

ROUGH NOTES TOWARDS A FERAL POETICS:
OR, A HOME OF ONE'S OWN, A MIND OF ONE'S OWN,
A FEAR OF ONE'S OWN

The beauty of the feral is that it is not about oneself.

The beauty of feral is that it is not *nature poetry* or even *ecopoetics*.

As a polluted category—where gene pools collide, nature and culture lie down and swap DNA, where the human and the nonhuman, the domesticated and the undomesticated (read: primitive?) cohabit, where freedom and structure, history and myth, means of wildness and the relations of colonizers to colonized confuse their histories—feral is there, in the garden of human evolution from the get go. It forays into our deepest, most pressing and least known fears: i.e. what it means to inhabit an inter-subjective world in all the fleshly (read: gross!) detail of a mortal relationship. *You can't tell up from down, and everything seems to go sideways* (Haraway 9).

What is at stake is three-fold:

1) boundaries, and under whose authority, and for what reasons

2) *just who is at home*—which must be permanently in question if we are to remain *alert to the fact that somebody is at home in the animals we live with* (Haraway 50)

3) we make things; what are the consequences? (which might include, but is not limited to: freedom, will, human power, human capacity and processes for moving/removing mountains, literally and metaphorically)

Some maneuvers necessary for such a project involve reinscribing the shapes respect, listening, and attention take. This is one way to honor nature in all its irreducible detail, to be at home in, as, and of the world.

RESPECT: A HOME OF ONE'S OWN

It is easy to understand why feral [as a species of animal, a breed of human, or even a kind of landscape]¹ continues to be marginalized. In truth, we do not like them. We would prefer evolution leave them out of it, but it is our responsibility to protect them. We must ensure their survival so they can be studied and understood.

As science and technology studies scholar Donna Haraway argues: “anyone who has done historical research knows that the undocumented often have more to say about how the world is put together than do the well pedigreed” (88). In particular: the feral is evidence that colonization is ongoing.

Strictly speaking: a *feral animal* is a nonnative animal that has escaped from captivity and established a self-sustaining population independent of humans. Hence wild horses, pigs and cats are ferals, while foxes and rabbits are not as these latter two were deliberately released to establish wild populations. However, or at least according to those who crusade against the feral: *the word is now generally applied to any non-native animal that causes serious damage to human interests.*²

¹ In the spirit of the beasts that inspire it, this essay will borrow from, build off of, think on, around, over, amongst, and through many histories of the feral. This is one strategy for articulating a public new sense that hinges on transgression, doubleness, transience, and the spectacular as a way of life. It is also a particularly powerful way of performing what the feral might make possible.

² These definitions were available on feral.org.au in 2013.

There are thus three categories of cat: domestic (owned and cared for), stray (roaming cities and living off human charity), and feral (surviving without any human contact or assistance). A feral cat, as opposed to a domestic or a stray, *threatens our rich biodiversity, adversely affects our landscapes and waterways, and has severe economic and social impacts.*³ None of this, of course, changes the fact that “fertile feral animals have sex, bear children they can’t feed, and die of awful diseases in pain and in great numbers” (Haraway 91).

“Going feral” thus has a metaphorical application that extends far beyond the limited scope of the radical environmental movements of the late twentieth century.⁴ In fact, a poetics of the feral *might* propose going feral not as a *re-enchantment* or *return* but rather as a radical method for *disorganizing* the *ego conquiro*, for *overwhelming* that safe space the human species has commandeered between the culture that made us and the nature that names us, for *becoming* more *worldly*, which, as Haraway admonishes us, means being “more alert to the demands of significant otherness at all the scales that making more livable worlds demands” (61).⁵

³ These definitions were available on feral.org.au in 2013.

⁴ I am thinking here of the Australian going feral/going tribal movements. However, this assertion applies broadly to environmental activism in the twentieth century, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ For Haraway, this is what significant otherness signifies: “vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures (7).

As an especially spectacular form of significant otherness, the feral reminds us of the real ontological challenges posed by this pursuit of *becoming worldly*. The kind of worldliness the feral promises is quite literally dirty, it requires a certain degree of homelessness in order to depose the dictates of language-knowledge-law, and this homelessness is both physical and metaphorical—it quite literally requires a liberation from the ego as a purely human instrument of conquest and subjugation.

Ferality [as a state of mind, a political act, a willful choice by a wishful species] is thus about counteracting the illusion of the ontological detachment (read: superiority) of the human species from Nature that began with Adam, naming the beasts. As a response to the spiritual/moral/ecological/aesthetic crisis's in the Western world in the twenty-first century, ferality is an authentic category of being worldly that hinges on disorder, unpredictability, otherness, mobility and motility, and that, by virtue of its disorder, unpredictability, otherness, mobility and motility, might *teach us to become coherent enough in an incoherent world to engage in a joint dance of beings that breeds respect and response in the flesh, in the run, on the course. And then to remember how to live like that at every scale, with all partners* (Haraway 62).

LISTENING: A MIND OF ONE'S OWN

If you enter into an ethical relationship with a text, my friend and Oscar Wilde scholar Jenny says, you have to put yourself in the position in which it might change you. To which I would elaborate: if you enter into an ethical [read: worldly] relationship with a text, with an experience, with another person, with a place, with a companion species like a dog or a cat or a chicken... you have to put yourself in the vulnerable, scary, and often disturbing position in which it might change you.

As freedom-hungry offspring of the conquest, it is our responsibility—no, more than that, our privilege—to seek to inhabit our fears creatively: neither in celebration nor condemnation (*I have it*) but in a spirit of not this, not this. Which is, as Fanny Howe reminds us, precisely the *lyric's/ Quest for rest that never/ (God willing) will be found* (13).

Those of you who have heard lectures on ethics may recall that this is often precisely the point: ethics functions because of uncertainty, because of error, the full acceptance of the limits of knowledge, that the art of living is indeed just that: an art—beautiful, hard, specific, frightening, and personal. Indeed, an ethics of the feral requires the experience of what is violent and tragic in living, putting oneself in the vulnerable, scary, and often disturbing position in which you might be changed. As Emily Dickinson

reminds us, knowing nature [both human nature and Nature] is knowing her less, and as American poet Arielle Greenberg cautions us, doing important work and aspiring to do important work is a work permanently in progress.⁶

One way of pioneering such a task is fear—not as a problem to think through but rather as a certainty to live with. This might involve saying it is a wolf becoming a girl, the action in reverse (Kapil 6). It's what happens when we turn perspective inside out and examine its inner workings, when we turn our sentience upside down and see what shakes out, when we work backwards along the evolutionary spiral of language-knowledge-law. These simple but drastic reversals of the conventional disturb expected patterns of perception, experience, and articulation. They are also, and more importantly, strategies for overhauling our very anthropocentric notions of what can be turned into bodies, stories or selves; what turns are taken in bodies, stories or selves; what ends up in bodies, stories, and selves; and what bodies, stories, and selves end up as in the end.

Consider, for example, Bhanu Kapil's *Humanchild: A Project for Future Children*, based on the true story of *sisters not biologically but made sisters by feral life* (49). The work is based on the true story of Kamala and Amala, who were found living with wolves in Bengal, India in 1920 and rescued by the Reverend Joseph Singh, whose 1945 diary

⁶ Greenberg made this statement most recently during a Writing Life Seminar sponsored by the Oregon State University – Cascades Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing in November 2013.

was used as the primary source material for Kapil's text:

In the jungle, on a Mission to convert the tribal population, Singh had heard stories of the “two white ghosts” roaming with a mother wolf and her pack of cubs. He decided to track them. Upon discovering the “terrible creatures” to be human, he killed the wolves and brought the children back to his church-run orphanage, the Home, in Midnapure. For the next decade, he documented his attempt to teach the girls language, upright movement, and a moral life. Despite his efforts, Amala died within a year of capture, of nephritis. Kamala lived to be about sixteen, when she died of TB (Kapil x).

In 2004, as part of a French film-making team creating a documentary on human-wolf contacts, Kapil traveled to Midnapure: where she visits the girls' graves; finds witnesses to their howling; explores the room the girls were imprisoned in; meets Singh's grandson]; who gives her blurry photographs of the ferals, and discovers the very real and very frightening space of the feral childhood. . .

The result is a beautiful, savage, compassionate, and disturbing meditation on “who has the social sanction to define the larger reality into which everyone's everyday” experiences and perceptions must fit “in order that one can be reckoned sane and responsible” (Hubbard, “Introduction” iii). In contrast to Amala and Kamala's captors, who attempt corrective therapy and a reeducation of the nerves, Kapil

dares to occupy the humananimal homeless and at home in the world, to inhabit a point of view deemed taboo—not, more than that, feared!—by Culture-At-Large.

The ferals' narrative, which is catalogued with letters, is woven into Kapil's own numbered diary of her research in the Indian jungle the two "white ghosts" called home before they were captured and, quite literally, killed by culture. *Each feral moment*, Kapil cautions us, *is valuable*. Consider, for example:

H. A white smoke fills the compound. Children gallop in the garden of the Home. I want my mother. With one crack in the stuff of her she was gone. But these are my hands. But the sun burns my hands. Kill the sun (27).

I. With nets and sheets, they made a canopy over my body, and I curled up inside the air. With teeth and earth, they made a net around my body, and I curled up inside my hair (31).

In between these sections, Kapil narrates the film-makers attempt to re-enact the capture of a girl by a wolf as she herself imagines the jungle *as a kind of foreign language extracted from the maternal language, on the condition that the sounds of phonemes remain similar (29)* as well as her aunt's childhood death *in the quick, black take of a body's flight, a body's eviction or sudden loss of place, the memory of descent functions as a subliminal flash (30)*.⁷

⁷ Kapil's father's sister was pushed off the roof by one of her six brothers and fell upside down to her death.

If the primary act of human culture is possession, then Kapil's is one of dispossession, where the feral eludes capture because it quite literally has *a mind of its own* (Kapil 31). Kapil's project—as many projects of the feral—is thus one of brave failure; I wanted, she writes:

to write until they were real. When they began to breathe, opening their mouths in the space next to writing, I stopped writing. I imagined all the children in the sky, part of the monsoon wind, the molecules of rain circulating from ocean to land and back again. A pressure. A loop. In this way, I wrote until the children left the jungle, the country itself, their families of origin, and time. I saw how they changed time. But the next day, I switched on my computer and read this: "PHNOM PENH, Jan 19, 2007 (Reuters Life!)—A Cambodian woman who went missing in the jungle for eighteen years before being found last week is struggling to adapt to life as a human and wants to return to the forest, police said on Friday... (41-2).

Humanchild thus ends with an admonishment, and a challenge: *I've exhausted the alphabet, the ferals say. But I'm not writing this for you* (63).

This would, indeed, be one particularly powerful strategy for learning to listen *in, as* and *of* the world: who *aren't* we writing for and what alphabets/grammars/syntaxes *won't* we use? It proposes an inside-out occupation of who gets the social sanction to determine, as Ruth Hubbard has aptly

asked, why “certain ways of learning about nature [both human nature and Nature] and using that knowledge as acknowledged as authoritative and others not (Politics 32).

The key, as Kapil’s *Project for Future Children* models, is *taking the right amount of risk, mixing it with passion and courage and going for it—again and again and again.*⁸

⁸ Interlochen Arts Academy President Jeffrey Kimpton makes this statement in his 2010 Commencement Address, available online: <http://www.interlochen.org/crescendo/2010-academy-commencement-address-jeffrey-s-kimpton>.

ATTENTION: A FEAR OF ONE'S OWN

In fact I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining.

~ Ursula K Le Guin, "She Unnames Them"

In *The Braindead Megaphone*, George Saunders argues:

Our [American] venture in Iraq was a literary failure, by which I mean a failure of the imagination. A culture better at imagining richly, three-dimensionally, would have had a greater respect for war than we did, more awareness of the law of unintended consequences, more familiarity with the world's tendency to throw aggressive energy back at the aggressor in ways he did not expect. A culture capable of imagining complexly is a humble culture. It acts, when it has to act, as late in the game as possible, and as cautiously, because it knows its own girth and the tight confines of the china shop it's blundering into. And it knows that no matter how well-prepared it is—no matter how ruthlessly it has held its projections up to intelligent scrutiny—the place it is headed for is going to be very different from the place it imagined. The shortfall between the imagined and the real, multiplied by the violence of one's intent, equals the evil one will do (10).

Our fraught relationship to the ecologies for which we have taken responsibility (perhaps merely by virtue of our being there) is just such a failure of the imagination. Consider, for example, the fate of the wildebeest dying in the 1970s in Botswana by the tens of thousands:

It was not that there was no water. It was that the wildebeest and many other wild animals were prevented from reaching it by a fence. A cattle fence that angles and runs for hundreds of miles. A hundred thousand wildebeest which had been spread out across a vast wilderness were forced by the fence to take the same migratory route to water that they never would reach. Almost four hundred miles of river and lake shores that had once been available to them [the wildebeest] had been reduced to a few miles by the fence. The wildebeest plodded along the fence, dying all along the way until the fence turned away from the water they had been smelling for days, joining another fence and forming a corner in which most of the survivors collapsed. Their heads hanging, they tottered and fell, their eyes plucked out by vultures while they still lived, their ears and testicles chewed off by scavengers while their legs still moved, as though they were moving still toward the water. [...] Well, that's what happened to the wildebeest, and is still happening to them. There are still droughts, and the wildebeest die against the fence, but not in the great numbers of the '70s because those great numbers no longer exist. When I think about Africa what I think is wildebeest—that wild, incomprehending, incomprehensible thing that thirsts. And I think that when you're talking about darkness, the blackness of darkness, you're talking about wildebeest, for wildebeest

are at the great empty heart of blackness, the heart of its nothingness, dying over and over again against the indifferent fence with the water just beyond it (Williams 110-1).

In fact, we might characterize much of the history of human civilization as a failure of the imagination—of that *vast, intensely civilized ego* (Le Guin 12) to imagine richly, three-dimensionally, and complexly, to think about what’s happening on the other side of the fence, in the unhappy wilderness of our indifference and our unbridled enthusiasm for *going where no man has gone before*. Despite the enormous efforts of environmentalists, philosophers, scientists, and poets, we are still the “happy hunters” of Robinson Jeffers’ “Original Sin”:

The man-brained and man-handed ground-ape, physically
The most repulsive of all hot-blooded animals
Up to that time of the world: they had dug a pitfall
And caught a mammoth... (1-5)

This, Jeffers reminds us, is *human dawn*. *These are the people* (21-2). We are indeed the children of the happy hunters, *hour after hour roasting our living meat slowly to death* (20). To imagine ourselves otherwise is, must be: disorienting, dangerous, and distressing.

And so we arrive again at fear, which is where original sin leaves us:

As for me, I would rather

Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.
But we are what we are, and we might remember
Not to hate any person, for all are vicious;
And not be astonished at any evil, all are deserved;
And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed (22-7).

But I would rather take a step further inside Saunders' three-dimensional imagination, without etiquette or influence other than *this green hunger*: to be cleansed by fear, to do again, in the words of Auden, *what causes me pain*.

As Auden has it, and likewise Kapil, this would involve going ghost.

And what is the feral after all but, quite simple, civilization's persistent ghost? Surviving on the perimeter, exiled to the limits of human conscience, there but not there, wild but not wild, a domesticated beast that refuses to depend on civilization, a kind of thief in the night that thwarts our attempts to pretend she does not exist.

Inspired by American poet Mary Ruefle, we might think here of fear as an *emergency of feeling* that results in *worldly action*.⁹ For instance: *the knowledge that one is going to die. This is a fear one can have while lying in a hammock on a beautiful day. And it can lead to an emergency of feeling that results in a poem* (109).

The world has entirely enough hammocks, and entirely enough poems about hammocks and death. In fact, I would like to be so bold as to assert that I have had it with negative capability, which has, in Ruefle's words, become *like a sickness unto death for me* (119).

~

Go into the center of fear and belong there—no, more than that *be at home there*.

Straight No Chaser is just such as object. It is not an attempt to be intimate with the feral, or to be in harmony with the feral, or even, as Kapil, to inhabit the feral. Rather, *Straight No Chaser* is the result of an emergency of feeling, a moment of experiencing fully what is violent and tragic in nature/ Nature and staying with that moment, as Virginia Woolf

⁹In a brilliant essay "On Fear," Ruefle defines the kind of fear I am talking about this way: *Emotions are hardwired, biological functions of the nervous system such as fear, terror, sexual attraction, and hunger-impelled action (also called "feeding behaviors"). They are each purely physical reactions over which one has no control, and they are common to all animals with a central nervous system. The emotion of fear is what drives all animals away from life-threatening situations, and that is not the kind of fear I have in mind. Feelings, on the other hand, are more complicated and involve cognitive reactions that combine, or can be combined, with emotions, memories, experience, and intelligence. That is the kind of fear I have in mind—the feeling of fear that involves an intelligent, cognitive reaction. Fear that requires self-consciousness* (106-7).

advises.¹⁰

Going feral is thus, as I imagine it, *an act of the mind: to move, to make happen, to make manifest* (Ruefle 2). It is a strategy that works only if you allow yourself to be *subjected to it*. There is an entirely new category of fearfulness to be (re)learned, a radical grammar to the art of *living in* and *working with* the world, a syntax that is wild and unpredictable, somewhere between a howl and a song, that appears from the woods of our cultured conscience and then vanishes back into them, that cuts so much deeper than *shunning the normal code of society with regard to dress, habitat, hygiene, etc.*,¹¹ cuts right through the fabric of human culture, that subject-object binary¹² on which so much of our self-certainty, self confidence, and dreams of conquest depend so that I might listen, learn, and live outside of my inherited [Midwestern American, Lutheran, white, female, human...] boxes.

This may be where, in the indubitable words of Haraway, we start seeing humanist self-certainty for what it is: *a bad guide to ethics and politics, and much less to personal experience* (8).

¹⁰ *One danger*, American poet James Sherry cautions us, *especially in a poetic discussion of nature, is to take nature as a noun, which makes us think it's a thing, when it's also a set of processes, relationships, and non-things, that is, where there is no object we can point to* (168).

¹¹ "Feral" as defined by the *Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Colloquial Language*.

¹² As American environmentalist Paul Shepard points out, *the noun and verb organization of the English language shapes a divided world of static doers separate from the doings. It belongs to an idiom of social hierarchy in which all nature is made to mimic man* (5).

See if you can identify yourself. If you can see the beauty that was there all along despite our being there. This very well might be how we begin *keeping it real*—by which I mean of course *growing the world*, which is, after all and as American poet Cole Swensen reminds us, *the basic project of sentient beings*.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “feral.” *The Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Colloquial Language*. Revised Ed. 1997.
- Lapidge, K., Braysher, M. and Sarre, S. December 2013. <feral.org.au>.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm P, 2003.
- Howe, Fanny. *The Lyrics*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2007.
- Hubbard, Ruth. “Introduction.” *Women Look at Biology Looking at Women: a Collection of Feminist Critiques*. Ed. Ruth Hubbard, Mary Sue Henifin, and Barbara Fried. Boston: Hall, 1979. i-xii.
- . *The Politics of a Woman’s Biology*. Piscataway: Rutgers U P, 1990.
- Kapil, Bhanu. *Humanimal: A Project For Future Children*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street 2009.
- Jeffers, Robinson. “Original Sin.” *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Tim Hunt. Berkeley: Stanford U P, 1938. 585-6.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Buffalo Gals: and other Animal Presences*. New York, Penguin. 1990.

Ruefle, Mary. *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2012.

Saunders, George. "The Braindead Megaphone."
The Braindead Megaphone. New York: Penguin, 2007.
1-20.

Shepard, Paul. *The Subversive Science: Essays Towards an Ecology of Man*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.

Sherry, James. "Human Views of Nature." *((eco(lang)uage(reader))*. Ed. Benda Iijima. Brooklyn: Portable P, 2010. 165-178.

Williams, Joy. "Wildebeest." *Ill Nature*. New York: Vintage, 2002. 39-40.