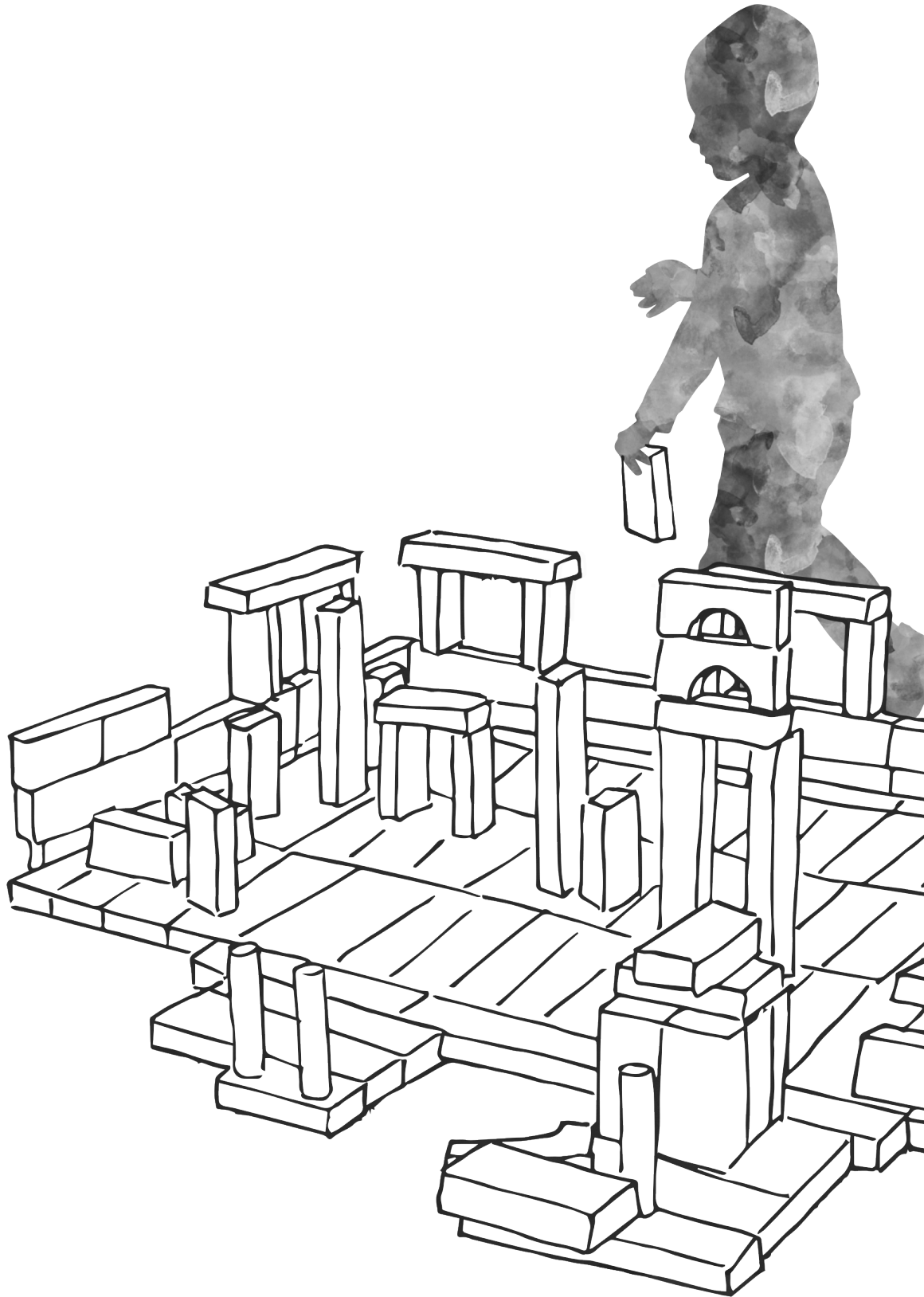
We can make her feel safe and comfortable.”

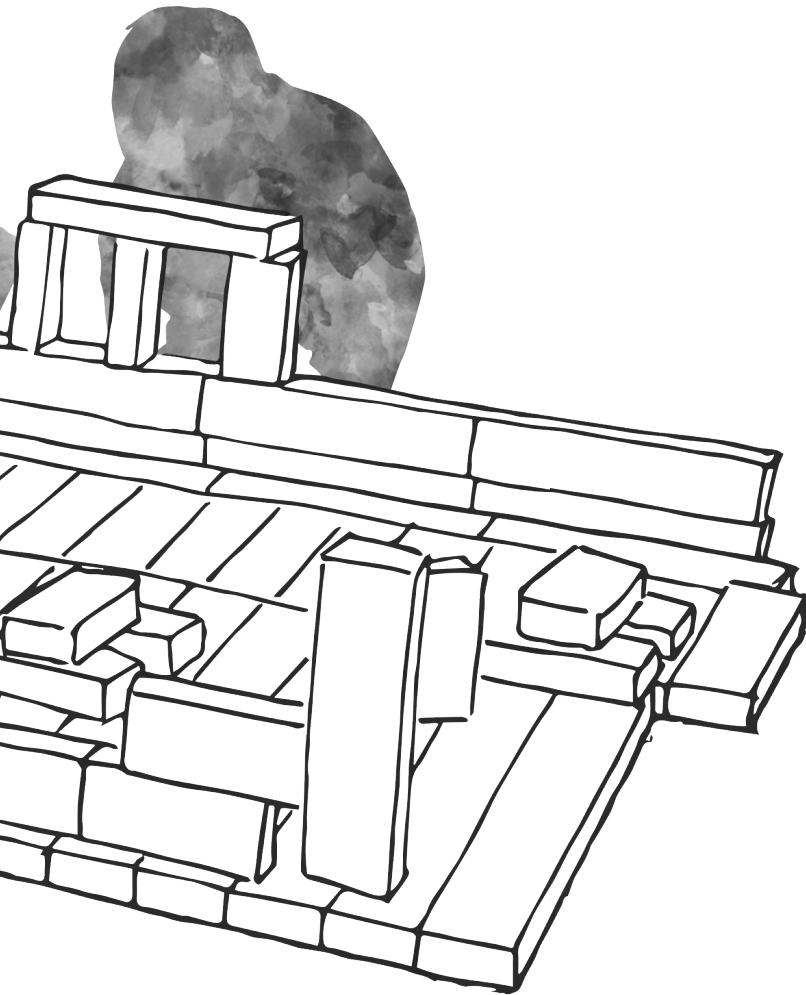


We wanted Indigo to be happy.

So we helped.

Some of us built her a hospital out of blocks.



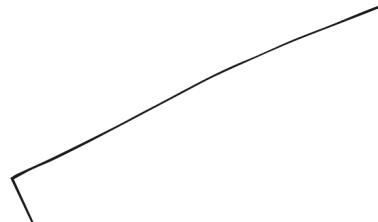


Some of us made sculptures that looked like her.

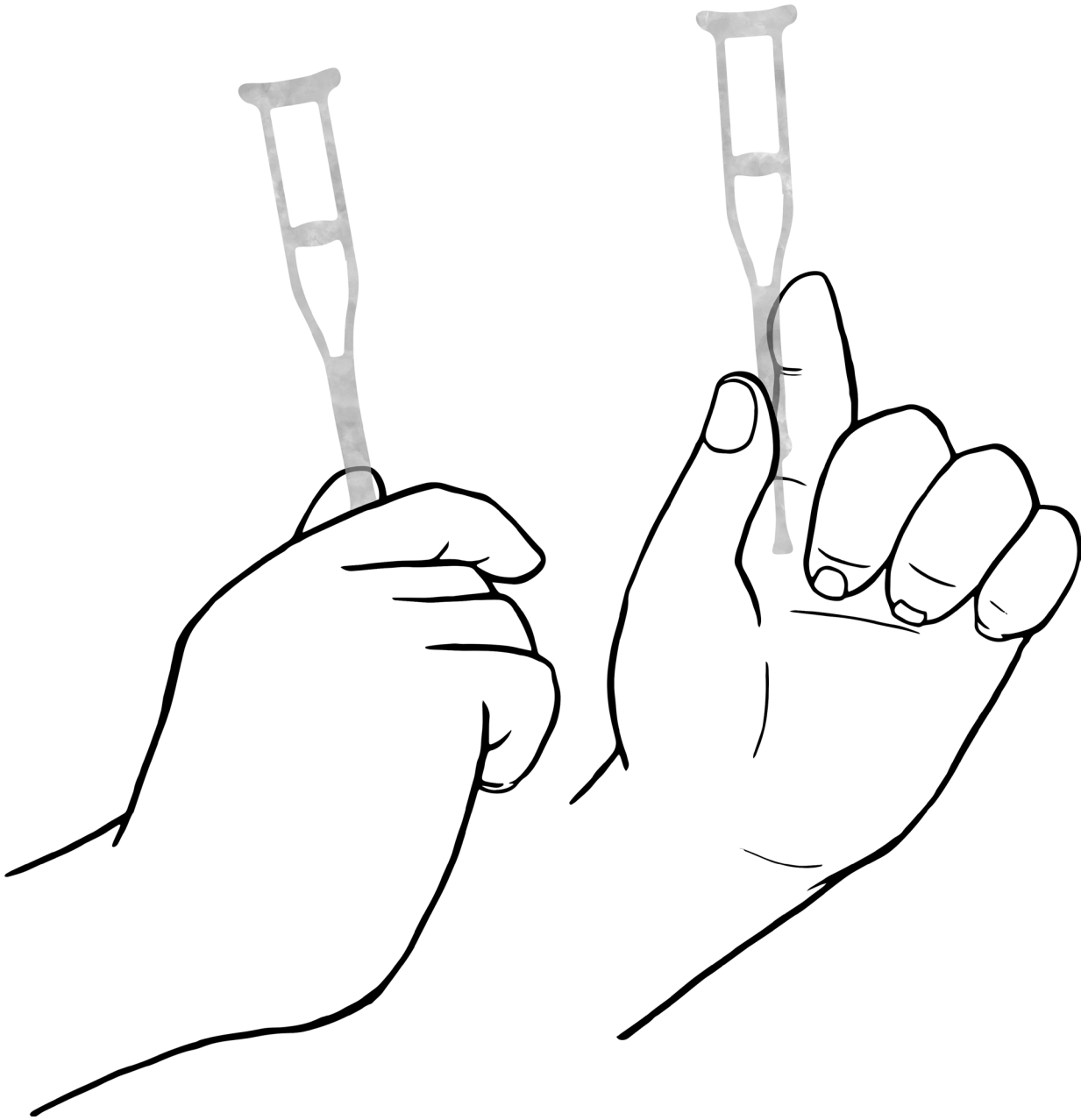




Some of us drew pictures to cheer her up.



Someone even made her invisible crutches.





We gave her everything we could, even though
we knew she would not get better.



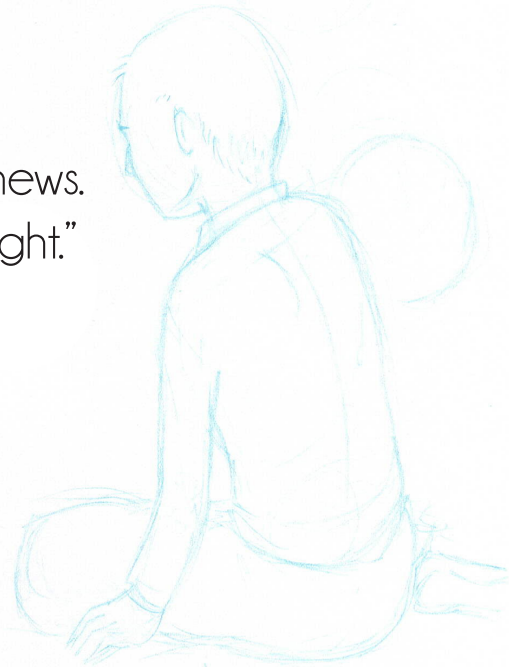
One morning, we came into the classroom
and saw that Indigo's tank was empty.

Our teacher sat with us in a big circle
so we could all see and hear.

Her face was tired.

student

“I have some sad news.
Indigo died last night.”



“Is she scared?” we asked.

“No, she’s not scared.”

“Is she hungry?”

“No, she’s not hungry.”

“Can she see us?”

“No, she can’t see us.”

“Can she hear us?”

“No, she can’t hear us.”

“Can she smell us?”

“No, she can’t smell us.”

“Will she ever move again?”

“No, she won’t.

Her body isn’t working
and it won’t work again.”



“I have her body in this little box.
It looks like she’s just sleeping.

Some of you might be scared to see her like this.
You don’t have to look if you don’t want to.
You can close your eyes
or go sit in your chair at the table.”



We were sad,
but we wanted to see her.

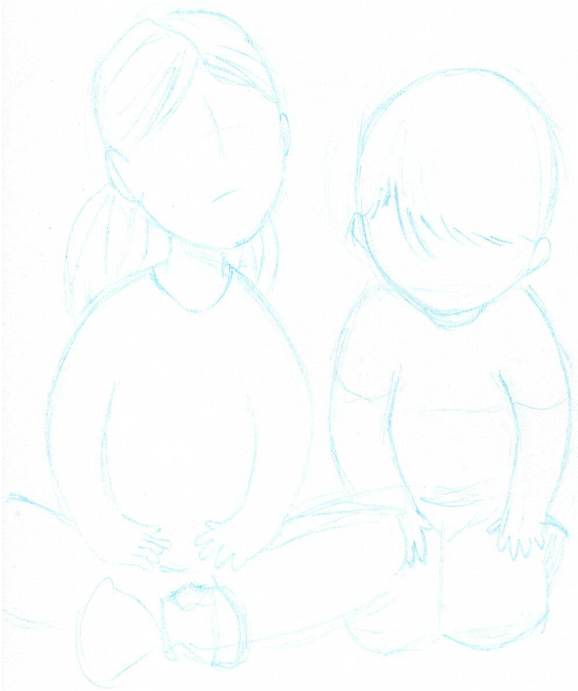
Everyone in the circle shared a memory of Indigo.

“I miss her.”

“I liked it when
I got to hold her.”

“She was so cute!”

“I’m sad.”



Our teacher said that even though Indigo is not in our classroom anymore, she will always be in our memories.



Our teacher said we could draw our best memory.
She told us, "We can put the pictures on her tank,
so we can look at it and remember."



And we did.

Because we loved her.

About Leopard Geckos



In the wild, leopard geckos live in the grasslands and deserts of Asia. They are nocturnal, which means they hunt for food at night and sleep during the day. Like all reptiles, they are cold-blooded and get their warmth from their environment. Leopard geckos can break off, or “drop,” their tails when they feel scared, allowing them to escape from danger. The tail will grow back, but it will look different from the old one. In the wild, leopard geckos are a dull yellow with brown spots, but captive bred geckos have lots of color options! Because they are healthy animals, they are good pets for first-time reptile owners. That, combined with their calm demeanor and cute faces, makes them a great pet for kids!

Author’s Note

Talking about death is hard, especially when talking with kids. We are sometimes hesitant to expose children to death in an attempt to shield them from emotional distress. In fact, depriving children of opportunities to discuss their feelings and their understanding of what happened undermines their ability to process the entire experience.

There are many wonderful children’s books that tackle the subject of loss. Given the pervasiveness of animals in early childhood classrooms, it surprised me that I could not find children’s books about the death of a class pet. I wrote this book to fill what I perceive to be a gap in the available literature. I hope Indigo’s story will help classrooms and families address this difficult subject with compassion.

Applications

After I completed my final draft of *Indigo Was Our Class Pet*, I brought it to my Kindergarten classroom to read. Before I read the book, I informed the group of twenty-two boys that it was a true story that happened when I taught at a different school. I warned them that it was a little sad and that I would be asking them for feedback at the end. The students listened attentively, smiling at each picture of someone holding Indigo. As soon as Indigo became sick, their facial expressions turned somber. I knew that the group had emotionally connected with the story when I heard audible gasping and whispered “no”s when Indigo was found dead in her tank. Once I finished, I asked the boys to think carefully about what they liked and what they didn’t like in the book.

I first asked boys to share what they considered to be *Indigo*’s strong points. Most of the children raised their hands to dole out their standard compliments, such as “I liked it” or “it was good.” A few boys elaborated on this, saying they especially liked the illustrations and the fact that Indigo was a gecko. (They’re predisposed to like geckos since we have three crested geckos as our class pets.)

Fewer hands were raised when I asked for negative feedback. “I really didn’t like it when she died... But I liked all their pictures on her tank,” said one boy hesitantly. After a pause, he continued, “This is why I want to be a vet.”

One astute boy said the book was “maybe...a little, you know, scary for little kids.” He then recommended that I change “die” to a phrase like “pass away.” The other children in the group agreed. I was pleased to get this response, excited that a child noticed the difference between the language in my book and the language he had previously encountered. I explained

that I had intentionally used blunt language to make death more understandable by addressing it directly. “Oh,” the boy replied, “That’s what you want. It’s fine then.”

“Yeah,” added another student, “*passed on* doesn’t say what happened. But you said when and why.”

Overall, I think the read-aloud went well. Most of the students understood the message of the book, that it’s important to take care of others and that a community can get stronger even when something sad happens. A couple of boys giggled on the page where the teacher answers one student’s questions about what it means to be dead. I did not get a chance to ask them what prompted the reaction. Perhaps the boys thought that the questions were silly or that the exchange dragged on too long. I would be curious to have a child read the book to themselves. Would their emotional reaction change without hearing the inflection in the teacher’s voice?

Indigo was written with grieving classrooms in mind. I envisioned that a teacher would read the story aloud to a class or small group of students. Alternatively, it could be read by an adult at home. The read-aloud component is important because the subject matter prompts discussion; I would want an adult present to hear their children’s concerns and answer their questions. The book explicitly addresses the terminal illness and death of a class pet, but it could be used to help students process a loss of a pet in a child’s family. I am hesitant to recommend reading *Indigo* in the wake of a human death; the emotional component of showing children a dead gecko’s body does not equate to showing them a dead person. The themes of caretaking and community would still apply, though.

Of course, it’s important to acknowledge that death is a sensitive subject for many classrooms and families. I imagine many adults would not want their children exposed to the

topic without being the ones to guide the conversation. There are also adults who would not want to expose their children to death at all. In such cases, pre-reading the book would be of utmost importance. *Indigo Was Our Class Pet* is a book to heal classroom communities, not traumatize them.

In late April, a colleague approached me after a faculty meeting to share that his second grade class's pet chinchilla had died. He said that he and his head teacher had been discussing which picture books to read in the emotional aftermath when he remembered that I had mentioned working on a project about the death of a class pet, and would I be so kind as to read it to his class? When I offered to send him some other book recommendations, he insisted, "No — no, that's fine. I want you to read *your* book. It's just what they need." It was hard not to feel validated; this is precisely the resource I hope this book can be.

Conclusion

Coming into this project, I had my own notions about the way to talk to children about death. After all, I guided my Pre-K students through "the gecko saga" and it turned out to be a powerful learning experience. As I researched academic literature and picture books, the information I collected corroborated my views. Children deserve to know about death, and sheltering them from the concept prevents them from fully understanding it and from developing emotional resilience.

My research for the IMP exposed that there was a gap in the death genre. There are picture books about losing grandparents, parents, siblings, friends, and pets - but there was nothing available about the death of a class pet. I hope *Indigo* will fill that niche. As a teacher of

young children, I thought such a book would be of value to the educational community. After my years of classroom experience and graduate school study, I want to give something back to the profession.

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