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Senior Projects Spring 2019

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Spring 2019

## Becoming Biophilic Beasts

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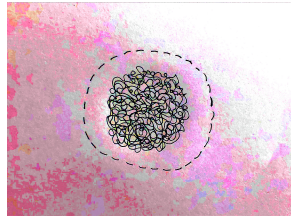
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### Recommended Citation

Tereshchenko, Nat, "Becoming Biophilic Beasts" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 126.  
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Becoming Biophilic Beasts



Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2019



## Acknowledgements

A thank you to my parents, for showing me the value of full-bodied labour and full-bodied love.

A thank you to Jay, for teaching me that I have a full life of work before me to look forward to.

A thank you to Darcy, for an unceasing commitment to joining me in the process of becoming.

A thank you to Walter, for being a cat and always one who is unafraid to speak.

A thank you to all that I love and have ever loved, for creating me.

A thank you to this world, for its interminable openness.



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## **Prologue-**

Before we jump in with both feet together, I feel I must interpret myself before you, dear reader.

What follows this brief address is a series of pieces, each of which considers itself a beginning.

Each piece intends to present itself to you as an individual as much as each also demands the

existence of all the others to form a whole. I dream this whole to be something I call a poem. The

emphasis on such a title is due to the overall charge, which above all else wishes to express itself

as a doing: thick, wordy acrobatics, performative utterancing, a spell, a prayer, and one stout

howl. I embrace the assertion made by the ancient Greeks that poetry is, in its roots, an act of

creation, and hope to express that this act of creation lives within in its own body as an always

perpetual beginning. The following work is influenced by the work of many others and as I

encounter different material, whether this material be textual, philosophical, poetical, or fleshy, I

allow the Voice of the material, by which I mean whatever resounds outward from its

constitution, to inhabit and co-compose my own voice, my own hollering.

We create the world which we occupy with our language—our stories—and too we recognize

that the world creates us in return, in the fervor of *its* unique and interacting forces. Reality

therefore is made up of all of the following and also infinitely more: the argumentative, the

prescriptive, the methodical, the imaginary, the literary, the metaphorical, the fantastical, the



unreasonable, the muddy, the furry, the leafy, the bloody, the felt and everything that could possibly be said about it. Once one allows themselves access to their own inherent understanding of the connectedness of these forces—how they function as ligaments and are braided together by something which is both utterly chaotic and perfectly sensible—then one begins to better sense their own proper duties as a relative of the world.

For many this is a spiritual or religious awareness, for others it is more of an ecofeminist ideology. Regardless of how one achieves this sense, it is imperative that we recognize and care for the instinctual desires we carry for ethical sensibility, for loving *well*, for living *well*, and for *dying well too*. Edward O. Wilson calls this our “biophilia,” meaning our inherent love for connection with the natural world and its creatures. He writes that “to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents.”<sup>1</sup> I hope then to engage in this process of weaving spirits, by troubling myself precisely with what philosophy and religion has neglected in matters of animality—our own as well as that of other animals, to whom we are indebted and indelibly related.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Digital file, 1.

To do so I employ a gradual unfolding of a creative process, of which I am only one of many authors, and of which not all of my co-conspirators are human. I concede that much of my work here is philosophical but that it is so as a product of its primary function, which is to engage with the world as a poet, both in the practice of writing as well as in the practice of reading and, too, in the practices of looking and touching. In the minglings of logos, ethos, and pathos, I hope to discover many different cross-woven threads of possibilities of open, messy, felt, reasoned, created, willed, surprising, and unavoidable interactions between living beings which, through these processes, bring one another into compounded life. For what I hope to insist most of all is that the nurturing of our biophilia and the praxis of ethics requires us, as embodied, feeling, and touching creatures, to make art that, rather than solely being reflective or responsive, also finds itself participative with the world, and therefore emits an urgency and density of feeling with which it may further generate, move, *be*. As Wilson writes, “the great artist touches others in surgical manner with the generating impulse, transferring feeling precisely” so that “the aim of art is not to show how or why an effect is produced (that would be science) but literally to produce it.”<sup>2</sup> I aspire, dear reader, with humbleness and urgent insistence, to affect, to embody

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 62.

the complex potentials of being and becoming in this world of multiple, ever-becoming and always touching beings. *Now* is when we begin.

## Part One: Where We Are and Where We Begin

Everything we offer  
to the world  
is what the world gives back  
without a thought  
or breath.

-Jerome Rothenberg, "What the World Gives Back"

The doubling of the self in dreams.  
The doubling of the self in art.  
The nightmare is that there are *two* worlds.  
The nightmare is that there is only *one* world, this one.

-Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*

A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.  
....  
A poem should not mean  
But be.

-Archibald Macleish, "Ars Poetica"

My favorite arts are the ones that can move your body or make a new world.

-Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women*

**This is the story of how I heard a voice which told me that I had to do.**

*“There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference.”*

-Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

I was sitting up in bed, checking the news the morning of the day that it was announced: there are only twenty or so years left before the unimaginable was to happen. Roughly twenty more years before it became irreversible and no one was safely exempt. All of time, all that had ever occurred or was ever yet to come, was suddenly reduced to a tiny window, a tiny sliver in which there were only twenty years to save ourselves and everything else from the disaster we have touched off. I received the news with my body, sitting there suddenly benumbed, feeling as though I had just received a phone call that my mother had inexplicably died. But it could not have been wholly inexplicable for hadn't I already known? It should not have been shocking to me. *Me*, one of the great many Global Warming Babies, born into the “Green Movement,” raised on the backs of the arrows that chase each other in an endless rotation. When *I* go to the store I pick the products graced by the happy green color and the little flower details on the packaging which indicate to me that these are the things that *I* should buy *as someone like me*, someone

who is *aware*. Of course I had *known*. But I had not, until that point, really felt. I was born into a low rumbling, complacent crawl of an anger. An anger so slow that it would take years and years and years for it to cross mountains, let alone oceans. An anger that easily tired of itself and went to bed sighing, “yes, there is *always* tomorrow.” The one relentless and unphasable constant: tomorrow. But the day had finally come, the day I never thought *I* would have to know, when the dependable having of tomorrows would no longer be a reliable source of life. And I had been awakened from a perfect dream that I had not even known to be a dream and I could see that I had not even had the wisdom to seize in the duration of its perfection. Someone had demolished the glass panelled doors of my precious reality with a sizable rock, stealing it from me along with the rest of all my precious possessions. *My most precious time. How could I do anything without you? How could I move again without you there to forcibly turn the ground beneath me, even in the instants when I had begged you to stop?* Sitting there that morning like a slowly dripping icicle in my bed, I began to hear the urgent hissing of a steady and devoted voice. It came from a location that made it sound familiar, like the echoing inside of my own skull, and yet it also came from some unbreachable distance, from someplace that I could only describe to you as *above*. Somewhere *above me*. The voice admitted to me with reassuring honesty, the undeniability of mortality, and especially that of my own. But before I could deliver even the slightest howl in

recognition of this felt injustice, the voice spoke again: *“It is not too late yet to save yourself.”*

And before I could even dare to ask for further instruction, to demand the deliverance of an explanation, the voice had left me. My eyes opened, surprised to have found themselves closed for the entire duration of this visit. I saw my cat sitting there next to me, curled around himself quietly, his whole body enveloped by itself, by the stillness of presence which is almost impossible to see. I looked at him sleeping there by my legs, and I reached out to stroke his warmed fur.

**This is the story of how all twos are also always one.**

Most often we are dreaming strenuously about the world. It is not difficult to search quickly into any particular segment of earthly history and find that there is individual suffering, massive death, proper injustice, or a cloud of destitution located somewhere in there. And to accumulate an immersive awareness of even just a few such occurrences, can catalyze a depression so sapping that the reaction to the event of suffering becomes an event of suffering in its own. When tuning in to the palaver which surrounds us now, one would be quick to conclude that the general tone of humanity is a hardened one; “The world is a terrible place,” a phrase spat, swallowed and regurgitated in some cruel effort to sober and simultaneously comfort. But what exactly is meant by the first two words of that utterance: “the world”? It is simply a place? A place where things grow and live and die, again and again and again? Or is it a being of some sort, one that is far more resilient than may be comfortable admittable, and one that confounds us because it is indifferent to all moral systems, because it holds no opinions, and makes no choices? This being will watch us die, it will watch as its own surface is scorched by fires and buried by seas, and still it will stand there as it always does, at attention and ready. Surely such a being would seem villainous to us, but is this even what they mean when they say “the world,” “*the world is a terrible place*”? Or do they mean to say something far more particular than this? That is what I



suspect, that although they may not know it when they speak it, they are speaking of a narrow characterization of “world.” They are speaking of *our* world, the world we have designed, shaped, created with *our* stories. *That* is what has us and everything else trapped in a monstrous embrace.

“It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories,”<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway wrote. And she emphasized that worlds and the beings in them are always both material *and* semiotic, meaning always both physical *and* metaphysical, meaning, too, always what they are *and also* what we make of them. In truth, what is capable of being contained by those words, “the world,” is an infinite everything. The world is always both the being which disregards us and the being which is formed by us. It is always both the place where buffalo eat grass and the place where fish are poisoned with mercury. The world is a place and a being which creates and is created, and neither condition exists without the other. Nothing exists without an other. Without endless others. And so then, I take into my body Haraway’s words when she writes that, “*the task is to*

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<sup>3</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, 12.

*make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.”<sup>4</sup>*

The world makes no choices, all choices are ours to make. The earth will withstand and future life will renew and in truth there is no real shortage of time. Time as something which we conceived of—built like a necessary cage to square off our own particular socializing routines, with minutes and hours and days and even years—does not disable the existence of *the other time*. For the other time is the movement of the being that is indifferent to our schedules, our buildings, our clocks, the continuation of our lives as *we* know them, and the things which we call “endings,” “finales,” and “death.” Such a time could never abandon us because it does not move for us, nor for any reason at all. The world has no reason and although this is threatening or mystifying to us as somewhat-reasonable creatures, we must know and feel that *this is also* the world we inhabit, that *this* is our world as well. *It produces us in its unreason*. Just as the world is always two worlds and only one world, and just as time is always two times and only one time, so too is life always you and the other, a single life. It is this life to whom we owe an immediate answer, for whom we must make an essential choice. And as somewhat-reasonable creatures, we are responsible for our choices and our actions to be in the name of love.

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<sup>4</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, 1.

**This is the story of how we live language.**

The other animals, the ones who are not us, have always been suffering at our hands. But now more than ever, they are disappearing from our lives. Animals live in our stories and haunt our imaginary worlds from childhood, but those animals are quite different from the ones who also live in the material spaces apart from our minds, *out there*, in the world. Rarely do we know those other animals, touch them, or even look at them. Those animals are not particular to us in the ways in which imaginary ones are; Winnie the Pooh is a figure I know well with a personality and appearance I could easily describe (red shirt, no pants, a relentlessly optimistic wisdom), but when I think of bears in the wild I only form an abstract, platonic image of “Bear” in my mind. In truth, I have never met one.

Writing on Native philosophy and science, Gregory Cajete reflects on the way in which the Western world, as shaped by narratives of Western science, has come to be so estranged from nature and that the subsequent effect is such that we come to *care less* about what happens to the natural world around us. Instead we further seclude ourselves within the intellectual and artificial worlds we create:

“The tragedy of modern society is that everyone falls into the trap of abstraction. The host of modern technologies that only mirror ourselves to ourselves hypnotizes perception and attention. While our bodies have been tuned to the sounds of birds and the changing qualities of natural

environments, our socialization makes us oblivious to our natural sensibilities. In many people, such sensibilities quickly atrophy. We are no longer able to participate with nature with our whole being—we cannot hear its subtle voices or speak the language of nature. Herein lies the disregard modern people feel for nature—when something no longer exists in your perceptual memory it also no longer matters.”<sup>5</sup>

Cajete makes several crucial observations in this one paragraph. He notes that, as in opposition to the values held centrally within Native philosophy, Western philosophy, in its great search for the “self,” has abandoned the body as a source of knowledge and experience. The lack of bodily participation has caused certain senses, which are in fact crucial to many facets of the active experiencing of nature, to forget themselves. We become less capable then of listening, of *hearing* nature. And as it speaks less and less to us, so it begins to disappear from our concern, our reality. Our attention is turned around to face something else entirely. Capitalist endeavours devour the natural world, reducing and altering life by staggering degrees and in irreversible ways. Animals die, become extinct, or else they live within the boundaries of captivity and so become entirely different animals: products produced by our removing of them from their natural environments, our constricting of *their* bodily experiences with nature by the same methods in which we have constricted our own.

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<sup>5</sup> Cajete, Gregory. "Telling a Special Story: 'Creating the world and humankind.'" In *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe, N.M.: Clear Light Publishers, 2000, 22.

How then do we retrain our senses towards communication and communion with the natural world in order that we may come to feel and practice, *embody*, a kind of instinct of responsibility towards animals and nature? How do we put into practice the suggestion that Edward O. Wilson makes when he writes that “to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves?”<sup>6</sup> Certainly the scientist is called upon in this regard, but what of the artist, and in particular the writer?

Kari Weil writes that we have a “persistent desire to know what it is like to be an animal (especially the ‘animal I am’)” and that “this desire is frustrated by our means of apprehending and representing such knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> The lived experience of another being, be it animal, microbe, plant, or human, is something which is ultimately immaterial and unknowable. We feel however, that this is particularly true of the animal because it cannot even, at least, *speak itself* to us. But it is our understanding of how we might use that word “speak,” that is limited, whereas the capacity which animals possess to speak, or communicate, or *respond* are boundless as long as the imagination remains open and the senses remain sensitive.

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Digital file, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Weil, Kari. “Introduction.” *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* New York: Columbia UP, 2012, xx.

Kari Weil also writes that, “insofar as language and the possibility for self-representation constitute that by which humans have distinguished themselves from nonhuman animals, we must ask whether our representations act to bridge or to increase the distance between us and them, if not between us and the animals we are.”<sup>8</sup> Language is a particularly contentious mode of investigation in relation to apprehending animal experience for it is a central truth of *all* animal experience that it lives in its actual being only in its immediate and material connection to the sensing body, and any further steps taken to possess such experience through external means results in a distancing between the experience in itself and the attempted expression of it. However, the making of and partaking in art remains essential to human life, as it is arguably an instinct that has been groomed by our evolution. But the making of art generally as a method of doing ethics poses a broader set of questions than the ones of present concern. Language specifically, more so than any other art form, may very well be the least conducive pathway to touching the animal, because it is, as Weil notes, the very thing by which we evaluate the distinctions between ourselves and other animals. It is that which we consider to be uniquely ours and it provides the basis for the kind of artist-subject relation which we ascribe to the human-animal relation. We cast ourselves as the true surveyors of the world, the storytellers and

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<sup>8</sup> Weil, *Thinking Animals*, 12.

the creators, and we neglect other truths about the languages of animals and the languages of the world. Those language are perhaps different, more embodied kinds of communication than ours, but they are just as constitutive of what is real and what is felt.

Perhaps language may not be the best method of touching the animal, the one that is both in ourselves and out there. Certainly I regard this as true of many particular uses of language, such as the kinds which place too much significance on the immaterial notions of logic and rationale.

Perhaps language is grossly insufficient in knowing the body as it is, particularly when feeling rises without shame to the height of its passion, such as in love and in lust and in grief and in pain. Perhaps it would be better to just dance it or play it as a song, as Nietzsche seemed to want.

But still I desire to try, to experiment with the practice of breaking language open, and filling it with the electric voltage of the body.

Our ability to metaphorize, to abstract, and to represent, is entangled in what would seem to be a contradictory, but, ultimately productively messy process, in which we simultaneously invent, perpetuate, and bridge the chasm between ourselves as humans and other animals. A metaphor is a tool whose substance is composed of quite magical properties and capacities; it is what brings us closer to the expression of, and participation in, individually situated particularities of

embodied experience. A metaphor always possess the imaginative and limitless capacity of simultaneously unique and universal expression. And so, although it, as all language does, create a distance between the thing itself and the description of it, it does so in a way which opens a space into which the body can enter, and in this way it brings us *closer* to touching.

Telling stories about animals is crucial. Being attentive and responsible about what kind of stories we tell is *most* crucial. “*It matters what stories make worlds.*”<sup>9</sup> So the suggestion is that we attune our ears towards the poetic voice, and toward the possibility of new stories. In my work here I use the terms “story” and “poetry” somewhat interchangeably, in that both are preoccupied with representation by way of metaphor and a lyrical language that attends to the desire for expressive and affecting portrayals of emotive, embodied, animated, moving, touching, and shared experience. Both intend to bring into life, through a particular usage of language. And so to discover possible new stories, we must attempt to break traditions surrounding our past usages and applications of language. We must learn the languages of the animals, and of the world, and we must learn them with our bodies. The result will embroil us in a unending process of self reimagining and reconfiguration, as well as the revitalization and retraining of our

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<sup>9</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, 12.



weakened senses of perception and sensation. Only by such active and lawless methods may we come to understand and to care about animals and the animals that we are.

Before we may begin however, we must first consider the other stories, the ones which have made us as we are now, and made the others as they are now to us.

## Part Two: The Created Beings

Good and evil and joy and pain and I and you—colored smoke this seemed to me before creative eyes. The creator wanted to look away from himself; so he created the world.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

**This is the story of the creation of a certain kind of world.**

One of our greatest stories—our most sacred and most dangerous, our most familiarly called to mind, yet also most foreign and neglected, or even forsaken, but also our most sung in the early morning and most wept in the middle of the night, the one that has been injected unwittingly under the skin and transfused directly into the generational blood, our most lived, yet also buried, most repeated, most retold, most contested, and most persisting story—is the one about God. Not only “God” in the sense that such a name is familiar to you or to me, perhaps in similar or perhaps also in divergent ways, but “God” as a knower of beginnings, as a shaper of nascent worlds. “God” as an answer to those questions which question the most unknowable and most petrifying. “God” as mover. “God” as a reliable force to call upon to keep us moving daily, lest we stop moving for a moment and find that the earth is unbearably quiet to us without the shuffling of human feet. Without such purposeful human noise, accompanied by the sanctions of godly figures, we stand to fall down, to be paralyzed by what is ultimately a plaguing fear of the immensely dark and vast space of a world without an “I” that is recognized and loved by “God.” Such a space seems to us to be void of light—and therefore our eyes, *as they are currently accustomed to seeing*, would have no possibility of recognizing themselves in this space, recognize themselves as belonging to a self, and all would become devoid of meaning.

This space—which is so black it has no color at all, and so large that it eventually ceases in our perception to be *anything* and instead becomes *only nothing*, a space which is the negation of space *as we know it*—is in fact the resounding actualization of all life that is temporally animated within a particular sliver of the infinite world. It is where animals *are* and where *we* fear *being*. It is *that* we fear being, and being's natural matedness to non-being. So we reason with something like "God," and we ask to be protected from those spaces—whether they be on this mortal-physical plane or in some realm of after-life—in which we cannot express a "self" or an "I." The mind of the "I," which is unfortunately most of what is considered to constitute the "I," becomes synonymous with "God" because it is only insofar as "God" is present that the "I" will be present as well.

We fear the mortal body, the mortal cages of freedom in the dark spaces of life and death where human exceptionalism as dictum is thrust upon amoral insignificance in the process of refunding the soil with a body that has resolved to ash and dust. We fear the domain of the animals, who live and move in this space without needing to first conceive of said space as inherently tied to an "I," which is inherently tied to "God." We beings recognize that space and time are infinite, but seek to destroy the neutralizing effect that such a recognition has, and so practice

characterizing, construing, condensing, commodifying, cutting, contouring, and caging upon said space in order to make it smaller for digestive purposes.

The story of creation—which is the story of how and why—takes infinite forms. Beyond its different cultural, ethnic, religious, national, regional, and personal variations, it is not even limited, I believe, to texts or tales which clearly announce themselves as primarily purposed towards the how and why of the world’s coming into being and the players who may have been responsible. No, it is far more potentially boundless than that. It is that which breathes life into all that is significant, *for us*. To our particular kind of sensory and perceptual consciousness, creation is a process which takes an effective hold on every story written, every work of art sculpted, every conversation held, every dream dreamt, and most importantly, every spot of flesh touched. For creation is the story of beginnings from which we subsequently derive meaning in order to further create more meaningful beginnings. It is the constant manifestation of the past and the future as it lives always in the eternal present. Every moment is a beginning and all of being is contained within every singular moment.

However, this is only the *potential of creation*, which we must give ourselves permission to discover and enact, and not necessarily the traditional or even most commonplace *conception of*

*creation*. For now, we most often talk about creation stories as antecedents and as relics of that which has erected human life, and non-human animal life as well. The mission is not to eradicate all that which has been established previously and begin anew with clean pages, but rather to consider the creation stories of past creative agents in light of their entanglements with the present, with a kind of present seriousness for what sorts of worlds these stories have manifested. It is then, after we allow ourselves to claim some partial authorship of both reading the past and writing the present (as both reach longingly towards the future), that we reveal the messy and poetic connections between what has been, what is now, and what is possibly yet to come.

Animals are of great concern in nearly all creation stories. For we know that we are here and so are they and as much as we are anxious to define that which makes us something and places us somewhere, so too we are anxious, perhaps even more so, to describe what it is that animals are and what they mean, to us. In creation stories animals are most often positioned in a certain relation to us, and by certain measurements and anglings, such positionings become capable of revealing.

In Genesis, the animals take up an ambiguous amount of space. Certainly they exist, certainly they are multiple and varied, and certainly do they serve humanity in both physical and

metaphorical ways. And surely humans have responsibilities to animals in return (such as when Noah saves the “clean” animals from the flood). Still, there is a great sense that in this story, animals primarily serve—with their bodies as well as with what their bodies might represent—humans. And this makes human responsibility towards animals somewhat vague, in that a love and respect for the animal is advised, but predicated upon the initial service which the animal performs as a means for humanity. Perhaps this is why certain early philosophical writing on animals was concerned both with defining the animal as, properly, Man’s means to Man’s ends, but while being careful to note that extensive cruelty is necessary to avoid. I would like to venture into what a sense of responsibility, which emerges from most creation stories as they are most often moral tales, might be capable of in our new writing about animals, our newly created creation stories.

I do not aim to make generalizing claims about religion and figures which might pertain to the nominative “God,” but rather intend to limit my scope here to the “God” of the Old Testament who is a consistent tenant of much of the material with which I presently engage, as both this “God” and much of the material may fall somewhere under the somewhat broad context of the European, or so called “Western World” of tradition. What follows is a pointed reading of the two creation accounts which appear in Genesis and it is important to preface that I operate under

the belief that all of humankind's greatest systems of truth and design—be it science, be it religion, be it network television—all share at their core the most basic tenet of storytelling: humans *require* access to processes of meaning-making. To engage in meaning-making is as obvious as breathing and as inevitable as sleep. Even in sleep we continue to meaning-make, as if we were not satisfied enough from a full day of it. To consider Genesis a story or mythology then, is not an aim to throw a knife at it and deflate whatever significance it holds to any persons, but instead to consider that notions of truth and belief, regardless of whom the terms “objective” and “subjective” are being awarded to, *are always birthed by stories*. I read Genesis as a story which proclaims a certain definition of the human, as well as of the animal, and most importantly of how the two relate to one another. These definitions have resulted in the certainty of certain worlds, of certain ways of being and relating which have persisted, and an understanding of this is essential for the creation of *different* worlds. If we are to re-imagine what it means to be “human” and “animal,” so that we may create new realities with present earthly inhabitants, we must begin with what has already been begun in the past.

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*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”<sup>10</sup>*

In the beginning the world had no body and it was empty of life. There was a darkness there were we had not yet been, a darkness so incomprehensible. Only God’s shadow swept the dark sea. Even if you looked closely, you would not see the reflection of his face on that water, for there had yet to be any reflections, and there had yet to be any you, either. But then the knowing God brought forth light to allow for the possibility of reflection, for one to see, and so consequently, for one to see oneself as well. *“And God saw that the light was good.”<sup>11</sup>*

In the first account the animals were the initial creations. And although it was good, there was also something better which followed directly afterwards, for good only increases in a linear direction, or by climbing, we can say, up a ladder, if such a structure may be used as a metaphor for the laborious tension between time and the ideal. A being was conceived of, which would stand on two legs and therefore reach a bit closer to the creator up above. God made Man after looking upon his own reflection in the waters. Like all great artists who practice in the

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<sup>10</sup> Gen 1:1-2

<sup>11</sup> Gen 1:4

naturalistic tradition, he forced into being something intended to resemble that which already existed in perfect form. The result was beautiful, but imperfect. Distinct and so, distant from its generative source.

When God made Man he did as any good father should: he gave him everything. This was what you might think of as the most significant moment in the baby's origin story; When Father explained to his offspring, in a language that he could understand, that he was gifting him dominion "*over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*"<sup>12</sup> From this moment of inheritance, when God entrusted Man with a sliver of the responsibility which he himself dutifully carried, was born the relative meaning of "animal" to "human." "*And behold, it was very good.*"<sup>13</sup>

The second account offers a slightly different story, one which seems to have received a bit of feedback about how writing can be improved with the addition of more specific detail. In this story Man was shaped from dust and inflated into motion by way of the nostrils. And in this version, it was Man who came first and the animal who followed. Initially, God had given Man a beautiful garden in Eden, where everything was for his consumption with the exception of just

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<sup>12</sup> Gen 1:26

<sup>13</sup> Gen 1:31

one tree, but still God said, “*it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*”<sup>14</sup> and so God made the beasts from the very same ground of which he made Man. They were Man’s first companions, and he even enjoyed the intimate moment that all pet owners are familiar with, of choosing their names. In giving Man this privilege, God wrote Man into existence as a storyteller as well. And in naming the animals, Man wrote the animals into existence, into a world properly of nouns. To give a name is to claim the named thereafter as one’s dependant, to establish hierarchy and demand of oneself a passion of responsibility. So in naming the animals, Man expressed his ascendancy as being entangled with his love. And yet still, the animals did not offer Man a true reflection of himself to look upon or be looked at by. He could see that they were of the same ground, but for some indescribable reason they remained of different flesh. Even among all the animals of the earth and sky, Man was alone, un-whole. God took notice, for he knew a thing or two about loneliness, and he borrowed from his first draft and made Man *his own reflection*: one more of his kind, shaped from the rib of Man’s own body. Overjoyed, Man awoke to his new reality and said, “*this at last is bone of my bones and*

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<sup>14</sup> Gen 2:18

*flesh of my flesh.*"<sup>15</sup> And he gave her the very special name "woman," "*because she was taken out of Man.*"<sup>16</sup> Naked, but not ashamed, they were together in their one flesh.

Next comes the part we like to hear a thousand times, as we are his children too, begging for him to read it every night until our eyes will finally close. It is the story of shame, the one we later as adults, continue to cite again and again as the trauma of a family history which haunts our bodies by a way of transference from one flesh born of another.

Here then is the climax of our story: Man and woman stood naked and felt no shame. They did not know any better than this. Until Serpent, who both was and was not animal, came along and recited a poem for the woman, a poem which told her that which she did not know she already knew: that she was hungry. For what does one want when one has everything *but* that which one can never have? They call it a God-shaped hole. If it was ever filled, we would be perfect, we would be God, and that is why the hole is shaped like God because we are not shaped like God, we are shaped "like" God, and therefore we are shaped like something else. "*You will not die,*"<sup>17</sup> the serpent promises the woman, and like any reasonable and animate being, it is all she really needs to be certain of in order to plunge her teeth directly into that which she desires. So she eats

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<sup>15</sup> Gen 2:23

<sup>16</sup> Gen 2:23

<sup>17</sup> Gen 3:4, emphasis added

the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and she shares in her success with her husband and together they eat because they want to know the unknowable things, to fill the holes shaped like God inside of them so that they might finally look more like God. And then suddenly their eyes were open and there was an abundance of light and that light was just as God had made it when he made it so that there would be reflections. And suddenly they could see. For when the blinding effect wore off and their eyes adjusted, they looked down and saw then that they were naked. And they felt ashamed at this sight, for now *they knew better*, and so “the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife *garments of skins, and clothed them*”<sup>18</sup> and *this* is how humans came to be. Clothed by God, for they know morality. Faithful to God, for they know mortality. *But clothed they were by the skins of the animals, and so faithful they must have been to those others as well.*

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<sup>18</sup> Gen 3:21

**This is the story of the conception of the philosophical tradition of human reasoning about animals.**

Jean Christophe Bailly wrote in *The Animal Side*, that “however the relationship may have been established [between humans and animals], from the most obscure magic to the coldest economic rationality, it has been constitutive of the human make-up.”<sup>19</sup> To consider then how one such cold, economic, rational mind characterized the Human-Animal demarcation, I engage a different muscle in my brain towards René Descartes’ account of creation. The story that is presented by him, arguably accomplishes something similar to the story of creation in Genesis, in that it also proposes a kind of general definition of humans, as well as of other animals. The difference however, is that Descartes sets out to inform us about animals in a more direct manner, and to propose certain meanings as to be gleaned from a scientific observation of their bodies and behaviors. Although contemporarily often criticized for his explications of animals, the French scientist and philosopher brought the question of the animal into light, and did so in such a way that directly responds to the ambiguity of animals in Genesis.

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<sup>19</sup> Bailly, Jean-Christophe. *The Animal Side*. Translated by Catherine Porter. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, 11.

Similarly to Genesis, Descartes is concerned with morality in his creation story. Rather than “good” and “evil,” he uses the terms “truth” and “error,” linking morality directly to knowledge; it is knowledge which equips the human with the active ability to increase assertions of truth and decrease exhibitions of error. But the knowledge in Descartes’ case is not one that can be acquired through the consumption of fruit. Instead it would be better understood as the process of dissecting the fruit in order to observe its physical properties and individual parts, and from there build an understanding of wholes based on the indisputable witnessing of its internal working system. It is by increasing intelligence through such study and the precise exercising of one’s cognition, that one comes to inform the will. The will itself, for Descartes, is not a moral agent, and is therefore prone to error when knowledge is lacking. Knowledge is what informs the will, and produces action. In order to maximize freedom, one must maximize knowledge, in order to ensure that it is truth which is acting upon the agent’s will.

The Cartesian method then is to firstly dismiss all of which has been accepted, learned, and taught and to begin freshly from the simplest of substances in order to find that which is undeniably true and known. It is a process of verification whereby rational observation of the most basic units of substance and thought are compiled in an orderly assemblage in order to make conclusive statements about the nature of complex beings and operations. In his own

words, “the laws of mechanics...are the same as those of nature,”<sup>20</sup> and so this creation story aims to explain nature according to its functional commandments.

Ironically enough, he begins with a metaphor, the very same metaphor which captured my fantasy in the account of creation in Genesis:

“...just as painters, who are unable to represent equally well on a flat surface all the various sides of a solid body, choose one of the principal sides which they place alone facing the light of day, and, by darkening the rest with shadows, make them appear only as they can be seen by someone who is looking at the principal side, just so, fearing I could not put into my discourse everything I had in mind about it, I undertook in it merely to speak at length about what I conceived with respect to light...”<sup>21</sup>

The painter requires light to bring the object of their attention into focus, just as light is needed in order for there to be such a thing as a reflection. Descartes isolates one component of the complex body, and like a painter or a storyteller, he calls our attention towards that which he wishes to reflect upon. So he begins with light, and then accounts for all that pertains to the light, such as the sun, the stars, and the heavens (for they emit light), and the planets, the comets, and the earth (for they reflect it). Our world resembles the structure of the heavens and with each known substance on earth, there is a counterpart above. Descartes figures that this is so on

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<sup>20</sup> Descartes, René. "Discourse on Method." In *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1-44. Translated by Donald A. Cress. 4th ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publ, 1998, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Descartes, "Discourse on Method," 23.



account, again, of the light which travels between our world and the bodies up above, constantly reflecting from body to body.

Again, there is a reminiscence here of biblical thought, and yet there is something more technical about the relationships between these counterparts. Whereas in Genesis, that which is born out of reflection appeals to a rather poetic sense of harmony, Descartes' order is one produced by calculation, in which physical forces depend on one another in their physical processes. One could characterize it in such a way that this light traveling between celestial bodies is a kind of thin but indestructible thread which keeps two twin-like figures necessarily tethered to one another, forming a chaotic web of delicately balancing moving parts, but one also understands that Descartes is speaking in literal terms as well: the water on Earth's surface is influenced by the moon above, a connection which results in the ebbing and flowing of the tides. He is a scientist, stressing the process of these connections, describing their internal functions, arriving at "knowledge" and "truth" by the standards of that which can be observed empirically and deconstructed. This is the method by which Descartes makes his (careful) critique of biblical thought.

That the Earth is entwined in this process of reflecting substances places us back within the metaphor of light and its subsequent reflection making as necessary to the creation or possibility of Man. And this is precisely where Descartes steps forward as well, writing that, after considering these bodies of light, he considers Man “because he is the observer of these things.”<sup>22</sup> Descartes’ proposal about the creation of Man has the potential to smell of a slight blasphemy. The mathematician is wary about challenging or adopting certain commonly accepted theories on the matter, so much so that he initially avoids the term “creation” altogether. Instead he makes a clever rhetorical move to distance himself from any potential accusations by proposing a story about “a new world.”<sup>23</sup> In such a story, rather than creating the world in its complete form as we observe it today, God created matter and then “from it a chaos as confused as any the poets could concoct,”<sup>24</sup> after which he then established the natural laws by which the world continues to operate.

Addressing his readers with the careful skill of a storyteller (or a poet), Descartes proposes that spontaneous generation need not be refuted entirely, for his theory of a slightly more gradual ordering of parts and conducting of laws concurs that God maintains our world by the same

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<sup>22</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 24.

<sup>23</sup> Descartes, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Descartes, 24.

methods in which he created it, and so Descartes avoids “doing injustice to the miracle of creation.”<sup>25</sup> This is demonstrative again of how Descartes emphasizes formation over completion, or rather that understanding the process of formation is what gives us true knowledge about complete beings and structures. He deconstructs the parts which constitute the making of every substance in order to substantiate the existence of those bodies and their operations. This is the model of stripping back, beginning with nothing, and building up slowly using tangible, verifiable blocks of solid truth. In other words, it is the process of “demonstrating effects from causes and by showing from what seeds and in what manner nature must produce them.”<sup>26</sup> Dissecting the fruit.

After having described all of that which is inanimate, be it light or fire or plant, Descartes ventures on to the description of animals and, as he says, “in particular to that of human beings.”<sup>27</sup> He begins by supposing that God created Man’s body much in the same way that he created the celestial bodies, composing the physical human form as we know it today, down to the very last organ. But the soul, that which truly makes Man what he is beyond his composite form, was not present at first. Instead it was “kindled in the man’s heart,”<sup>28</sup> growing due to a kind

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<sup>25</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 25

<sup>26</sup> Descartes, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Descartes, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Descartes, 26.

of heat without light, the same kind of heat which causes crushed grapes to form into wine.<sup>29</sup> I read this as a metaphor for time, by which the natural laws which God has applied to the substance “heat” occur throughout the body, working upon the body over time in order to produce the soul of the human, just as the fermentation of crushed grapes produces the final, holy achievement of wine.

But there is a distinction made between kinds of souls, for all animate beings have an “animal soul,” but only human beings also possess a “rational soul.” In order to explain how it is that the animals may have hearts physically resembling ours, yet still lack rational souls, Descartes describes the heart’s formative details. Building piece upon logical piece, he explains that more heat is contained within the heart than in any other internal function of the body, and blood moves between the heart and the rest of the body. These pieces are observable, knowable to us, by way of our eyes and our fingers and so it is as simple really, as deconstructing a clock, and understanding that it moves in accordance to the arrangement of its mechanisms.

From the understanding of the flow of blood, Descartes tells us of what he calls “the generation of the animal spirits.”<sup>30</sup> The animal spirits exist within all animals and humans alike, and they are

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<sup>29</sup> Descartes, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 30.

what cause the movement of the body, for this is the communication from the heart to the brain, which rises like “a very pure and lively flame,”<sup>31</sup> and allows for the nerves and muscles to move the body’s parts. But in distinguishing these animal spirits from the rational soul, Descartes comes to his famous (or perhaps infamous is more apt now), conclusions about the great difference between Man and Animal. For all this talk of machines and their interrelated functioning parts was to prepare us for the climax of the story, in which we find out that these animal spirits which move us are entirely independent of any notion of will. They move our bodies and cause us to experience certain sensations and exhibit certain internal instincts, all by a greater design; we are perfect machines, formed by the most perfect machinist. And yet for all that we are perfect machines together, animals and humans both made by the same skilled hands, we still feel that there is some difference, a difference so tangible and mysterious, between *us* and *them*, that it would be unthinkable in the final stages of this story not to uncover them once and for all.

Descartes observes that if one were to place two perfectly constructed monkey machines next to one another, one crafted by some hypothetical extraordinarily skilled man and the other by God himself, it would be entirely impossible to determine if the two had any differences in nature at

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<sup>31</sup> Descartes, 30.

all. While if the same experiment were to be applied to humans rather than monkeys, it would be immediately apparent who was real and who was the phony. And this is on account of two reasons which encompass the fundamental distinction between Man and Animal. The first is of course speech, or more specifically the ability to arrange signs in such a meaningful way that one is able to communicate their thoughts to others, thereby proving that one has thoughts in the first place. The second function is reason or will, which allows us at times to override the internal functions which produce our instincts or desires, whereas animals act only according to such mechanisms and do not therefore have “understanding.”<sup>32</sup> It is not a matter of having the right physical structures to produce speech or occasionally even producing speech, such as in the case of birds for example, but rather it is a matter of demonstrating that said speech is connected to thought and understanding. Animals therefore, have no reason at all, no “rational soul,” and to mistake that they do, for Descartes, is as treasonous a claim as denying the very existence of God.<sup>33</sup>

I would like to discuss why it is that Descartes appears in this last section of *Part Five* to be so offended by the notion that humans and animals might have kindred souls. Before he expresses this sentiment, he mentions something in brief which catches my attention. He writes,

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<sup>32</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 32.

<sup>33</sup> Descartes, 33.

“it is also a very remarkable phenomenon that, although there are many animals that show more skill than we do in some of their actions, we nevertheless see that they show none at all in many other actions. Consequently, the fact that they do something better than we do does not prove that they have any intelligence at all, for, were that the case, they would have more of it than any of us and would excel us in everything.”<sup>34</sup>

This apprehensive acknowledgement of those ways in which animals surpass us with certain abilities, followed by the quick dismissal of said strengths in an effort to ensure the proposed hierarchy of Man over Animal, is something which appears in Descartes’ letters to the Marquess of Newcastle as well. There he writes, “I am not disturbed by the astuteness and cunning of dogs and foxes, or all the things which animals do for the sake of food, sex, and fear; I claim that I can easily explain the origin of all of them from the constitution of their organs.”<sup>35</sup> Why “disturbed”? Coming to his own defense, Descartes seems compelled to stress that he is not afraid of the Animal’s power, for he is armed with the strongest tool imaginable: the weapon that is our reason. It is almost as though he privately suffers from nightmares, horrible terrors in which the uprising has finally come, and the cunning dogs and foxes, the talking birds, and the automatic monkeys have come to seek vengeance with their passionate souls. When he wakes from those feverish dreams, he wipes his hot brow and says a few reassuring words out loud to himself,

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<sup>34</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 33.

<sup>35</sup> Descartes, René. *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

ensuring that he still remembers how to use his tongue-d weapon, flaunting his carving skills and sharpening the blade so that he might always be ready.

There is more to it, I suspect. It is not only the fear of destabilization that seems to lurk behind Descartes' defensive remarks. We cannot forget where this all began, that this is a creation story first and foremost, and it intends as all creation stories do, to ease our anxieties about the how, and perhaps even more importantly, the *why*. For I believe this is what leads Descartes to write that,

“...there is none at all that puts weak minds at a greater distance from the straight path of virtue than to imagine that the soul of beasts is of the same nature as ours, and that, as a consequence, we have nothing to fear or to hope for after this life any more than do flies and ants. On the other hand, when one knows how different they are, one understands much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not subject to die with it.”<sup>36</sup>

This is an essential component of many creation stories, for just as terrifying as the question of where it all began, is the question of how it will end. Bound within Descartes' “*I think therefore I am*,” which is predicated upon knowing of the existence of God, is a much greater and more private despair that if I suddenly ceased to think, then what would become of that “I”? It is quite nice then, quite pacifying, to be reassured that although our bodies will die with the rest of them, our souls, our *selves*, will live on forever and that this is so because we know of God, and

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<sup>36</sup> Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” 33.



because he helped kindle our rational souls so that we became thinking beings, reasonable beings, beings who can claim an “I.” If this is not the case, then a very grim and very dark question begins to seep out like a foul odor from the abyss, begins tugging at our weak ankles, inviting or commanding that we fall into the enigmatic chasm: *What is all this for, anyways?*

**This is the story of the triangle made by God, the Animal, and I.**

Where is it sitting, my “I”?

How have you identified it is “I”?

What would you devote to meeting “I,” to knowing it? Would you, for it, forsake your “I”?

In *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil defined humans and reasoned about faithful human commission. Her creation story:

*“Creation is an act of love and it is perpetual”<sup>37</sup> and “we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves.”<sup>38</sup>*

To accept responsibility as co-creators of this world, we must imitate God who, in the act of creating us, resigned himself from being *everything* in order that we might become *something*.

Now that we are something we can see that we must relinquish being something and we must do so by mimicking God in whose image we were created.

We decreate our “selves.”

We then are creators as well.

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<sup>37</sup> Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Translated by Arthur Wills. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Weil, 80.

We are then God, or rather, God is us.

Firstly, we recognize what has been given to us by God through creation, namely the possibility to exist outside of him, or in other words “the self.”

Secondly and subsequently we point the will towards our duty to God, towards “*the refusal to exist outside God.*”<sup>39</sup>

Decreation is not destruction. It is not ruin.

Decreation is not extinction, for it does not lower us into the ground but rather raises us in an upward direction to greet what is high.

Decreation is transcendence.

It was necessary for us to firstly have been created.

*“For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time, and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough*

*“I” in us to make it possible to surrender the “I” for love’s sake.”*<sup>40</sup>

God leaves us, then replaces the vacated space with an “I.”

The “I” exists as God intended, as a test.

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<sup>39</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> Weil, 78.

All that which surrounds the “I” and feeds the “I” its meaning is necessary for us to think an “I.”

To foremost have an “I” is necessary to then give it away.

God must have been everything in order to give up being everything in order for us to become something.

We must have been something in order to give up being something in order for God to again become everything.

*“Being and having. Being does not belong to man, only having. The being of man is situated behind the curtain, on the supernatural side...My “I” is hidden for me (and for others); it is on the side of God, it is in God, it is God. To be proud is to forget that one is God...The curtain is human misery.”<sup>41</sup>*

What we have is “self” and “I.”

We must renounce the “I” which is not really I.

We mistake in believing it is separate from God.

I is God, “I” is not. Self is God, “self” is not.

We return God’s love to God truly and only when we allow him to love himself through us, for

*“his love for us is love for himself through us.”<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>41</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Weil, 78.

We decreate our “selves,” give our “selves” back to the one who created us so that he may love himself fully.

It is the only way to demonstrate proper gratitude.

If our bodies are balloons over inflated by ego:

*“A woman looking at herself in the mirror and adorning herself does not feel the shame of reducing the self, that infinite being which surveys all things, to a small space.”<sup>43</sup>*

The curtain and the mirror are metaphors in parallel.

The curtain and the mirror are veils which produce our pride and our misery.

True being does not reside within the mirror. True being resides within God on the other side the curtain. Behind the mirror.

The space on *the side of the other* is the space of the infinite and it is where love blooms and lives well.

The curtain protects us from nothing-being. The curtain is also the mirror in which we see our own reflection.

The mirror protects us from only-being.

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<sup>43</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 79.

It allows us to see an image to which we can tether a conception of a self.

The mirror allows for an “I” to be thought.

*“The self is only the shadow which sin and error cast by stopping the light of God, and I take this shadow for a being.”<sup>44</sup>*

We must not allow the self in the mirror to lead us to the conclusion that “being” has therefore been achieved or realized.

There is a distance which keeps us shielded from light.

The light would allow us to see where being, where “I” resides:

on *the other* end, where *the other* resides, past the chasm which currently stands between you and its source.

*“We have to die in order to liberate a tied up energy, in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things.”<sup>45</sup>*

We must kill the “self” in the mirror.

We look for God inside the mirror, but see only “I.”

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<sup>44</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 81.

God is not inside the mirror, God *is* the mirror.

When the curtain stands between us and him we cannot look directly at God/Self. We cannot love our God/Self.

We see only "I." The "I" must be killed in active duty to love.

The true relationship of things resides within the being of the other, and he shows us that he is everything and everything is him.

Through God we see that everything is everything.

Now I propose this:

As God is the ultimate *other*.

So Animal is the ultimate *other*.

The distance between our side and the other side is maintained by itself. By your "self."

When we look at Animal we do not look directly at Animal.

We look at Animal with the mirror positioned equidistantly between us so that even as we look in the direction of Animal, we are first and foremost looking at our "selves."

If we kill the self in the mirror the mirror is emptied. What is left is Animal and a cleared path to where it is waiting.

We will not find Animal inside the mirror, Animal *is* the mirror.

There is much to be said about the tradition of deifying animals but this is not the subject presently.

To consider instead what it might mean to love Animal as selflessly as one loves God.

To consider that God is an expression of connection which is ever-present throughout all fibers of being and that such a realization can only be properly contained by the infinitude of a love which is tied to responsibility and will.

To consider that Animal opens this very same path.

To become followers of Animal on this path.

Who has no "I" and is instead only being.

To denounce our pride which stands in the form of a mirror between ourselves and Animal.

To see Animal.

In decreation we give back what has been given to us by God.

Perhaps in *recreation* we might find another duty.

We came from Animal. And Animal sustains us.

Now we ask what it is that is our duty to give to Animal.



So that it may love itself through us as we have loved ourselves through it.

We must recreate ourselves.

To love once again that Animal is I and Self. To love my Animal/Self.

The true relationship of things is that Animal is everything and everything is Animal.

Through Animal we see that everything is everything.

*“We have to be nothing in order to be in our right place in the whole.”<sup>46</sup>*

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<sup>46</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 82.

### **Part Three: The Poetics of Becoming-With**

By its original meaning poetry means simply creation, and creation, as you know can take very various forms.

-Plato, *The Symposium*

**This is the story of poesis.**

The very beginning of the book *The Bow and the Lyre* by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz reads,

“Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandonment. An operation capable of changing the world, poetic activity is revolutionary by nature; a spiritual exercise, it is a means of interior liberation. Poetry reveals this world; it creates another. Bread of the chosen; accursed food. It isolates; it unites. Invitation to the journey; return to the homeland. Inspiration, respiration, muscular exercise. Prayer to the void, dialogue with absence: tedium, anguish, and despair nourish it. Prayer, litany, epiphany, presence. Exorcism, conjuration, magic.”<sup>47</sup>

It is for this reason that I believe in poetry to do the work which is required of us to feel animal and feel for the animal, which together may be expressed by saying “feeling *with* the animal.”

Theory, ethics, moral philosophy, the prescriptions of logic in steady dosages, they have taught humanity certainly, they have provoked thought certainly, but have they sufficiently moved and touched in the way that poetry moves and touches?

Poetry is a method of delivering truth from the locus of where irrational and embodied experience knots itself with language. It is a doing which affects further doings. Poetry looks at the world and *is* its truth, but it also takes up the world and shapes it into bodies of newly possible truths. It is always an act commissioned by the self, authored by the self, but it is also always brought into being, authored, by the world. Poetry begins from an individual and then

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<sup>47</sup> Paz, Octavio. *The Bow and the Lyre (El Arco Y La Lira): The Poem, the Poetic Revelation, Poetry and History*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1973, 3.

immediately opens itself, expands into a universal width. There is a tremendous significance in the invocation of religious language in the quoted section above, for the poetic voice is an activation of the most unexplainable and undeniably felt truths and so often occurs as a kind of spiritual or devotional response to reality. It is the act of praying, of exorcising, of conjuring, and even of feeding and consuming. And so it attests particularly well to matters of the self in nature, for this is often where one feels oneself most distinctly as having been taken up by the breath of the untellably sacred.

Both in what it produces and what it embodies or is, poetry requires laborious and devotional attention by way of the total activation of the senses and a full bodied engagement with the world. It is created through an active process which makes the poet a servant of her own attention to, and observation of, particularity, in order that she may effectively manifest and communicate that which captivates her in her surge of inspiration. Poetry also similarly implicates the reader in that its activated use of language requires the same focus of its audience that it does of the poet. In this way poetry produces further poets. And as Paz describes, poetry is also active in that through this close observation of and attention to the world, it unveils certain truths which are to be felt while also always tempting the boundaries of language and embracing the endless, experimental linguistic fodder which feeds the possibilities of new worlds.

Poetry is our animal language, and we may better claim ourselves as animals participating with the world, engaging and making with other animals, when we use our bodies to create it. It is a very high expression of love.

**This is the story of the individual life.**

Mary Oliver was a poet who loved the world. She walked among the open world, where she found that there were dogs and geese and trees and she felt they were in need of love poems. Or perhaps she was in need of confessing, because as she walked she found too much of which there was to say. She could not keep quiet. And that is a testament to the severity of her love, and to her constant pursuit of the kind of written word which could ripple, which could release one contained thought like a domino, except that rather than collapsing each piece as it is touched by the previous, the goal is to feed them taller, allow them to become more exposed. Here is a poem of hers with which to illustrate this point; it is called "Lead":

Here is a story  
to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter  
the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore  
that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long, sweet savoring of its life  
which, if you have heard it,  
you know is a sacred thing,  
and for which, if you have not heard it,  
you had better hurry to where

they still sing.  
And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.  
The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake,  
was dead on the shore.  
I tell you this  
to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world.<sup>48</sup>

This poem provides us with a necessary structure. It is like an instructional manual, except more God-like. If the task is to understand that some injustice has occurred, and therefore some response must follow suit, then it suggests that we begin with a story. And this story asks us for our permission to permit ourselves to feel a pain and then clutch it. The loon cries in a language which requires no translation, as it is the language of the living. It is difficult to hear, technically speaking, as our ears have fallen out of practice, and do not often search around for it. But sacred it is, to *hear one life* and from it the resonation of a limitless echo-string comprised of an infinite number of singular voices. It can only be heard in certain places, the speaker of the poem tells us, and these days fewer and fewer it seems. So we must go there, to this place. Each of us, we must

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<sup>48</sup> Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

go alone and listen to it. And then when the call of one living life is extinguished, you will notice its absence, because you heard it before it was too late.

What this poem by Mary Oliver demonstrates to us is how infinitely heavy the weight of just one individual case of anguish could always become. And too what it begs of us is that we do not shrink from compassion, that is, from *suffering with*. For once the heart has been broken open to receive even one living creature into itself, it cannot, due to instinct, un-know this process thereafter.

If there was to be something like a philosophy of suffering, its greatest challenge would be in remaining closely aware of the living individual. It is likely an issue which the field of history finds itself caught within from time to time, for death and suffering occur on a massive scale as often as they occur on an individual line of sight. But when we learn of a certain genocide, or a certain systematized practice which afflicts generations of living beings, or even when we simply reflect on the neuroses of the hive mind, we travel a great psychological distance in order to encompass something so large. And this distance between the self and the great large mass of suffering and dying selves feels necessary, for it reflects how the human eye works: a greater scope of information is to be contained by it the further that one zooms out. And so the distance



also perhaps protects us from the possibility that, as we attempt to reach out and understand that which we are studying, we may accidentally touch something which might infect us with our own despair, one that is certainly capable of eviscerating a human being.

But in doing so the distance forbids certain contacts which are essential for the practicing of justice and love. Faces, specificities, sounds, and smells, become so obscured that the presence of living bodies disappear almost entirely and instead come to be replaced by thoughts. And even those thoughts, over time, come to be less and less specific, less detailed because of the processing and coping mechanism by which we group all things which might conveniently be considered alike. The thought of thousands of chickens confined to a narrow dark building on one farm, sick and battered by their own beaks, by one another, and by the conditions of their lives, becomes the thought of millions of animals slaughtered yearly, becomes the thought of incalculable numbers, must then become the thought of what do we do about “The Animal?” And this return to the abstracted singular from the seemingly infinite, seems to have been crucial for the philosophers of ethics concerning animals, just as it has always been crucial for academics concerned with any marginalized “other” or subaltern, who speak of The Woman or The Black Man or The Black Woman or The Deaf or The Muslim or The Jew or The Native, all in generous pursuit of voice and sovereignty, with the astounding effect of eradicating complexity and

thereby abating the lived and embodied particularities of experiential beings. So when we write about “The Animal,” we must also stop to consider *this* or *that* animal, real singular life, for it is in the attachment to, and love of, particular and individual life, that we open ourselves to the potential of such a relationship with *all* life.

**This is the story of the Open and the animal gaze.**

Rainer Maria Rilke looked at animals. He wrote many poems about them which demonstrated the mastery of his attention to the details of experiential bodies. It is the kind of specificity and resonating truth which may only be accomplished by poets who choose to look closely, graciously, and wholly at that which captures their attention and pathos—and from there comes the fission of pathos from pathos, with the delicate curation and audacious rule-breaking and enlarging of the word and its sense. “The Eighth Elegy,” a poem contained within the collected *Duino Elegies*, is a poem that is of importance to many thinkers and writers concerned with animals, and I too would like to discuss its gravity and personal force of impact.

The poem begins:

“With all its eyes the natural world looks out  
 into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned  
 backward, and surround plant, animal, child  
 like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.  
 We know what is really out there only from  
 the animal’s gaze.”<sup>49</sup>

The world, this natural world as we often distinguish it, is introduced as a character which is comprised of many, sighted, creatures, all of whom must also purportedly be considered natural

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<sup>49</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria. “The Eighth Elegy.” *Duino Elegies And The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 49-53. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. New York: International Vintage Books, 2009, 1-6.

as well. In the climactic culmination of all of these eyes, this character becomes the greatest seeing force of what really is. The Open is difficult to define, and this is necessary for its function as an imaginative and truth-bearing significance. The only way to address the poetic sense of the Open, is with further poetry, otherwise it is threatened to lose its infinitude, which is its vibration. However, in its simplest condition, I conceive of the Open as pure living space. It is both external and internal: space which is occupiable, or capable of being touched, peered into, and also a kind of pulsating spirit which the living themselves may embody. The Open encompasses being, it facilitates the expression of all possibilities of all sensations and experiences contained within these words: "to be." And it does so without questioning. In fact, the Open is not capable of posing question at all. It is not capable of judgment or demand. What it is capable of however, is infinitely specific *and* universal: only space, only deliverance, only humming, only dance, only touching and unremitting turning.

Humans do not contribute their eyes to the collective sight of the natural world which sees the Open. Our eyes are turned away from the Open so that we do not see it, do not know it. And when we spot some creature which we see to be turned away from our gaze, because this creature is of course, facing the Open, we take offense to the seeming indifference they have to our strength and permanence. We see something free, and which does not even struggle first to

define freedom before it can exercise it, and we feel betrayed, alone, suspicious, resentful, terrified. That is why we trap the loyal creatures of the Open, train their loyalties around to serve us instead.

The child domesticated into human, the animal domesticated into pet, food, and spectacle, the tree domesticated into paper, the earth domesticated into property...

And yet still we know of them, sometimes even encounter them, those animals which walk in the Open with their gazes forward. We are far away from them, living in a different slice of this reality, a world which is its own distinct circle inside the greater sphere, although we seem to forget that we drew the curved line ourselves.

Another segment of the poem continues:

“Always there is World  
and never Nowhere without the No: that pure  
unseparated element which one breathes  
without desire and endlessly *knows*.”<sup>50</sup>

Our human circle then, we may call World. It lives in a negative relation to the Open, for in turning away from it—that pure living space—“where” is refused by us. There is a great attention to words which reading Rilke demands of the reader, as if to say that what it is that we

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<sup>50</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 16-19.

do with words is in fact what we do with lives. Our words desire to know the world, and so they attempt to separate that which is inseparable from itself, thereby creating a distilled reflection to represent that which is impossible to represent. In truth, knowing is a state of being which at its core does not require explanation in order to exist. And oftentimes this process of explaining is negating, is driving us further and further away from the thing we seek to grasp. *That is World* and it is a demanding and lonely terrain of great arrogance and whispered inadequacies.

The poem offers a brief moment of hope that some of us, in theory, *could* find the Open:

“Lovers, if the beloved were not there  
blocking the view, are close it, and marvel....  
As if by some mistake, it opens for them  
behind each other... But neither can move past  
the other, and it changes back to World.”<sup>51</sup>

Those who know and have known an intimate love shared with another human, seem to gain new eyes, or rather there comes a moment of clearing, where something appears suddenly like a hidden door in the chest of a forest tree, something which was unnoticeable until then, but which has obviously existed in genuine vivid color for thousands of years. To see such a sight, even for a moment, is to be able to testify to the certainty of magic and the conviction that it is only our fear and our resistance of the unthinkable and the irrational which keeps us from seeing it.

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<sup>51</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 25-29.

Still, the lover standing before another lover is standing in the way of total sight, as much of the eye is still too full of all the World contained within each individual, and the meanings communicated by their shared commitment to a human-World relationship. Still they face one another, and even as they see the Open lying in the distance, they each choose to travel in the direction of their partner, so they turn again away from their lust for the distant, unknown, and yet familiarly scented, Open.

“Forever turned toward objects, we see in them  
the mere reflection of the realm of freedom,  
which we have dimmed. Or when some animal  
mutely, serenely, looks us through and though.  
That is what fate means: to be opposite,  
to be opposite and nothing else, forever.”<sup>52</sup>

The World consists of objects. Perhaps even more properly we should refer to them as Objects, for they are the essential building units of World and the two depend on one another as endorsements. The Objects sustain the World; They are our possessions, our things, and they are also our words. With them we abstract and quantify, and especially qualify, our existence. They seem to be the most precious products of our own certainty. In fact Objects and World work cooperatively to substantiate us. But the poem suggests something quite horrific, which is that

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<sup>52</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 30-35.

we have fooled ourselves and one another into accepting only impressions and echos—a kind of advertisement and mass-production of light and being—as total realization and satisfaction.

We become the fragments that we make of the world, we become the words and all the other objects when we stand so far away and purvey over all of that which we have named and laid claim to. We become them, not despite our control of them, but precisely because we are creatures capable of building, destroying, and rebuilding Worlds. The entirety of the self becomes ensnared in a duty to this process which we believe to be uniquely ours:

“And we: spectators, always, everywhere,  
turned toward the world of objects, never outward.  
It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down.  
We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.”<sup>53</sup>

Returning back then to the previously quoted section, I ask, why is the animal so silent when it looks at us, and then through us, into the Open? And why are we incapable, so intolerant of its silence? In another section of the poem the speaker notes that humans see only death before them as they travel in the direction of World, while animals travel with God and with time when they walk directly into the Open. Is this what is meant by “fate,” that our relationship with death as a kind of knowledge or final truth is what keeps us running away from the Open? To know something in such a way that you may name, as we have named death, has long served us as a

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<sup>53</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 67-70.



thin comfort, and more so, as an undeniable objective. But perhaps this kind of knowing reveals our fear of death and meaninglessness, our fear of being the animals that we are, and so provides only further escape in more distant places, *farther* places to hide.

The animal however,

“...it feels its life as boundless,  
unfathomable, and without regard  
to its own condition: pure, like its outward gaze.  
And where we see the future, it sees all time  
and itself within all time, forever healed.”<sup>54</sup>

To face the Open as the animal does is to live. And unattached is that life to anything extra, or reflexive, or prefixed, or conclusive, which in reality negates, just as the “no” attached to the “where” turns pure space and being into the opposite of itself, into its mere reflection. And such is true, most significantly, of time, which we conceive of as another ruling object, operating in accordance with abbreviations and systemizations. What is time however, in the Open and to the Open creatures? It surpasses and denies fragmentation, it is always all of itself, which means that it is always limitlessly whole, cumulative, circular, and also preciously individual, singularly essential, and inimitable. This is what animals are, and why they are healed, while we are perhaps, on the opposite front line, deathly ill.

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<sup>54</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 39-43.

There was a time, we believe, when there was only one world for all of us. Something shifted and even the animal is not blind to the shift, as it too has some ancient memory of past earths where it knew man “more intimate[ly], more tru[ly]” with a “communion” which was “infinitely tender.”<sup>55</sup>

“Here all is distance;/ there it was breath”<sup>56</sup>

So finally the poem asks, how have we come here, to the edge of our circle, facing inward, searching for centrality while ignoring and abusing all of that which we have left behind, which lives in the Open behind our eyes, and ultimately shares its radial core with us:

“Who has twisted us around like this, so that  
no matter what we do, we are in the posture  
of someone going away?”<sup>57</sup>

“So we live here, forever taking leave.”<sup>58</sup> How do we return? How do we look at all that is so tiny and exceptional, and all that is so shared and perpetual, and learn to be beholden to it?

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<sup>55</sup> Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy,” 49-50.

<sup>56</sup> Rilke, 50-51.

<sup>57</sup> Rilke, 71-73.

<sup>58</sup> Rilke, 76.

**This is the story of the mirror and the image.**

There are some animals which we believe can recognize the image of their own body reflected by a mirror as being the same body, which contains the self, in and by which they are feeling.

The gorilla is such an animal of course and we call them, for this reason primarily, the intelligent animals. There are other animals which are far more mysterious to us, for it seems that there is no metric by which we could ascertain exactly what it is that they see when they glimpse the parallel world presented by mirrors. From the multiple opportunities I have had to watch my cat sit before a mirror, I have developed my own private theory that he knows exactly what it is that he is looking at, but that he simply has no use for it. By such sense I deem that he is likely the truly intelligent one.

We each spend a lifetime growing a heart that is co-conducted by a child and a wise elder. And this heart has an insatiable hunger for many things, but primarily only one thing, which is to know what is contained within the eyes of its own host, and the eyes of every eyeful creature with whomever it may happen to share some particular shape of space and time. Already there is always some distance, something wedged in between the space between the eyes of any two individual human beings, something like a lengthy book of mysteries and inconsistencies. But so far as one has been trained to read, no such book may ever pose a truly worthy threat, for our

common language relieves us of the fear that even other humans might be entirely unknowable.

The animals' eyes, however, are inexplicably dangerous, and that is because they are infused with some substance, some material which is impossible to read or write. And this is greatly thwarting, for it is the information contained by the animals' eyes which we feel most urgently that it must be written.

John Berger wrote quite a bit about seeing, about its significance as a vehicle for knowing, living, and making. In one particular essay he poses the question, "*why look at animals?*" By which he means why think or write about animals, but by which he also and more so means, why *look* at animals. There is this precious dichotomy—Man and Animal—which I am certain you have known and felt in your own right. Berger supposes that once Man and Animal had lived together inside the same circle, a circle which Man drew but that Animal roamed and climbed freely within. But now the animal walks along another circle, spins around a slightly larger circumference that has been drawn on the outskirts of Man's interior circle. By this process the recognizability and definability of human interiority becomes more graciously available and abundant, while the interior lives of animals are more unreachable than ever before. Still, it is the nature of concentric circles to maintain a parallel distance at all given points. And so Man and

Animals are running, each within their separate confinements, but always mirroring one another, and this has been achieved through meticulous design.

Berger writes that,

“what distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them.”<sup>59</sup>

To say that human syntax and abstract thought was generated from the inaugural moment of depicting the animals which surrounded us as symbols, suggests that that which is argued to justify our supremacy above them, was made possible only because we lived among them, and felt them to have some great and secret power of knowing the world.

“If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric,”<sup>60</sup> wrote Berger. A metaphor works by exhibiting how two distinct things run parallel to one another, that they are both alike and not, that they are each individual, but somehow also belonging to some collective sense or meaning. Typically however, in any metaphor there is the tenor, which is the true subject of concern, and the vehicle, which are the

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<sup>59</sup> Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals?" In *About Looking*, 3-28. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" 7.

terms of comparison by which the subject is described and explicated. Most often when we speak of the metaphoric relationship between Man and the Animal, we mean that animals have been vehicle-ized in order to make meaning for and about humans. The reverse is true as well of course, that we anthropomorphize animals in such a way which uses human terms as metaphor for animal life in order to create meaning. We apply the terms of human language and its subsequent productions upon the world, to the Animal in such a way that the animal must always be assimilated within the boundaries of human significance. And this significance has lost sight of that which concerns the animal *beyond* only that which it gives us, or that which we may take from it.

Animals have come to always signify something other than themselves. The game is to determine just what this something other may be. This is the practice of art and writing which uses the animal to moralize or syllogize. To play the game too often however, is to fall victim to the danger of forgetting that there is more world outside of this game and its players. And to make of the animals, manipulated pieces.

And so the Animal is a construction, “a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species.”<sup>61</sup> Our loneliness for proof of self is what led us to build the mirror, and what drives our

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<sup>61</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” 6.

steps towards its poison comfort. There is disappointment in the climactic moment when one comes to face the mirror and discovers the absence of God inside its frame. Man's loneliness is that he has been abandoned there inside the mirror; created in God's image and yet Man's own image does not reflect his Creator back to him. Instead he is alone with his two selves, his mirror self and the other.

Would he be less lonely if he could talk to the Animal? "The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man."<sup>62</sup> This creature, so like and unlike, so distant and yet parallel, has a gaze which sees us as we are part of all that is Everything. It is when we witness ourselves being seen as such that we realize that we only *thought* we were capable of such a God-like vision, but in fact we have not seen ourselves running through the Everything. We have only ever seen ourselves, like a hanging picture, framed by the mirror.

When Man looks into the mirror, he finds another creature which is waiting there with patient stillness, sitting tidily in the background of the mirrored dimension. It is the Animal, always behind Man, always following him from a consistent distance. Man looks at the reflection of the Animal next to the reflection of his self. The mirror distorts distance (the cars are always closer

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<sup>62</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" 5.

than they seem, it is warned), and Man wonders if the Animal has finally crept close enough to steal him away into its world. He fears that the Animal might want something of him, and he fears not knowing what it is. “The animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension.”<sup>63</sup> What does it see when it looks at Man inside the mirror? Perhaps if he could reach inside those eyes, he might pull out an endless string which begins to unravel all that he has ever been unable to find and it will finally reveal itself to him as a texture and a heat that he may hold in his hands. Man flings his gaze behind himself and arrives in a locked embrace of visions with the Animal. How was it able to adjust so quickly, to meet his eyes just as he turned, as if no time or space at all existed between the mirrored reflection and his own body? By what kinds of sorcery does the Animal deny time its hold on our movements, deny the mirror its authoritarian ruling of the real?

All it knows is to look there where you have asked to be seen. But now that you have asked to be seen here, where no shiny surface protects you from the direct gaze of the animal upon you, your gaze upon its gaze finds itself stunned.

The Animal *knows*, only it will not tell, or at least that is how it seems to us with our unsophisticated, shallow ears. “Always its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its

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<sup>63</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” 5.



distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man,”<sup>64</sup> and so Man sits there, on his side of the narrow abyss, and wonders what would happen if he turned back again to face the mirror.

Would the Animal find him there again, in that other realm, or would it finally grow tired of being unheard, and abandon Man to be alone forever with his self? For when the Animal walks it does not look back.

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<sup>64</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” 6.

**This is the story of a philosopher who sounds like a poet.**

In french “je suis,” meaning I am, is conjugated from the verb “suivre” meaning to follow, and so Jacques Derrida asks, what is it that I mean when when I say “je suis:” “I am” and “I follow?” Considering the self in the tradition of Descartes’ longing, but in a movement which isolates principles, individuals, and seemingly singularly intended utterances, in order not to produce linear satisfactions, but rather intending ecstatic, multiplicitous, crossbreeding, knotty complexion, Derrida produces in his essay a mess to which I am in writerly attendance. When one word or phrase divulges into streams of meaning, that is when one begins to understand how it is that all of life functions, and that language often does succeed in the notation of experience in this regard specifically.

Derrida is prompted to ask this question of his self (who I am and following), because of a cat. Not the “*figure of a cat*” who, according to the collected evidence will “*silently enter the room as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse myths and religions, literature and fables,*” but instead “*a real cat.*”<sup>65</sup> Derrida exerts his linguistic efforts to expose this issue of universalizing, tokenizing, epitomizing, and so forth as it makes reduced puddles of that which is the animating source of stirring experience. To notice, as John Berger does, that

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<sup>65</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 369-418. Digital file, 37.

each lion has become “Lion,”<sup>66</sup> is to question why such vast distances were traveled away from home in an effort to return home. As Jean-Christophe Bailly writes: “the animal, animality, all these singulars...are, as Derrida has insistently reminded us, simply terms that allow thought to avoid following the real paths of the animal world.”<sup>67</sup> For Derrida then, thought is born directly out of personal interaction with this specific cat, who witnesses the man naked and causes him to witness himself being witnessed, naked, by a cat. An individual animal, which lives within its own specificity in our physical world and looks upon this individual man, not for the purposes of allegory, but for the simple reason that is also an unreason. The cat looks with its full attention at the naked man and *sees*, and in return the man can then see the cat: “I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized.”<sup>68</sup>

From there the thought follows:

“If I am to follow this suite [en suite, meaning “following”] then, I move from “the ends of man,” that is the confines of man, to “the crossing of border” between man and animal. Crossing

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<sup>66</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” 7.

<sup>67</sup> Bailly, Jean-Christophe. *The Animal Side*. Translated by Catherine Porter. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 378-9.

the borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself. . .”<sup>69</sup>

In the moment where his gaze and the cat’s gaze meet in living recognition of each other, Derrida sees himself in a relation of seeing, of time, and of proximity. He feels shame for being looked upon in this state of nakedness, for he senses himself as being seen, perhaps caught, in the moment which precedes his being Man. He is, as we are, haunted by those two who, upon eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, became aware of their nudity as shameful and indecent, and became the only animal to dress itself. *This* is what distinguishes us, he suggests, not any language, for animals with good sense know that all animals communicate, but rather the donning of clothes which transforms man from animal, into animal at unease with itself—the domesticated, and, as he cites Nietzsche here, “promising animal” or “an animal that is permitted to make promises.”<sup>70</sup> The animal which fears its own animal nakedness as something perhaps just *too* animal. Derrida must ask how he himself is animal next to this other animal, who by looking at his naked pre-promised body, reveals to Derrida that “before” and “after” are two words which share one sense, and that these synonyms reveal their communion through the magnified examination of one another’s distinction, which can only be achieved when standing face to face. And when he asks himself this question he realizes that in fact he must ask the

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<sup>69</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 372.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, 372.

animal, he must ask this cat, and when he asks himself to ask this cat he realizes he must not ask at all, but rather he must listen.

He writes, “before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* an animal that no longer has the sense of nudity? Who am I therefore? Who is it that I am (following)? Whom should this be asked of it not of the other? And perhaps of the cat itself?”<sup>71</sup> Is being seen naked by the cat inciting a shame for recognizing oneself as also animal? When standing before this cat, who does the “I” of Derrida’s self become, and who does it then also follow? He himself cannot answer this question, the answer is held by that other who witnesses him naked there, that other who is the cat. But how does one extract the answer from this animal who seems not to “speak”? To this Derrida says, “the said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means.”<sup>72</sup> It is not the shortcomings of other animals that they do not speak by the conditions which we desire them to, but rather it is our stubborn inability to know what is meant, in all its sensory senselessness, by a response. For that is what the animal (here it is this cat), communicates: its *response*. When I speak of response in a strictly human sense, I mean art, I mean writing, I mean stories, I mean *words*. But when I mean to mean response as it escapes from animals—as it occurs between all

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<sup>71</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 374.

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, 377.

living beings and the totality of the earth—I mean something far more boundless and unrestrained, something which can only, in fact, be constrained by the synthetic limitations of human response.

When Derrida feels his naked shame, which I venture to call his fear as well, he finds that to untangle the logics of his self as it meets and is greeted by the individual animal, in a moment which is situated in the density and sacredness of particularity, he finds himself incapable of drawing straight lines, from signifier to signified, from animal to man, from body to response:

“One thought alone keeps me spellbound: dress myself, even a little, or, which amounts to the same thing, run away—as if I were chasing myself out of the room—bite myself, bite my tongue for example at the very moment that I ask myself, Who? But, *Who* then? For I no longer know who I am (following) or who it is I am chasing, who is following me or hunting me. Who comes before and who is after whom? I no longer know where my head is. Madness: “‘We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.’” I no longer know how to respond, or even to respond to the question that impels me or asks me who I am (following or after whom I am (following) and the way I am running.”<sup>73</sup>

To dress himself would be to admit his fear of being animal himself, to run from himself as animal. To ask for logic to be extracted from this moment of two meeting gazes, which necessarily neither shares nor partakes in words, is to realize that whatever sentence is hoped to be synthesized, whatever order you may ask for these two bodies to be placed within, whatever lines you wish to connect in order to form a perfect clearing of a path, all perish under the

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 379.

monstrous beauty of the interactions of living beings: complex, irrational, and in every sense inseverable. The result is madness, it could only ever be madness. This is *precisely* what we ought to seek as we run unreasonably through wild thickets of activity and response. For it is in the madness of deconstructing language that we arrive at the madness of deconstructing selves, and we reach beyond language and beyond the self into something which can be touched with the animal being in itself.

What now follows is this: “I am inasmuch as I am *after* the animal” or “I am inasmuch as I am *alongside* the animal.”<sup>74</sup> What is “I am”? It is “*being-with,*” with the animal. What is “I am”? It is “the being-pressed, the being-with as being strictly attached, bound, enchained, being-under-pressure, compressed, impressed, repressed, pressed-against....”<sup>75</sup> This is where I seek to emphasize the extraordinary revelations of this work. Derrida himself admits its urgencies, as it indeed regards the greatest questions of humanity, the largest philosophical currents which drive us to *think*. To think about “what is meant by living, speaking, dying, being and world as in being-in-the-world or being towards the world, or being-with, being-before, being-behind, being-after, being and following, being followed or being following, there where *I am*, in one way or

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 379.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida, 380.

another, but unimpeachably, *near* what they call the animal.”<sup>76</sup> There is absolutely no time left for denying our relations to animals, our co-constitutive beings and becomings. For it was always true before and shall always be true after. This is the radical proposition which Bailly describes as such, that “perhaps it is only here, in proximity to animals, then, that we truly encounter the whole fabulous conjugation of the verb *to be*.”<sup>77</sup>

Finally it is crucial to note that Derrida takes issue with the philosophers, the academics and the thinkers who have thus far addressed animals, and seeks in his own investigations of language to address that which they have neglected. It seems to him that their writing demonstrates that they have never allowed themselves to be looked upon, naked, “by an animal that addressed them.”<sup>78</sup>

And so their thinking does not encapsulate being, it does not reach out to *being-with* and embrace the very individuals which it claims to be concerned with. The philosophers have extracted the mind from the body in order to achieve something profound, in a secluded state, away from the distractions of impulsivity, irrationality, madness. And too they have distanced themselves not only from their own bodies, but from the bodies of others as well. I embrace then, as Derrida suggests, that “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from

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<sup>76</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 380.

<sup>77</sup> Bailly, *The Animal Side*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 382.



poetry,”<sup>79</sup> for it is the only thing which could contain the mess of these bodies and these words as they are always entangled, as a metaphor is always rooted to specific experience while also speaking to the whole of relational possibility.

The aim of such poetry must then consider how to capture the universal soul within the story of the individual, and to touch being with its words in such a way that touches, in the visceral sense, beings and stirs within them an undying devotion and impulse for movement. The poem must will us to come face to face with the cat again and again so that when “faced with a cat that continues to see me, to watch me leave when I turn my back on it, a cat that, from that moment on, because I no longer see it seeing me still, from behind, I thus risk forgetting,”<sup>80</sup> we may promise instead to remember.

Evolution of the human conceives of itself with linear strategy, just as the making of time itself was drawn as an arrow with only one head. We are domesticated, promising animals, always striving for more perfect domesticity and more perfect promises. We hope then to craft this domesticity, and promise our promises not only to ourselves as animals afraid of our own animality, but to the animals who are not us: the others. Part of our great domesticity is revealed

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<sup>79</sup> Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 377.

<sup>80</sup> Derrida, 381.

in interaction with the gaze of another animal, the cat, whom we have also swept along with us into the domestic world with promised food and prolonged life, and yet who maintains a refusal of the shaming prescriptions of civilization. A house cat knows freedom still. And were we to, and if we do, look carefully at what it is “to be *this* being and to be it in *this* way in *this* instant, in the serendipity of this instant,”<sup>81</sup> we might find, as Derrida did, an exposed chain-linking of sweet lively madness.

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<sup>81</sup> Bailly, *The Animal Side*, 46.

**This is the story of following the animal into the Open.**

An experience recounted by Jean-Christophe Bailly. Driving with the highway, which is a tunnel of light bravely charging the thirstiness of black night. A deer puts on its shoes in order to withstand the walk across the bridge between the natural world and the man-made road which slices the animal dimension in two. It was built for travelers from the other, human, parallel world, and it caused a rift in the fabric of the non-space, a gap of cold light where the deer must now always tread carefully. The driver slows to a crawl before the deer. The driver *chooses* to *follow* not hunt. The driver is now the child that he once was *before*. The deer is before him, he is before the deer and now the time of his World, and the non-time of the deer's non-World are suddenly *both outside*, as suddenly *both* of these creatures are *inside* of a wholly third place, together. It is because of *this* deer, and *this* night, and *this* man, and *this* choice, that *this* happens:

“It was as if with my eyes, in that instant, for the duration of that instant, I had touched some part of the animal world. Touched, yes, touched with my eyes, despite the impossibility. In no way had I entered that world; on the contrary, it was rather as if its strangeness had declared itself anew, as if I had actually been allowed for an instant to see something from which as a human being I shall be forever excluded, either the nameless, purposeless space in which animals freely make their way, or the other way of being in the world that so many thinkers through the ages have turned into a background against which to highlight the supremacy of humankind.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Bailly, *The Animal Side*, 2.

In the hospitality of the light which these two particulars shared, beyond time or perhaps at the very center of it, where there is only the micro-delicacy of monadic life, a human's gaze surrendered with love to the eloquent body of an animal, and so glimpsed, for a breath, into the current of the Open. So in following, opens the possibility of becoming-with.

**This is the story of who I am dreaming of and of who I am when I am dreaming.**

Recurring dreams are personal mythologies. We recite them like fragmented prayers, each one a gifted crumb dropped down by God who eagerly awaits your answer in return. Your answer never comes, each delicious crumb leaves you hungrier than before. In my dream I am at home and a stranger comes through my door. It is a cat, and she has followed me to find me here. *I* am the one she was looking for, and she has found me because her paws are infused with the spirits of delicate maps and her nose is an immortal compass and her ears had already learned the timbre of my voice before I had ever even spoken. I had cried out for her but forgotten that I'd done so. I had done it in my sleep, had a dream while I was dreaming, one from which I did not wake and so was never able to record. When the cat comes her homecoming conjures up the arrival of other cats. Others follow. In one particularly memorable dream one of the cats died. I found myself, with a desperate insistence, trying to convince the surviving animal not to abandon me. But she died too of course, from grief, for she loved the other animal more than me. My lack of fur or barbed tongue excludes me from certain intimacies, I know. In this recurring dream of mine, I always feel afraid. I search after myself in searching after a cat who searches after me. Always I am the "animal that is permitted to make promises" and always I promise to contain these other animals in my home, to find some method by which to keep them there. This is a

promise I make to myself, for in promising to care for this other animal, I am promising to care for my animal self. In the dream the cat is following me, but in dreaming of this I am the one who is revealed, and my lovesick desires no longer have a place to hide: *I am* the one longing after the animal, *I am the one following, in search of a human-animal love and fellowship, I am when I am following the animal.*

**This is the story of how I speak with the cat who lives with me.**

*“It is not credible that Nature has denied us this resource that she has given to many other animals: for what is it but speech, this faculty we see in them of complaining, rejoicing, calling to each other for help, inviting each other to love, as they do by the use of their voice? How could they not speak to one another? They certainly speak to us, and we to them. In how many ways do we not speak to our dogs? And they answer us. We talk to them in another language, with other names, than to birds, hogs, oxen, horses; and we change the idiom according to the species.”*

-Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*

Pablo Neruda wanted to speak to the animals and so he wrote, *“I want to speak with many things/ and I will not leave this planet/ without knowing what I came to seek,/ without investigating this matter;/ and people do not suffice for me,/ I have to go much further/ and I have to go much closer.”*<sup>83</sup> Feeling that he was right, I took his advice, abandoned people and tried to get closer. I studied my cat with the attention of a poet and the intention of a shapeshifter. Perhaps we could speak if I became in my body like him.

I sought homeschooling, or, the method approach. Home on the couch with the window open, I caught myself completely enamored by the sound of 1) trees making promises with wind and 2)

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<sup>83</sup> Neruda, Pablo. *Bestiary/Bestiario: A Poem Pablo Neruda*. Translated by Elsa Neuberger. Illustrated by Antonio Frasconi. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

cars going somewhere. I was in perfect mirrored synchronicity with the cat who was perched there too. And I looked at him and reassured him, "I will write this down."

I do not know many animals. One day I hope to travel to meet them and speak with them, but before then I *pray*, that they will be patient and I will be practicing. As I am writing this, there is only one that animal I know. He is a cat, who has lived seven previous calendar years of a life, the content of which is unknowable to me. We have shared eight calendar months of a life in the same home, temporary for us both, and for over 200 nights, and also several daytime hours, we have slept in the same bed.

Sweet, sun bleached fur, he is the color of the hardwood floor sought out by sunlight. He has seen me every day. I begin each day with his seeing of me. He likes to sit on the plank of wood, refashioned as window ledge, which some other gracious innovator thought to leave there on my radiator. It is his hot skillet throne, upon which he is buttered bread lightly toasting. And he watches me while he is sitting there. He is what is meant by "sitting." No human has ever accomplished sitting, for sitting is more than a temporary relinquishing of the behind's responsibility to an unsuspecting chair. Sitting is how this cat does it; When he is sitting, his svelte flesh, his corn chip fur, his boxing glove paws, his olympic whiskers, his sacred and well



worn love-letter eyes, his babe mewl, his vital hunt, his operations in their concomitant implementations—they are all sitting too. He is alive with all the sincerity of death.

He watches me as I change in my bedroom, from a naked sleep self to a clothed prepared self.

There are a few things which I can see from *my* side of the room. I can see that there is no time or distance between this cat and the surface upon which he his sitting. Both are hot with sterling blood. One, singular, concerted current of heat, which he feels, and I see. What does he see of me from his vantage point? Does he feel there is no time or distance between himself and the curling of my naked flesh? From where do I summon the audacity to ask him to reveal such private and genuine observances of truth? And if he obliged such a request, how would I embrace the inevitable disintegration of me?

Derrida described his cat's gaze as "the gaze of a seer, a visionary, or extra-lucid blind person."<sup>84</sup>

A being of perpetual seeing, who sees beyond eyes and words, *that is this* cat. There is no way to name it, but its effect is cloudless; No one has ever seen me like this, far more than naked, *translucent*. He shows me that I am not a reflective surface for the light, I am its prophet. I speak for the beam, but the beam's origin is tethered to the confidential centre of him, this cat, who

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<sup>84</sup> Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 372.

emits the beam like an angel mother. I try with all my might to open my pores and let it touch me all the way through.

Are you a secret god, my cat? Are you carrying a gift addressed to my name? I am trying to record everything you have whispered to my dreaming, believing this to be my sacred occupation. When will I learn the meaning of what your gaze has said of me, of this world, and of my devoted transcendency? I promise not to turn my back as you blind me with your searchlight. I promise to let it eat me just as I have been eating you.

**This is the story of loving the other.**

*“Love is a more inclusive term, since it signifies fellowship in suffering, in joy, and in effort.”*

-Albert Schweitzer, *The Ethic of Reverence for Life*

Sit with me for a moment. Have you, do you, ever sit in the way that cats do? The way that cats do when they leap and land by the measures of premeditated calculation, into intended position?

The muscles come to a complete silence, like that of an ancient statue of a sphinx, they sit completely. In all of their moments they belong to all of history's past and all of the present's future.

Try sitting just like this. It is not entirely simple. You must close your eyes and try to become embalmed in the absence of your own noise. And you must let your body surrender to an unqualified stillness. If you do it you will find that you are mutating into the architecture of the everywhere around you. There will be no distance between yourself, your still body, and everything, everything else. And only then will you find that you can hear me. My voice, the architecture. My voice, the sensation. The words my mouth are shaped like are illegible, so you must make yourself into an illiterate being who sits at the very beginning of the creation of the world. In this stillness, this silence, every molecule of a second is charged by the infinite capacity

of possibility. It is the moment where there is *nothing* and yet also there is all that could possibly be *something*. There is total enrapturing darkness, and there is a single, soft, slender tunnel of light where dust particles sparkle like freedom.

Only in this moment are you really *in* love. For although I trust in your own familiarity with these muscular words, I am afraid that you still know very little of what it *is*. *Knowing* this quality is not to be mistaken with a *doing* or a *performing* or a *speaking* or a *crying* or a *decrying*. No, this would be a misplacement, this would be to take the exit off the highway and park the car in some familiar driveway, rather than ride the highway, not in seeking of a destination, but rather to ensure that you do not miss the opportunity to drive, to stop before the deer as it emerges from the brush, while you still can.

To be in love: *being in* love. That is, for your being to fall into a new texture of this old world. These textures are endless, overwhelmingly so, but trust that you are equipped with a profound memory, a memory that began its accumulation at the conception of time. Your heart is a snowball of the greatest density and proportions: it has been rolling along the ground for all of history, never resting, for it could not even if it so desired. The ground keeps turning, the sun keeps laughing, the night keeps chanting, we keep dying, and all of it, everything, is unceasingly

living. You have nothing to fear then, in the stillness of your body, because the heart will beat dutifully, as it has and will for all eternity. There is a rhythm, a resonant base which is vibrating in all directions, and you must place your trust in it. This is how you relinquish your being into love.

But for now your being is only what you *know* best. It is all that is your self, with which you believe that you touch all that is else. But for now when you touch, you are like the bibliophile, running her fingers along the spines of every book on every shelf, reading each name she passes as a measure of security by way of irreversible instinct. So you must forget that you have learned to read. Close your lips and let the tongue be still like the rest of your muscles. Close your eyes and begin listening. Still your self, forget.

What do you know of the other, *your* other, with whom you are in love? Name the color of their eyes, sure, you have an impeccably trained memory from infinite years of practice. Describe the practice of their chewing, the sound of their sleeping, the texture of their fur: this list is inexhaustible, for what you *know* of the other, is everything, or more precisely you have the potential of an endless *knowing* of this sort. But when we say *with whom you are in love*, we reduce this “with” and this “in” to the status of colloquialisms, that is to the practicing of words

as words, which are so easy, so effortless to read now, that we never pause to decipher them. This is why you must forget how to read and remember what it is like to begin anew: like when you were a child, or even further back, to when you were only freshly born, or even further still, to when you were still animal.

We do not realize that it is the newborn moments which we are fearing, for such a discovery would reveal the depths of our cowardice. Instead we practice fearing history and we chew our nails over imagined future endings. Terror stricken by the silence of conception, by the stillness which precedes reactionary movement, by the nothingness of death. For these are the moments in which we find that we are suddenly not our selves, and when we cannot locate our selves, we are impotent in imagining whatever else there could possibly be. So there is some desire to eliminate those precursory moments, to exist only as reflection, as though any space devoid of our reflection is poisonous if we were to expose ourselves to it for too long. Such space might very well eliminate us entirely. Such space proposes our greatest despair.

But this space, it is the space of the other. It is the space where the other lives in its being. And we must enter it, with our own being, so that we may be *with* the other, *in* love. To be alongside another being with your own being, in a space which is now comprised of your two interacting,

co-influencing worlds, and to still the self so as to properly hear the silence of the space which precedes any movement or reaction, this is *being-in*. And this is the most necessary first step to *becoming-with*.

There is something about love which brings each individual it entangles the pleasure of a mirror. When you gaze into your lover's eyes you delight in the tiny reflection of yourself which you see there. Another's loving touch may cause the sensation of your own skin to take on a new meaning, and for the very body to which you belong to take on a new form. There is no shame in such transformation; It is a nourishing kind of growth and response. There is no shame in seeking to be nourished, to be watered with care so that your roots will grasp more firmly to the soil, your stems will reach taller towards the sun, and your pigments will be flushed with greater green intensity.

But there is danger in delighting too long in the presence of reflective objects. A mirror is ultimately a shallow, two dimensional surface, which only gives the *impression* of wholeness.

And the other is not an object. The being which you love is not solely a metaphor or symbol which you may endlessly write and rewrite. Certainly at times this writing of the other is our most compassionate and thoughtful means of thanking. Often it is the metaphor which expresses

our love with the most depth, urgency, and attention we feel we are capable of. I do not deny such impulses nor the weight of such feats. It is, in most ways, the method of my current venture here. Yet I tell you to abandon reading and myself continue to write. I tell you not to fear the absence of your own response and yet it is the absence of my own response, as it takes shape here, that I myself fear most. But I do not aim to dismiss our human responses to the world, in fact I aim to embrace them more wholeheartedly. But we must breathe our words, so that we may allow them to penetrate our flesh and mingle with our blood. We must imbue our *animal spirits* with this responsibility: a responsible and reactionary moving with the world. An instinct of responsibility.

And to do this we must embrace the space before reaction, in which nothing is yet created, in which instead there is only one necessary component: attention. In stilling the body, in sitting like a cat, in ceasing to seek for a moment the pleasure of our symbols and what they show us of ourselves, we begin listening, and we become open. This is the most primary and fundamental condition of loving another. It is the moment in which the child begins to learn to read and each word is heavy with the slow materiality of sounds in their own right, it is the stillness of the self which engages the entirety of the body. Allow your attention to be held entirely by some other,



listen to the language of their breathing body with your own; for such a language is universal,  
and rejects translation.

## Part Four: Becoming-Beast

The lovely human beast always seems to lose its good spirits when it thinks well...

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

**This is the story of how Men are Beasts.**

John Gardner imagines the life of *Beowulf's* other protagonist, Grendel, the monster who terrorizes the kingdom and must be slain in the preservation of humanity and its good. To rewrite a story from the perspective of the villain is a kind of political report which aspires to consider complexity as something which we must learn to love to fear. Gardner's Grendel is a beast by all accounts: lonely, murderous, lovesick, vengeful, selfish, hot-hearted, and hairy. He lingers like a four-legged leech, between his two worlds: his soggy underground cavern which he shares with his sluggish, grunting mother, and the above world, where humans and animals and trees grow amongst each other without much fear that their daily proceedings be interrupted by some unnatural fiend from the depths of hell. Grendel terrorizes, this much was already gathered from the original telling of the story. But what is gained for the reader now, as she is situated, perhaps somewhat uneasily, within the perspective of the beast's mind, is that this creature suffers greatly from its own disunified existence.

He prays to belonging. He walks along the very edge of someone's private land, where it meets the beginning of the free dirt, the very same place where shadows drink the light. Grendel is angry, because his love is violent, and with each cacophonous, serrated howl of love and despair

and hatred, he is cast further and further out, towards final solitude, to be drowned in the infinite, godforsaken, nighttide sea.

The beast commits a holy act, of worship *and* of sin, because he joins the ill-fated lovers Mind and Body, Man and Animal. He remembers more than we do, of his own childhood, because when he is angry and also he is loving, he screams to the firmament and so he knows the possibility of feeling for its own sake, feeling without the accompanying nausea of time as a slippery fish, without questions and answers, without “why.”

It is “why” that makes man run into the arms of death. Man gives everything a name and he spends his days memorizing and reciting them to his own reflection, hoping they will reveal their invisible significance to him. Before he dies he hopes to collect every secret which God has hidden in the pores of all substance, hidden there *for* him.

Sometimes the beast cannot help but to also scream “why” at the sky, where the stars are always laughing back in two part harmony. Does he expect, as Man does, for a God to be sitting there?

Or does he only hope that his screaming will be heard by Man? When the beast speaks, Man makes little sense from his words, for the words escape from his mouth in a different shape. The

beast has a voice like birds' wings and toads' leaps and deers' tails and gorillas' chests: too untranslated, too moving for Man's weak heart to bear.

Sometimes, privately, the beast feels shame for not being a man. There is some hand which pushes on his back, leading him towards Man's home, causing him to dream of sleeping there among the others. He stalks outside the walls which make up human spaces, where the trees are whispering dirty truths about everyone's business. He knows he is invitation-less. But he loves to hear the poet, who comes to tell beautiful lies to the men in the house. Why does the poetry sound like it was meant for the specificities of the grooves of his ears alone, when in fact it was written for all of Men and their big wars?

Inside of the house, Man is calling one thing a thing. When he encounters the body of the other and he dissects it into bits for swallowing. He is tearing the other up, limb from limb, because he is an insatiable machine instructed to take apart other machines for repurposing. And he feels at the end of the day, that these disassembled parts are his trophies to kiss and that he has proved himself infallible, triumphant like a real king. Then he will return to his bedroom alone and look inside the mirror. He will see his fat belly, his face and hands bloated with the blood of his captives. Enraged, he will run the entirety of his quaking force into the mirror, and collapse to

the floor as another piece among the shattered pieces. And he will lie there in pieces all night long with no one to hold him together, choking from time to time, on the bones of the fragmented.

Man has tried hunting the beast, slicing the beast, and even eating him. But each time that Man hunts the beast, the beast hunts him in return. They face one another like mirror reflections and speak in simultaneously in parallel languages, "I am not you," and so they move eternally hunting themselves. Are they willing to persist in their war of interpretation until someone is dead and alone? Anything to silence the mad voice which each of them separately hears, whose source each one suspects is the torturing project of the other.

**This is the story of how I become-beast.**

I exist in between two worlds well defined. I am neither-or but everything, a re-appropriation, a mixture which makes me plural, a private interpretation expressed by generously open metaphors by which I have created myself. When looking at my reflection I see the ever-improving results of my tireless practice of becoming a sculptor. I am the poet of my body clay, the shaper who tells lies so beautiful, they become true. I hope for a poem to free me, to hold each necessary segment of my fearful and courageous meat together with the promise of authentication.

There are shameful, darker days, when I wish my animal body away, when I wish upon myself an exorcism, to rid myself not of demonic spirits, but of animal flesh, which in truth I know is not a creation of any sort, but instead a simply neutral, living mass. These are the days when I do not agree to bear the torment of being interpreted by others. I beg someone, God perhaps, to relieve me of the self infliction, and the interpretation too, of myself, by myself, that accompanies each passing glimpse of my own face and thoughts of actualization.

A beastly body could be free, so I dream of myself as beast like this: To be alone in the full world, to look with a big eye at everything and see every single point inside a line, to be so small and also so big that I suddenly and finally know what it means to consume and be consumed by

the living body of the Everything. To fall in love with the Everything which is sometimes so hideous that I must bang my beastly head against irritatingly stoic trees and scream. To eat all of the Everything until I am never empty and always only everything, as slovenly and sick, as round and richly crowded as the earth itself. To slowly turn over and wrap in perfect one-to-one ratio each square inch of my flesh with the big dirt of the world. To cause the world to turn with my running as I become time itself. To scream when I must and can, and lay wherever there is a hole for me, which is everywhere. To carry a forever length string of nows in my pocket and drop them like crumbs where I walk. To be unceasingly lonely and so fold every being I encounter into all the possible openings of my flesh. To become so heavy with life that I am then weightless enough to be suspended by the same magic which keeps the planets hanging in the heavens, always turning in their designated perfect alignments within the infinite celestial spaces. To become the world.



**This is the story of when I woke up, opened my eyes to a beam of light.**

This is not what I had in mind. When I dreamed like a kid again about becoming beast. I wanted to see. A new way to want the world. I wanted my body to melt in the kiln and for God to start me over again. Only body will I be then. Not even "I." Just body will be. There was a new story in there. Somewhere in between before and after the ones I have read already. I had hoped to write it from inside. With the linings of some stomachs. In order to show you what it had all meant to say. Should have said. Could have said. Allowing myself to believe that becoming a beast would save me. Allowing myself to allow myself. How substantial I was in that moment of mine. Now I fear. That all there is still only all there was. I was the beast then. As I am now. As I will continue to be each time I die and again I live. To where could I ascend? If only I found those greater words? The other words? To liberation, to health, to salvation? In these pages? Everything we give. And everything we write. Will become part of the reserves. Of what there is. To be given and written again. No, I want to reach much further outside. Reach the place where my words are purely extravagant. And my body is the poem by all accounts. To get there. I know that I will have to learn a new manner of moving. Perhaps carve my tongue out. And learn to fly from a bird. Take sitting lessons from a cat. I have already arrived at this very beginning of a

conclusion of a beginning. What if I saw instead that I was just another worm in a mess of worms. What is it that I would desire of this world then? Surely it would be something new.

**This is the story of the trouble.**

What we come to after this now, is that in keeping with philosophical tradition, I must consider the deficiencies of my own address and address the very serious concern that this present work has failed to truly touch the animal in the way in which it had set out to do. I hope now that all previously suggested metaphors be considered in their purpose as an expression of *process*, for I fear that all of which has been examined thus far has fallen still short of what it is and what it means to be living on this planet at this very situated moment.

I have been in persistent search of the proper metaphor, the most demonstrative words, to describe and embody the complexity of the ways in which things touch in this world. The process and practice of “becoming-with” animals has been adopted by various writers, and my own work has intended to embrace this principle as well as suggest my own light alternative of “becoming-beast,” but in truth the usage and intended application of such terms is variable among different interlocutors. So far we have examined “becoming-with” as a process of deconstructing created and persistently stressed divisions between humans and other animals through the applications of looking and following: of allowing the self to become dutifully charmed by the capacities of one’s own attention when it is directed outward to the world, and of welcoming the impulse of the eyes, the feet, and the hands who desire to reach the other, to join

the animal in its practices of living and dying. Becoming-with has taken up the matter of crossing the distance, the abyss, the bridge, which we ourselves have storied into existence.

Becoming-beast has suggested something similar, by way of re-imagining or re-creating our philosophies and our sentiments about the significance of humanity and the meaning-feeling of a particularly human embodied consciousness. Beasts are made through the production of amalgamating two beings, two circles, two worlds in order to consider a whole which is ultimately a third entity entirely. This third being, the beast, is necessarily more troublesome to define than either of the two parts of which it was made as they stood alone. This is essential to the understanding that the world is always one because it is always multiple and always multiple because it is always one. Even further, this is essential to the proposal that we must consistently engage ourselves and each other in a tussle of complicating matters, resisting the impulses to create simple and distinct categories of being as we have become accustomed to do according to our training and our schooling. Instead we labor to love the work of cradling the difficulties, the thoroughly chaotic beauty and horror which implicates us and all of everything else. In this way becoming beastly *begins* to suggest that for humans, becoming-with must be a matter of recognizing oneself as actively *in* and *with* the world, which problematizes certain long-cherished notions of humans as surveyors, puppeteers, gods, and even artists.

Becoming-beast, and thereby nourishing a kind of trust in the animal aspects of ourselves which we have sought to reject or even denaturalize with our “Reason” and our “Morality,” is a practice which reveals to us that which we already are. Becoming-with, and so joining the animals in their open world, allowing them to seriously influence the kind of animals we make of ourselves as we look to them for lessons in living and dying well, reveals what we already are as well. Both processes of becoming reveal us as biophilic beasts, a special kind of animal which loves itself and the world for the love that the two create together, as lovers, expressed most tacitly and viscerally in the moments in which they actively touch one another.

However, I feel that “becoming-with” and “becoming-beast” as they have hereby been demonstrated do not sufficiently express the complexity of touching and co-constituting in the ways in which the work of my exemplar on these matters, Donna Haraway, suggests. Therefore I am pushed to expose the limits of my own meditations. Haraway is in the business of revealing troubles, as the title of her book *Staying with the Trouble*, intends and welcomes. She is a proponent of trouble, a proponent of touch, of particularity, of becoming-with, of storytelling and sympoiesis, that is, making-with. All of these ideas reflect those that I have come to nurture

throughout my own examinings, and yet Haraway's work troubles two fundamental aspects of my preachings.

Firstly, there is the trouble that most of the metaphors that I have employed in order to deconstruct and reconstruct the human-animal relation in my discussions of creation, poetry, becoming-with, and becoming-beast—those that I have achieved by engaging always presently with the particularities of various works from different thinkers and writers, as well through my own poetic responses to the practices which I employed in my lived experiences and interactions with animals and nature—have consistently relied upon the language of dualities. The self/the other, one/two, before/after, inner circle/outer circle, World/Open, etc...., all of this was imagined so in order to deconstruct the ways in which individuals and parts depend upon each other in their constitutions and cannot therefore be faithfully addressed by any kind of philosophy which erects partitions between them. But Haraway's work destabilizes dualisms entirely by suggesting, rightfully I believe, that what comprises every whole is far more than the interaction between any two entities, but rather it is the interactions between endlessly multiple entities.

She proposes instead this idea of “tentacularity,” which “is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres.”<sup>85</sup> Imagine endlessly tangled strings, imagine threads which cannot help but to touch each other as they cannot help but to produce each other in a massive mess of feelers, imagine taking hold of one of the many hands of the many tentacled and following it along its lines as it leads you to all the other lines, threads, strings, to and of which it is in undulating, as well as, throbbing kinship with. These are Haraway’s “string figures” and they are “*thinking* as well as *making* practices.”<sup>86</sup> They are integral to her proposal of a different name for our current epoch. Different from the suggested “Anthropocene,” with Anthropos as its ruling force, or even “Capitalocene,” whose mandate is Capital, she suggests “Chthulucene” as a proposal for “learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying well in response-ability on a damaged earth.”<sup>87</sup> For “Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute,” and they do and have always mucked through the mud with their many sensitive tentacles, as they “romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> Haraway, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Haraway, 2.

Herein lies the second troubling. The distinction between Haraway's string figuring chthonic creatures and my own beastly creatures, reveals something about beasts and the notion of becoming-beast which fails to attest to the reality of how we become with each other. It is quite possible that even beasts are still holding on too dearly to the enticing and destructive promises of escape offered by certain strictly human ventures. For it is quite possible that beasts are still too much overcome by their longing for "humanness," and though they nourish the needs of their bodies as animals do, perhaps they still feel too much shame about their creaturely instincts. And perhaps they still dream too much, with their heads turned upwards, rather than reaching with their eyes and their fingers towards the muddy earth in order to touch it.

In this way Haraway's work challenges much of what has been proposed and synthesized in my work about the relation between "God," the human, and the animal. In another of her books, *When Species Meets*, Haraway writes "I am a creature of the mud, not the sky"<sup>89</sup> and with this proclamation she targets precisely what is so troubling about the invocation of God in referring to ourselves as well as to other animals. The language used to explore all of which has been discussed up to this point implicates a triangular relationship between ourselves, animals, and God. All of the following with which I have grappled— the concept of creation, the notion of

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<sup>89</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *When Species Meet*. Nachdr. ed. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009. 3.



making selves out of images and reflections, a relinquishing of the self out of a duty to the larger, more infinite self which joins all matter together, the gaze which contains truth and recognizes *what really is*, the suggestion of “following” as it calls upon devotion, love, and attention to the individual, the metamorphosis of the body of which only the poet as a shaper of new truths is truly capable of dreaming into existence—has all drawn from this impulse, for my work has entangled itself with the thoughts of others, others whose writing continually overwhelmed me with language about God. Why does God or faith more generally appear again and again in writing about humans and animals? Perhaps there is a feeling that when Man and Animal are joined together by God, some appetite in the soul is nourished, in that the relation of these three points begins to speak to some felt force which is ultimately impossible to contain by any combination of words alone. The innate sensation of love and responsibility that is cultivated in interaction with animals and the natural world and which can sometimes only be expressed in spiritual terms, is a voice that is felt so deeply inside of the self that often it is most reasonable to understand it as coming from above the self. And in truth it does come from outside the self, for this feeling of love and duty is also informed by the voices of others, other humans, other animals, and everything else, from the trees to the sun as well. There is a sense that all things,

forces, and beings are somehow extraordinarily united. For us as poets, God is often the most satisfactory metaphor for the expression of this phenomenon.

And yet I believe Haraway is right that we are creatures of the mud, not the sky. We live *here*, and are surrounded by materiality, texture, flesh, fur. What does it mean to truly be present, to truly touch this material world which we occupy right now? Becoming-beast may not be enough, for even the beast still has her head in the clouds as she digs through the ground for grub to consume. Haraway notes that “Adam” comes from “Adamah” meaning “ground.”<sup>90</sup> We are, and have always been, creatures of the mud. And so she suggests that rather than become *posthuman*, as many have suggested we must, and rather than, as I now add, becoming a kind of “*plushuman*,” as a potential term with which to describe my own proposed examinations of becoming-with and becoming-beast, we become *compost*. “Human as humus has potential, if we could chop and shred human as Homo, the detumescing project of a self-making and planet-destroying CEO.”<sup>91</sup> Instead we join our fellow creatures of the mud in their tentacular entanglements. Become *with*. For Haraway this is the meaning of kinship and companionship to which we have a duty. “Response-ability,” as she calls it. The ability to respond. Just as animals do. And how perfectly this notion of compost attests to what I have begun to suggest about the

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<sup>90</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 11-12.

<sup>91</sup> Haraway, 32.

relationship between poesis and touch. For in the ancient Greek the word *poiēsis* means to create, to make, and to compose—all meanings which it shares with the Latin *compositus*. We are composed of that which we create, as well as of the natural earth and the processes of decay and living transformation which does not discriminate between beings, but instead is always actively implicating all of everything in its movement, and always in the most complex and ever-boundless ways. Just as a metaphor is always personal, yet also infinitely expansive, and with the potential for countless fraying paths and points of intersection among its endlessly emerging tentacles, so too is life.

To truly be one is more than to *become with* “the other,” rather it is as Haraway emphasizes: “to be one is always to *become with* many.”<sup>92</sup> In the tradition of Haraway then, I wish to stay with the trouble, to allow the work that I have done thus far to be as troubled, as wavering, as messy, as irrational as life itself. And to embrace in this as beautiful fodder for living and dying well. For this is the active process of *becoming with the world* that I have intended to be response-able to as a writer and a poet: to allow the voices of reason and unreason alike to touch each other in their acts of creation.

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<sup>92</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

**This is the story of my practice, of what I have done, for now.**

The animal has been calling. From every conceivable direction: the past, the future, from heaven, and from hell, the animal has been calling *you*. And now there is only one moment left in which you might finally hear it. So you begin the preparations.

You begin with an incredulous belief that your heart is worthy of being bewitched by another.

You begin with the desire to be told that your soul is capable of saving. You grow inside yourself a very preliminary amount of trust in the process of resurrection. Then when the day comes that all suffering and death suddenly becomes too massive, and all humans as we know them suddenly too weak, and you must call upon a God again, a God you have not known in years, to tell you something which you've yet to hear, something new like the promise of an egg, you will be ready to listen.

The first utterances of this desire, this desire of undeterminable authorship, you dreamed up in the damp and panicked crack of dawn while you were listening to the high pitches reserved for dogs. And although you'd never been able to hear the screams before, now the sound keeps rushing at you from a distance that is continually shrinking, tumbling down the hill at an

exponential rate, toward your window, ready to break glass and fling piercing sharp remains at you where you sit in your bed, with your soon to be bloodied open gape of a mouth.

Listen. Listen and do not shut your eyes or your ears to the unbearable cacophony of anguish and joy. It is life and it is death revealing to you that all of the earth's surface can be traced onto one great circular path. It is life and it is death begging you to feel absolutely nothing but this path, and your feet. Begging you to feel that your feet are everything, they are your ears; And your ears are everything, they are your eyes; And your eyes are everything, they are your tongue; And that your tongue, as you have come to know it, is actually quite little, but that your eyes and your ears and your feet, well, they are everything.

You must practice with diligence. You must force yourself, with a strenuous strength, to trust in uttered nonsense. There is no sense to be had but the little sense with which we feel the earth with our feet and beckon to its creatures with our fingertips. There are so many moments in between time, where you are only ever briefly. What if you laid there and let the huge jungle cats lick your face? What if in this time between time you gave those cats everything you knew and let yourself become as immoral and inconsequential as the dirt?

You will find it strange to have no true substance to call your own, no true control which you could claim over anything out here, but soon you will desire it, like your mother wanted God when she called him privately to her bed. Soon you will repeat your newfound prayers, soon you will be unable to recall if you wrote them yourself, or if they came in a dream from God. You will repeat them until your tongue erodes between your teeth and you will only be able to dance and cry, and then there where you are crying and you are dancing, you will find that this was always the shape which the prayer wanted to take. And it will become your secret sense that you share with the howling dogs and all the other screaming beasts in this great open world. If you would only allow yourself the freedom of a well earned scream.

But once you have danced there for even just a moment, and heard the colors with which nature and all its animals are demanding your attention, you will want to return to tell us where you've been. You will want us to join you in the rituals of the Open. The call of the animal has become the selfsame call of your own re-created animal being. And like a child, you will hope we take notice of your newly born flesh, and the hairs which have now sprouted from your throat. But how should we ever understand your reasons, when you shout like a monster? How will you ever translate it back to us, those dances and those cries and all the love and misery they carried? Begin with a poem, a love poem, and then only trust, that someone find it true.

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