

# Milk to Blood

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1. Ronald Johnson, "The Unfoldings", in *To Do As Adam Did: Selected Poems of Ronald Johnson*, ed. Peter O'Leary, (Jersey City: Talisman House Publishers, 2000).

Ronald Johnson catechizes, "Who placed us with eyes between a microscopic and telescopic world?"<sup>1</sup> With perception hovering amid unsettled bounds, our bodies also linger somewhere in between. A clover mite vaults across the expanse of my fingernail, yet I climb two flights of stairs to be level with the black tongue of a corralled giraffe: When we consider the animal, we must consider scale. Although comparatively few, those that outsize the human are profoundly consequential. They challenge our claims of human exceptionalism and guide us hand and tool, to build fences at best and cages at worst. We are uneasy when faced with the physical proof of our inferiority, and we hastily compensate with prideful claims of intelligence and dexterity. We hope to orchestrate encounters with these beings on our own terms, if at all, yet any brush with the world or the worldliness of these great creatures forces us to confront the stunning, transformative power of the animal.

2. Isaiah 11:6.



He is neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two.

These spaces of encounter, idealized in dreamy visions of the wolf lying with the lamb and led by a young child,<sup>2</sup> are weighed down by the reality of unbalanced power. In most cases, this asymmetry favors the human; the scales are tipped further by technology—tools, chemical or mechanical, mediating and amplifying the structure of dominance. Rarely do we see an animal larger than ourselves without focusing

beyond walls woven of metal, blurred but always appreciated. Jean-Christophe Bailly, driving at night on his suburban street, happens upon an uncaged animal as a deer breaks through the screen of trees running alongside him. Divine in its materiality, the deer grants Bailly “for an instant, that instant opening onto another world.”<sup>3</sup> As the woodland creature of nursery rhymes and childhood movies crashes through Bailly’s landscaped and paved oasis, it is he who transcends, “suspended like a day dream.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Jean-Christophe Bailly, *The Animal Side*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p3.

4. *Ibid*, 64.

However, Bailly remains enshrined within his car, untouchable, with his fingers wrapped around cold plastic. Although boundaries are bowed, the power dynamic remains asymmetrical as Bailly operates a personal machine in the sort of chance meeting that often ends in metal splattered with bestial blood—the deer slipping through to yet another world. Only vaguely aware of this distinction, he reveres the moment of touch, his eyes skimming the surface of the passing deer, turning to philosophy and poetics to crystallize his sentiments as he eulogizes an infinite Open lost to humankind. Something is lost, however, in this false equivalency of sight and corporeal touch. From the safety of the automobile, Bailly is not subject to the danger of encounter. The shift in power created at the moment of touch can leave you supine and breathless, ribs cracked and bruises spreading over your soft body like rotting fruit. Terra Rowe affirms the corporeality of this concern, writing, “In our touchability—our fleshiness, leafiness, or rockiness—we encounter the wild Other who, as wild Other, is beyond our control and thus dangerously free.”<sup>5</sup> Rendered as a means of maintaining dominion by our obsession with physical force, size is a critical factor in the human-animal interaction.

5. Jacob Erickson, “The Apophatic Animal: Toward a Negative Zoo-theological *Imago Dei*” in *Divin-animality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p98.

Knocked flat on our backs, staring up at this loss of power, humans retaliate and attempt to regain control at the expense of understanding; animals are forced to exist in spaces more specific and tangible than the conceptual realm. Physical confinement has become a condition of large animal existence from reserves to zoos to barns to factory farms. To be wild is to be bounded, relegated to those areas delimited by people. For large animals, these spaces resemble quarantine more closely—forbidden to live amongst humans under the pretext of communion in the way that cats

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6. Bailly, p. 41.

are permitted to curl up on our sofas and probiotics populate our yogurt. Bailly points to this difference, acknowledging that there is an evident distinction between “the relations we as large animals may have with those from which we have nothing to fear and with those that we may well fear.”<sup>6</sup> The influence of scale on fear of the contact zone situates those animals larger than humans in a unique position, although small creatures, even invisible pathogens, can still pose a threat. Our methods of coping with these organisms are distinct, oriented more often towards either avoidance or total elimination. The “dangerous freedom” invoked by Rowe becomes paradoxical for the large animal, as it functions as the very incentive for its internment.

While this confinement of the wild is in part defensive—as a self-justified preemptive measure—domestication of animals is often painted as an act of communion, building a pluriverse on coerced coexistence. Although now polluted by violence, an enduring gentleness exists as a holdover from a past era of more sympathetic shepherdry. While critical of domestication, Bailly, with his hushed breath perhaps still fogging up the window as he searches for flickers of life, finds hope in this gentleness, in the way that our “first impression” of those animals whose wildness has been constrained “is not a fantasy of domination ... [but] the sensation of harmony, of a peaceful possibility—a tranquil surge of the world into itself.”<sup>7</sup> It is in the realm of peaceful possibility that Donna Haraway resides, reflecting on her experience training her dog, Cayenne. Haraway portrays the training relationship as something far removed from enslavement and explicit expression of human control. The emphasis lies instead on reciprocity; both human and animal—each situated in their own power-laden histories—are “partners-in-the-making through the active relations of coshaping.”<sup>8</sup> It is fluid system in constant flux, where each being is constituted through mutuality in a way that softens the edges of “the other.”

7. Ibid., p. 64.

8. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 208.

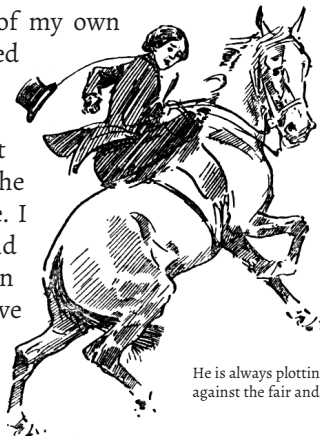
When we try to form a comparable relationship to that of this woman and her well-mannered dog with creatures that outweigh or

overtop us, we face a different challenge.<sup>9</sup> When our material fragility is exposed to animals more physically powerful than ourselves, the palpable consequences of touch become exceedingly real. Although confinement is most often inseparably intertwined with isolation, it is through this bondage that we manifest far greater potential for human-animal interaction. While large animals are consigned to particular spaces, in part to diminish human feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, confinement also contributes to the formation of a constructed, often dangerous, space of encounter. It is in this hazardous contact zone that some humans will risk trauma, or their very life, in exchange for the chance to share an instant of sublime, harmonious touch. Fingertips of shaking hands brush against unkempt fur in an anxious plea to regain the interspecies intimacy that was lost in the “break ... between milk and blood.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Ibid., p. 16.

10. Bailly, p. 64.

Over a life in this contact zone, I have looked up at the underside of the hooves of a rearing horse, and I have looked down at one's head lying in my lap as I sat in tall pasture grasses, sighing breaths causing the reeds to sway like they were sharing in each exhalation. With the weight of only a small part of this enormous body resting so heavily on my folded legs, I recalled the sound of the bones in my left foot being crushed under an accidental and ill-fated misstep, unable to support a thousand pounds of animal. Through the years, I watched our difference in size diminish, but never disappear. The familiarity that comes with time and proximity remained colored by fear and incertitude. Any slip into overconfidence and laxity led unfailingly to a reminder of my own weaknesses. I have heard pained howls that I only found out hours later had been spilling from my own throat; I have been hurried into silent ambulances, sirens muted to indulge the animals who strongly prefer quietude. I have returned to the pasture, time and time again, in hopes of a collaboration that allows me to come closest I have ever been to peeking into the strange space of the animal world.



He is always plotting against the fair and good.

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11. Haraway, p. 16. Donna Haraway speaks of the love between her and Cayenne as “a historical aberration,”<sup>11</sup> and now, two years removed from ten years on horseback where the word tripped off my tongue as I wrapped swollen hocks in faded red cloth and offered sweet crystal cubes in my open palm, miles away from conceptual considerations, I wonder aloud what that means. Last summer, in an act of impetuosity and perhaps desperation, I climbed from a fence onto the back of a horse with my fractured foot only half healed, my ligament separating again from my bone as I pushed my heels down into stirrups and leaned forward to lay my hand flat against the horse’s warm shoulder, an act of reassurance for us both. Limping more heavily the following morning, I was embarrassed by this sacrifice, somewhat inexplicable even to myself. Two days later, I did it again without hesitation.

I once met the only man in recorded history to train a cassowary—an ancient bird, six feet tall with talons to split you open and swallow your organs whole. This one has eaten her mate alive. I stand transfixed as I listen to him describe the years he spent alternating between her enclosure and a hospital bed, and I watch him stop

You yourself  
will not deny,  
Socrates, that  
your face is like  
that of a satyr.



speaking mid-sentence, holding perfectly still as the bird's gaze shifts from the apple in his palm to his unprotected body. Later, I meet five women cradling tiger cubs, born in captivity and rejected by their mothers. They tell me how they cannot speak to their families or form human relationships until the tiger has grown, because the chances that coming home smelling like someone else will end in a hunt are too high. I ask one woman if it is worth it, and she only smiles, reaching instinctively for striped fur. It seemed wholly aberrational. If there is another word for this, I do not know it. Yet this is love. I struggle to reconcile this devotion with online images of a dentist kneeling behind a lifeless beast, with its regal mane in one hand and a crossbow in the other, and to reconcile this with wolves denatured into handheld dogs, their tiny gasping breaths inside leather purses.

When risk is met with the phenomenal reward of touch—stroking the sleeping face of the beast, or knowing in your body when hooves will become airborne, leaving you bonded with the animal and entirely unattached to any other point on earth for a few fleeting instants—what feels like clarity is clouded by the irony inherent in the encounter. Haraway's sentimentalized domestication is consensual between two free beings who are historically situated yet, above all, companions. However, here equality and historical situation are mutually exclusive. The possibility of shaking loose the clinging grip on human exceptionalism, of loving the non-human, is only offered as the end result of a world history where the wild have been condemned to confinement and subjugation. As humans have colonized and dominated the planet, not only is the ideal of animal freedom unreached, but it no longer exists as an obvious perfection towards which to aspire. Is it the housecat who is free, living in the peaceful integration of its owner's apartment? Or is it the tiger, spared of human contact but pacing alone behind a fence? In the horse, this distinction is obscured; the animal is designated its own space, yet in a world history of close interaction with the human. It is in the confinement of the large animal—simultaneously brought into and excluded from the world that has been claimed as human—that we see a contradiction: the desire to protect our human vulnerabilities vying with the desperate yearning to touch a part of the animal world.