The Collaborative Craft of Creatural Writing

Alex Lockwood

Dear Anton,

You are one day old. You are 1/180th of the way through your life. It will not be a good life. I wish I could write that the beginning (the tail docking, the castration) and end (no, not yet) will be the worst moments; that there will be respite, even comfort. But this is not a fairy story. Standard farming practices will meet only your very basic needs and these only to satisfy profit motives; those who own you will not respond to your piggish 'wants.' In too many ways you will only ever be –ish, never pig complete; the intensive processing to which your creaturely life is object rests upon what Nicole Shukin calls a "breaking" and a "denial of 'becomings'" (2009, 31) where you are kept in a "limbo economy of interminable survival" where "coping is all" (39). I don't know what 'coping is all' means in your hermetic context. The "with" with which you are becoming –ish is a with/out, including freedom and creatureliness, and the relationship between the two denied you. This becoming with/out leans on Donna Haraway's provocation that "becoming is always becoming *with*, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake" (2008, 244, emphasis in original).

Your with/out, Anton, in Anat Pick's words, is an "exemplary 'state of exception' of species sovereignty" (2001, 15). For Pick, whose theorization of creaturely poetics has done much to raise questions of your status, "to speak of animals' vulnerability is to draw attention to their outstanding position in the judicial, political and moral orders" (15) of social worlds. But so what? What can we do?

I have shed many tears for you in your shed. For you and your mother 'gestating' in her crate, the metal bars of her stall stalling her ability to come to you when you

call, as if she has fallen inside the rutted grid of a steel volcano that plunges interminably to hell (those deep red lights, in fact, are to keep you safe from 'chilling'). I attempt to share your trauma by writing (in)to you, become traumatized by imagining your becoming with/out freedom. Like Haraway, the sociologist Kate Wright uses 'becoming' in the sense of the performative "becoming-with" which she describes as "a form of worlding which opens up the frames of what registers to us and so what matters to us" (2014, 279). It matters to understand what it means for creatural writing to imagine a becoming-with/out freedom. As Susan McHugh asks in her work on agency and *Animal Farm*, "what exactly goes on in the acts of reading and writing animals?" (2009, 32). What does it mean to write in a creatural way? One way we are going to find out is by doing it: as Robert McKay suggests, there is possibility in telling stories differently with nonhuman-centred agency through the introduction of what McHugh summarizes in McKay's work as "a simultaneously abject, animal and 'protesting agency' that puts authority under erasure" (McHugh 2009, 35). And why not scholarly stories? By writing (in)to you, I am hoping to bring this erasure to bear here. Following the autoethnographic method of, among others, Enza Gandolfo (2014), I write in a way that attempts to perform the creatural. In acknowledging our entanglement—if your end is already written, then so is mine (Lockwood 2016, 63)—I come closer to your trauma. But how? What is the craft? What are the consequences of traumatic fiction about the vulnerability of other creatures? What does it mean for *our* entanglement?

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Donald Turner has suggested "if a nonhuman animal's story is to be told or heard, this will require a different type of listening than that to which humans are accustomed" (2003, 172). Cary Wolfe seems to agree. For him,

> real “listening” means being willing to have our own modes of perception, our own habits of knowledge, our own prerogatives of power, interrogated by taking seriously the radical alterity of other, nonhuman, ways of being in the world, ways that demonstrably can be communicated to us, and are all the time, if we know how to listen. (2011, 103)

I hope those who read on will turn their ears not into purses but to an *oto*biography nonhuman enough to put up with my attempts at becoming-with the other.

I have conducted in-depth interviews with seven writer-editors of creatural work, who give attention to the nonhuman to produce this new listening, which is a listening that interrogates place, power and language. Their acts of writing offer resistance to the social and cultural energy expended in the history of contemporary Western life to expunge the creatureliness from us, through what Foucault has called a “radical malice of knowledge” (1994, 11) in the instrumentalization of our discourses and practices. Instead, theirs is a work of attention to Wolfe’s ‘radical alterity of other, nonhuman, ways of being in the world’. Looking to the production of creatural becomings will, I hope, lead us to the affective dimensions of a creaturely writing process. As Gandolfo suggests, this might be traumatic: “In order to create believable worlds that readers can inhabit and the characters that people them, writers have to inhabit their characters’ lives. This can mean spending years in dark places” (1). And as Paul Kingsnorth, author of *The Wake*, said during our conversation, “People are scared of talking about dark things.” My own writing, here and elsewhere, is an attempt to inhabit the dark places where you are, where “coping is all.” Poet Susan Richardson told me that the obligation to at least try is upon us. So I shed my human skin to get closer to yours. I wander and wonder into dark places, sniffing around the foundations of your unfreedom in the shed where you are kept, snuffling new forms

of narrating, digging into an attentiveness to the creatureliness of writing. I wish I could do more. But what else can I do? You are one day old. And there are a billion of you.

How to Listen Differently

It makes sense, Anton, if I first introduce you to a few texts in which writers have imagined human–nonhuman entanglements in ways that seem creatural. I've focused on the pig, or boar, or swine; you have been called many things: you have stood for chauvinism, stubbornness, and cruelty, as well as slovenliness, filth and intemperance—all undeserved markers. But your species define, as historians Robert Malcolmson and Stephanos Mastoris put it, "a boundary between the civilized and uncivilized, the refined and the unrefined" (2001, 2). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have written that before intensive animal agriculture put you into those warehouses and crates, you were kept on smallholdings, even in the home, fed on swill and scraps. Imagine that! We could cohabit; you would be again the "creature of the threshold" that, they say, "overlapped with, and confusingly debased, human habitat and diet alike. Its mode of life was not different from, but alarmingly imbricated with, the forms of life which betokened civility" (1986, 47). (My apologies for their 'its'. Perhaps they are working from Erica Fudge's urge to write not history but "itstory" as "an attempt to identify the limits that our own discourses and our own capacities place on our ability to recognize agents with particular modes of engagement with the world" (2015, 19). Your historical closeness to us, your established intelligence and perhaps even the pinkness of your skin, have left you with, as McHugh says, "peculiar cultural resonances as avatars of animal agency in a startlingly coherent narrative history of barnyard revolutions. […] Pig stories come to

embody creative potentials for collective life" (2011, 18). It is this potential for collective life I am writing, Anton. To explore what it might be to write-*with* you: a becoming-with your lived experience.

How has this collaboration formed? My practice has involved writing to you each day in my journal, a letter about your life. For material, I've turned to farming manuals, videos online, and my own experiences protesting outside the gates of slaughterhouses where I met your brothers and sisters suffering in trucks only minutes from the gas chamber. Over the first twelve days of my practice and of your life, much has happened. None of it good—except that you are alive, unlike some of your sisters and brothers. You are weaned away from your mother. You will never see her again. I skulk into your pen to feel your confusion, the aches of the castration and the tags bitten into your ears, and the terror of foods that make you sick (but so big already!). When Fudge says of Sandra Swart's observation that "it was necessary for humans to think like a horse—to a certain extent—in domesticating them, training them, riding them" (Swart 2010, 256), then "perhaps this mode of engagement might be taken into the writing" (Fudge 2015, 18) of both the history and contemporary experience of nonhuman others. For Fudge and Swart this is an exercise of "historical empathy" (Swart 2010, 263). What I suggest is that perhaps a quest to write such a history is also the quest(ion) of writing creaturely.

I have turned to piggish texts, Anton, as a way of coming closer to you. In *Creaturely Poetics*, Anat Pick gives welcome attention to this peculiar and powerful place of your kin in thinking the process of what creaturely writing may be. Let's turn to Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* whom Pick picks at, as if a player of the *Schweineorgel* (the swine organ: a harmonium) making beautiful notes of your creatureliness for the ear that is listening differently. In Darrieussecq's novel *Pig*

Tales, the unnamed narrator, a woman whose body turns into that of a sow like your mother, experiences what it is to *become* you/her, performing a metamorphic becoming-with. Her perceptual experience of the world and herself changes. The more the narrator becomes a sow, the greater is her attention to her worldly entanglements: "The air, the birds—I don't know, whatever nature was left—really affected me all of a sudden" (Darrieussecq 1997, 10). Later on, when more fully in pig form and wild in the forest, she forgoes all human concerns:

> I no longer remembered either the millennium to come or any of my experiences—everything rolled up into a ball inside me and I forgot it all. I lost my memory, I have no idea for how long. I ate and ate. . . . Eating and sleeping didn't require much effort, just a little vital force, and there was enough of that in my sow's brain and vulva and brawn to wallow through life. . . . With my entire body I felt once again the spinning of the planet. (127)

The writer has imagined a pig who is in all of her pigness, and experiencing what you do not—acorns, mud, freedom. When the narrator becomes upset by the threat of "leaving my lair," it is her body that responds: she becomes more pig, or rather, "I was naturally rather upset the day we moved, so I was a *complete* pig" (121, my emphasis). The narrator experiences the full extent of her affective life in her animal body. This implies that we humans can attain more complete lives when we feel ourselves as embodied creatures, the full range of our "mind–body–world entanglements" (Blackman 2008, 3) with the other. But the things of culture lead us away from our bodies. These are in *Pig Tales* most notably acts of reading and writing, and here lies one of the difficulties in not only coming close to you, but in understanding what creatural writing might be.

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As Pick says, "*Pig Tales* begins by making the relationship between species and writing one of its chief concerns" (2011, 84). From the beginning, the narrator consciously draws attention to the process of recording her story in what the English translation terms "piggle-squiggles" (Darrieussecq 1997, 1) or "*écriture de cochon*" in the original—the writing by/for pigs. The narrator is also writing as a pig: with difficulty, for example, holding the pen in her trotter. The term '*écriture de cochon*' resonates with "*écriture féminine*," the term coined by Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, meaning 'feminine writing' that also opens to the inscription of the female body and female difference of language and text. By toying with this idea, Darrieussecq has written a book, says Pick, "about a certain animality *of* writing that exceeds the stakes of the female writer" (2011, 81, emphasis in original). That is, the idea of an "*écriture de cochon*" of writing by and for a pig reveals the naturalized ways in which writing/language supports and perpetuates dominant norms. Such "piggle-squiggles" from a sow/woman expose the ways in which both female and animal bodies are inscribed with difference through language and text, at their subordination and expense. To have another species—the pig, a sow—'become' a writer, experience a 'becoming-with' writing, challenges the idea, at least in the text, that only humans write. If only humans write, then language can be part of what it means to be human. For Pick, "the process of 'becoming-human' [is] for Darrieussecq inseparable from the question of writing" (85). To ask the question of the relationship between species and writing is then to expose and explore the 'writing of species'. It is to suggest that the differences between species are *merely* written; are merely, then, a question of language, and not something *natural* at all.

The writing of species is not always 'creatural' but can rub out the nonhuman in this privileged account of writing as only human. Human privilege—manifested in

anthropocentrism and speciesism—is enacted in practices that efface our separation from 'becoming-with' the animal other. Although, as Kate Wright suggests, "we can never disconnect from Earth's ecological community, because we are always becoming-with, in a living multispecies world composed of phenomena and transitions" we can nevertheless "terribly damage our ability to respond to that world" (2014, 280). The civilizing process produces seemingly stable, autonomous, bound and single identities. But civilizing is also traumatizing; we are no such things as stable, autonomous and bound individuals. Seeing and believing ourselves to be so, we suffer all sorts of atomization and pathology as we move away from the things we most need: touch, somatic and physical regulation, organicity and symbiosis with our environments and others. What we require to flourish is to experience life with our vulnerable bodies. We must do so without "perceiving the body with consolatory illusions" (Pick 2011, 186). These comforting illusions of the mind ('thinking') are that we operate as autonomous, separate, nonmaterial and invulnerable beings, and cannot be threatened by the material, animal world.

In the 2014 novel *The Awareness*, Gene Stone and co-author Jon Doyle chose four protagonists to tell the story of the world's nonhuman population coming to conscious awareness of their exploited positions: a wild bear, a domesticated dog, a circus elephant, and, for the farmed animal population, pig number 323. This pair of authors have chosen to come close to the sense of what it might mean to feel the world through your senses (or rather, your mother's), recoiling from the anthropocentric objectifying practices in the general narrative of your kind.

When she comes to awareness, Pig 323 is trapped inside a pen (much could be said of this!). She begins to have disorienting thoughts and to discover language:

"Pig," she said as she caught herself.

> The word felt good as it escaped her mouth into the air.
>
> . . .
>
> And then she thought of one word: “Human.” But the word wafted away like a secret… (Stone and Doyle 2014, 41-43)

Can animals keep secrets? This is the subject of a meditation by Derrida in his essay ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’. For Pig 323 it is difficult to grasp, this secret of the human, of being (with the) human, but give her some credit, she’s only just gained awareness of this division in language. For Derrida, it is a “naïve philosophy” to suggest “animals are incapable of keeping or even having a secret” (1989, 17-18). And yet even as Pig 323 loses the word (“human”) she gains another (“secret”) and so both loses and keeps the secret of how secrets operate: through and as language. It is later, in the house of the absented humans, that Pig 323 learns—from a drunk and miserable ferret—what this word (“human”) means and so loses her secret but gains knowledge of the radical malice that humans have inflicted upon ‘farmed’ animals:

> “Why are you telling us all this?” 323 asked him.
>
> “Because you need to know. They have kept you so ignorant, that even the awareness hasn’t brought you to understanding.”
>
> Again, 323 felt the need to defend herself.
>
> “Who is this ‘they’ you keep speaking of? And how have they kept us from anything?”
>
> The ferret just laughed.
>
> “Quit laughing,” 323 demanded, rage rising within. “I said, quit laughing or I will make my way up there and stop your laughter myself.”
>
> The ferret quieted. He looked down into the eyes of 323.
>
> “Humans.”

"I knew it," 323 said quietly. (Stone and Doyle 2014, 85-86)

In Foucault's analysis, there are three passions or drives that are "all ways not of getting close to the object or identifying with it but, on the contrary, of keeping the object at a distance, differentiating oneself from it or marking one's separation from it, protecting oneself from it" (1994, 11). These passions are to lament, to detest, and to laugh. The ferret here is the stand-in for the absent human, both animal and not-animal, drunk on fermented plums and detesting but also helping Pig 323 understand her predicament through explaining to her what she "needs to know" which is that "at the root of knowledge" are these drives, which "have in common a distancing of the object, a will to remove oneself from it and to remove it at the same time – a will, finally, to destroy it" (11). It is by quieting the detesting, objectifying laughter of the ferret that Pig 323 comes to understand the 'radical malice of knowledge' in the summation of the single word: 'Humans'. Human-like consciousness, the 'awareness' that has come about like a global telepathic download, is not enough. Pig 323 needs to also be educated in the cultural behaviours of humans. At first glance it seems this access to knowledge takes place from animal to animal, ferret to pig. But the human is not wholly absent. We, the readers, are also implicated in this scene. We recognize some aspect of ourselves in the ferret's drunken laughter and, critically, this draws us to the creatural writing-with at play in the text.

By choosing to inhabit Pig 323's world in narrative, Stone and Doyle are hinting towards the creatural as requiring the opposite of this 'keeping the object at a distance' by either laughing at, lamenting or detesting. Instead, what is needed is to *listen*, differently. Towards the end of *The Awareness*, Pig 323 is led to a shed where hundreds of sows are trapped inside gestation crates, many of them farrowing or with young piglets like you, Anton. Pig 323 frees the others from their crates and urges

them out before fire engulfs the shed. Outside, the pigs from the original pen come and join those newly rescued:

> Here were their mothers, they learned, and they nudged each other, and talked, and sniffed, and wondered who belonged to whom, and why that suddenly seemed to matter. . . . They spoke of their next round of piglets, how they'd be born into something different than any of the rest of them. They thanked 323, over and over. . . . The other pigs asked her how she did it, how she was able to free the birthing pigs.
>
> "I used my mind," she said. "My body. And my hooves."
>
> They all looked at their own bodies and hooves, and wondered what they would have done. Then they asked her to tell the story again and again.
>
> (Stone and Doyle 2014, 192-193)

By bringing our attention here to the nonhuman telling of stories, by asking us to understand that they *matter*, and hear the voices of other animals, *Pig Tales* and *The Awareness* engage in attempts to have us 'listen differently' to the narratives we humans create—and co-create—about the nonhuman. Following McHugh, we might argue that these two novels are efforts to wrest away particular nonhuman agency from the human-centred practices of literature, as alternative "models of collectivity" (2011, 22). That is, "commitments to living with and learning from animals differently . . . can proceed from creative engagements with narrative forms" (217).

McHugh is talking here of literary representation; but what about the creation of these forms? If these novels are to be seen as "experiments with multiple perspectives and processes that support models centred on agency rather than subjectivity" (1) and as such produce writing about creatures that is also creatural, how is this enacted in the production? If writers are "to write the body of the traumatized character, its

visceral qualities, the writer must *know* it" (Gandolfo 2014, 9). Perhaps unwittingly, Gandolfo reduces the subject of history to an impersonal body, the 'it'; but that is fitting for how most writers (and critics) overlook the importance of nonhuman experience, testimony, and bodily encounter in their writing. But what about writers who *do* respond to their entanglements with the world, the nonhuman other? In what ways is creatural writing *performed*?

Writing in Creatural Ways

Anton, you are now forty-five days old. If you were a broiler chicken you would be dead. You are coping, you are alive, you know nothing else. With such a lack of stimulation, only my rendering of literary tales keeps you from going insane. But you continue to shape my scholarly writing; I engage with the seen and heard representations of your experience, if not the smells and visceral touches, so that my writing, I hope, "twists language, makes it vibrate, seizes hold of it, and rends it in order to wrest the percept from perceptions, the affect from affections, the sensation from opinion" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 176). And I might add, in your context, wresting the rending from rendering, reared as you are for and *as* meat.

I hazard a guess that to produce creatural writing is to do with attempts to read and write your experience with *empathy*, an emotion that the philosopher Lori Gruen thinks of as "a particular type of attention[,] . . . a kind of moral perception" (2015, 39). For Gruen empathy is "the ability to blend emotion and cognition to understand the situation of the other" (51). If writing is a form of thinking or rather an exploration "to find out what I'm thinking" (Didion 1980, 18), then the 'ability to blend emotion and cognition' can be found in the writing process, as we come as close as we can, as

Leo Tolstoy impels us, to the other—to *you*—as close as we can bear, to help and to care.

A few caveats, however. For Belgian ethologist Vinciane Despret, empathy is too narrow: "Certainly, empathy transforms the subject (the one who feels empathy) but this transformation is a very local one as long as it does not really give [the empathiser's] object the chance to be activated as subject, the subject feeling empathy remaining the subject of the whole thing" (quoted in Fudge 2015, 21). For Despret, "Empathy allows us to talk about what it is to be (like) the other, but does not raise the question "what is it to be 'with' the other" (Despret 2004, 128). Physically, perhaps, this is the case. I am not *there*, with you.

Philosopher Ralph Acampora also veers away from both empathy and sympathy, suggesting they are "more airy, psychic" notions that do not provide a satisfactory sense of dense physical experience. What Acampora wishes to avoid is to employ empathy as "an ontology that grants the presence already of subject/object division and subject/subject separation" (2006, 78). Instead, Acampora suggests "it is time, as it were, to put the body back into moral sense" (73) and his attempt to do so is to work with the concept of "symphysis" as an "experiential principle of conviviality" (78) between bodies, and which places much more emphasis on the corporal component of how we sense and make sense of others. Symphysis is much more useful and responsible a concept than empathy, in Acampora's argument, for exploring interspecies compassion and how we encounter and form relations at the somatic level: through bodily engagement.

Both Despret and Acampora offer useful reappraisals of the concept of empathy as raised already in this chapter in respect of a 'becoming-with' writing or even a 'writing-with'. However, rather than adopting symphysis at this stage, I will continue

to employ the concepts of empathy and compassion as reasonably understood to ensure the focus is instead on elucidating this new concept: the creatural. As such, I need to ask what else is happening in the practices of writers that makes me believe they are engaged in performances of creatural craft that remain 'with' the other?

Over the summer of 2015 I visited seven writers to ask how they write in creatural ways—about the human as animal, the nonhuman animal, the animate and inanimate. They let me into their body–world–mind entanglements around their writing processes that, in my view of their work, tries to create "a syntax that makes [their work] pass into sensation, that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 176). Let me introduce them, with the caveat that some still would eat you. (While ethical veganism forms part of my utopian creative process, in the sense of Ann Cvetkovich's "utopia of ordinary habits" (2012, 191) that includes writing and other embodied routines, this does not hold for all others engaged with creatural practices. Becoming-with is a messy business.)

These writers have a connection to projects, publications and ways of being that coalesce into what can perhaps be called, in Blanchot's (1995) terms, a writing of the disaster of modern Western ways of living. Sharon Blackie is a novelist, nonfiction author and the founder and co-editor of *Earthlines* magazine, which seeks to "tell the story of those who are living well" in these times of ecological crises and species extinctions. David Knowles is co-editor of *Earthlines* and a poet "who likes animal- more than human company." Susan Richardson is another poet with three published collections, her latest being *skindancing*, which explores human–animal ambiguities and troubles those categories through shape-shifting forms and expressions, especially—as do both Sharon and David—drawing on Celtic myth and story. Along with James Roberts, the author of the children's book *The Man in the Mountain*, a tale

of the loss of wild life, Susan co-edits *Zoomorphic*, an online magazine dedicated to "the defense and celebration of animals." Another writer engaged with attempting to undo the damage done by the mostly anthropocentric outlook of 'civilization' is poet and psychologist Steve Thorp, who established *Unpsychology* magazine as a place for writing about "the wild mind." The fourth project is *Dark Mountain*, founded by Booker-longlisted novelist Paul Kingsnorth (with Dougald Hine). I travelled to Ireland to visit Paul and talk about his novel *The Wake* as well as his nonfiction, including *Real England*, and the *Dark Mountain* project that now publishes anthologies around, loosely, the idea of "Uncivilisation." On the way I stopped off in Scotland to speak to Em Strang, a poet with her first collection coming out in 2016, and also poetry editor of *Dark Mountain*. I asked these writers how they inhabit language, and their bodies, in ways that try to undo the catastrophe. To understand the web of entanglements that we are in—which we must, if there is to be a future for (and not only *beyond*) us.

Becoming Animal by Becoming-With Place

"I've always loved animals," Roberts begins. "I wanted to set up something that was purely about the animals, rather than with them in the periphery." For Richardson, there is a strong feeling that "poetry and prose as well can be a very effective tool for creating new patterns of thoughts and experience, ultimately possibly engendering behaviour change" towards animals.

All of the writers practiced coming closer to the nonhuman—and their own animality—by staying in one place and getting to know that place. Richardson feeds her poetic practice by "spending long periods of time where animals might be. I'm interested in being more rooted, spending a long time getting to know a small area

intimately. That's really helped my writing about animals, because if I know a whole ecosystem or environment on an intimate level, it leads to depths in the writing that I couldn't access before."

Each of the writers has chosen to live in places where they could, as Blackie emphasizes, "live *with* the land." (Blackie's forthcoming book is entitled *If Women Rose Rooted*.) This becoming-with the land is also vital to each of their publications' editorial rubrics. As Knowles says of *Earthlines*: "It comes down to having ways of living that are the fabric of your life, rather than adding a bolt-on by going out into—this is anathema to us—'the countryside.' What we're looking for is people who are living in a way where the land is central to their whole way of life."

For Kingsnorth, rootedness is a condition that has opened up possibility in his writing practice. He and his family moved to rural Ireland to live *with* a larger patch of land than they could afford in England. Kingsnorth writes from a hut on the land away from the house that was, while I stayed over, observed by a wild horse in the field beyond. The idea of rootedness is evident in *The Wake*, which retells the story of the Norman Conquest in 1066 from the point of view of the 'green man' Buccmaster of Holland, thrown off the land by the invading French. Finding rootedness is, for Kingsnorth, part of the solution to the current ecological and biodiversity crises. "When people are rooted," he suggests,

> it's not something they particularly worry about, it's not a Romantic idea for them. But for those of us floating around in bourgeois consumer capitalism, we're now coming out of the other side of modernity and its promise that the individual is free from the mass. But that's lead to the individual feeling rootless.

Strang's poetry is infused with a contextual becoming-with 'animal' and land. In a long poem she is currently writing,

> there's a lot of deer, there's not very many people, the guy is surviving on foraging, an ecological crisis has occurred, and there's a lot of rain, a lot of bog, and scree. These images will always be there for me when talking about these crises. I've always been fascinated with nature, what we call that, it's what makes my heart sing, being in the forest, going to the river, growing my own food. It will always be reflected in my poems.

Strang and Richardson recall to me Sarah Wood's comment that, "Poets do not hesitate to address animals, especially birds. Philosophers and scholars would not usually dare" (2013, 18). Or perhaps psychologists. For Thorp, in understanding animality it is important to note the difference between being 'in' or 'with' nature. As he says,

> We are human animals, and we have taken ourselves into a place where we are living in ways that is not nature. There's a difference between "in" and "with" that we need to ask about how we are living. The "in" bit is how I recover—going "in" to nature, but not necessarily being or becoming "with" it. It feels like I'm doing an "in" not a "with"; there's no real relationship, and I like that—for recovery.

The Importance of Story

A common thread among the writers for practicing 'creatural writing' is a close, even moral, attending to the centrality of story for understanding human–nonhuman entanglements. "We can't get away from stories," says Strang, "they are part of us, they're intrinsic. But unless we realize the power they have over us they can be phenomenally dangerous."

For Blackie, the challenge of the writer is to frame the experience of what is being harmed in a way for the reader to come upon it that connects empathically to their loss. Often the stories that best touch upon these losses in ways that can be felt and acted upon are stories that engage nonhuman imagery and agency.

"I work a lot with people who yearn for something," says Blackie, who runs a women-only writing workshop, *Singing Over the Bones*.

> Women particularly are big yearners; they are yearning for something: a form of enchantment, a way of being that is in some way magical. A story that works every time is of the Selkie, the seal-woman who has her skin stolen. She fades away, but then finds her skin and gets back into it. It's a perfect metaphor for people who know that there is some way of being in the world that they've lost, or that their ancestors had and they never had. The best stories are those that allow people to put their own experience into it. You capture that inchoate kind of longing for something, and you give it a form.

(It is worth noting that for Linda Vance, the yearning for something lost is more typical an experience of male relations with nature, in that privileged, white men have the access and luxury to indulge in such an emotion. Perhaps what Blackie is suggesting is not yearning itself, but its suppression. As Vance says: "For women and people of color, that same separation means a continual struggle for access to that which defines and controls us" (Vance 1993, 124).)

Both Richardson and Roberts have used this story in their writing. For Richardson this has taken on deeper meaning in relation to the seal, which I will come to in a moment. Kingsnorth echoes this sense of 'yearning' for something lost that appears in his practice, connected to what he argues as a loss of connection with the concept of what it means to be 'English', and the language that he created for his

novel. *The Wake* is written in what he calls a "kind of shadow language" that is a mix of old English, Anglo-Saxon and creatural becomings. He emphasizes this is not a "device" but an "essential, integral" element to communicate what it might have been like living a thousand years ago. *The Wake* is similar to William Golding's *The Inheritors*, a retelling of the diminishment of Cro-Magnon man in prehistorical times, which Pick calls "a bold ecopoetic experiment that gives rise to a new kind of literary sentience" (2011, 53). The creatures of *The Inheritors* are pre-human; the playfulness in language, as with *The Wake*, is a question of "not species, but perception" (54). For Kingsnorth, the process is of exchanging our language for one appropriate to the mind–body–world entanglements of humans living a thousand years ago. "If you break down a language you break down the way that you visually relate to things," he explains, "you're being forced to look at the world in a different way through different words, and to observe the things your ancestors had but we do not—this connection with land, myth, gods, place, animals. To a degree that's what every writer does anyway: how can you look at it fresh?"

For Kingsnorth this articulates a way of being in the world, resonant of how Kate Wright's uses Haraway's "worlding" to show us how we are *not* in the world. It is freedom from the constraints of contemporary thought to rethink the creatural, what Sarah Wood means when she writes, "The articulation of an otherwise inconceivable concept can only be brought about by a work that does not think" (2013, 18). Or at least, *not* to think like *us*.

Practices and Techniques

For Richardson, a practice of education around the nonhuman world is a vital component in her creatural craft. "I try to get up to speed with the science as much as

possible," she says, "whether that involves doing an animal behaviour course or doing a wild boar tracking day or an otter ecology day, or a week monitoring and counting seal pups in Pembrokeshire."

Richardson also has very clear techniques for engaging in creatural work. "If I'm writing from the animal's perspective or trying to, I'll think a lot about pronouns and not having a single solitary I." Richardson's practice echoes Derrida's invocation that "We must be several in order to write, and even to 'perceive'" (Derrida 1978, 226). "I maybe have a we, or an us," continues Richardson (or even a *you*, Anton?), "if you're writing about a flock for example, to think about how language is malleable and fluid and can shift."

Richardson, Knowles and Strang all play with "verbs acting as nouns, nouns as verbs, etc." For Knowles,

> To some extent we're talking about devices for getting around the ruts of language. But I think there are enough permutations in language, even the one we have which is so trodden down, which gives you something, every so often you come up with something, a curiousness, a surprise, which puts the reader into the place where you were, afresh, as it were.

Richardson agrees. "Being open to language as more fluid, and thinking about the form of the poem and allowing that to shift and change, shift from prose to poetry and back again, having fluid sentence structure, brings us closer to the nonhuman, reminds us that language is constructed by humans. If we're writing from an animal's perspective," she adds, "it's going to be a construct anyway, but I like experimenting with different forms of structure to give a flavour of animalness, or my version of animalness where possible."

This idea of how we perceive is central to Strang's practice in moving closer to the nonhuman. "I'm interested in seeing our own seeing," she explains.

> What does it mean to see and perceive the world? Paul Klee said it wasn't him looking at the forest but the forest looking at him, and I feel that as well. It isn't just a one-way thing, it isn't energy from me going into the world; it's a two way, cyclical exchange.

Knowles writes from the same position.

> We're presented with this notion that there's us and the world out there, and it's a false dualism. What I'm trying to do with my writing is to show that it's a false dualism in the first place and that there's only one great continuum and it is us and the land and the animals and the birds and the weather. It's a real, tactile, rain in your face, glimpse of a fox, phenomenon. It's gritty under your fingers, not some intellectual construct. This is the land on which you walk, footfall after footfall, glimpse after glimpse.

This attention to perception has led Thorp, Strang and Kingsnorth to meditation and Buddhism, Richardson and Blackie to myth and folklore, and Richardson to the alterities of shamanism and trance. These are all forms of recognizing the other and rerouting the social mind's responses in their writing to what could be called creatural. For Strang, meditation is similar to poetry in that "it's a slowing down process—I have to think about what I'm writing; I'm not just cognating it, I'm emotionally engaged, I'm sensorially engaged, and all of those processes take time."

To come closer to animals, Richardson practices "dance and trance, and more intuitive stuff such as shamanic journeying, animal communication, which helps me find a more intuitive way into writing."

> Animal totems have significance for my writing. Some of my first shamanic work was about finding my animal spirit guide, and the one that came up was the Atlantic grey seal, and I think my relationship with Seal has developed a lot over the years. If you open yourself up to your spirit guide then it will appear to you in lots of different ways. I was more aware of Seal being there." Such radically other ways of connecting with the nonhuman in writing is essential, thinks Richardson, for challenging the dominant stories we tell about nonhuman animals. "In our Western tradition there are very few examples of positive animal transformation. It's often a curse. But in more traditional forms of stories it is seen as a positive transformation. For me this sums up the dysfunctional relationship we have not only with the animal within us but with the wider animal world.

These attempts at self-transformation, of 'becoming-with' *the/an* animal, are crucial, says Blackie, for tackling the contemporary disasters of Western living, even if they are a risk. "You have to do something that runs the risk of transforming people," she says.

> My own writing is very much about that. I don't think I would write if I did not have anyone to communicate with. It's the story that's important. Reenchantment is a funny word, some people love it, some people hate it, but I go out into the world and see a crow and I know what a crow is and I know how it lives and I know what it sounds like. I know it's a crow, but on top of that I have layers of mythology that date back to 'this is what a crow was in mythological terms' in this land. It doesn't make it less of a crow it makes it more crow to me, and if we live more with these stories then we care more about crow and care more about the environment where crow is, and we see ourselves as part of crow not

> something separate from crow. And so we change, we live differently, we don't need crap, we don't need the possessions we have—we just need crow.

The Collaborative Nature of Creaturalness

These attentive writers are engaged in what Thom van Dooren has called "*practical* acts of care that can draw others into a sense of curiosity and concern for our changing world" (2014, 293, emphasis in original). Van Dooren unpicks the affective, ethical and practical nature of the labor of caring. The investment in shamanism of Richardson, Roberts' decision to live in a national park, the obligations these writers have put upon themselves to live with nonurban experiences of the nonhuman to infuse and shape their craft, are vital practices of the labor of caring; as are the publications they have established to foster community around human–nonhuman entanglements. Their writing is "grounded in a new way in the specificity of real bodies and worlds in ongoing relationship" (293). And, as Blackie emphasizes, these ongoing relationships are both social and textual: the crow is not just crow but the layers of story we know about crow. It is our obligation, in living well, to know these layers and articulate them in story. This is, van Dooren says, a "curious critique" that is exemplary of this new (but so very old) way of caring: "here the obligation to know more emerges as a demand for the deep contextual and critical knowledge about the object of our care, a knowledge that simultaneously places us at stake in the world and demands that we be held accountable" (293), practically. This articulates my hope, Anton, and my justification for this creatural scholarship, a writing that "requires that we get involved in some concrete way, that we do something (wherever possible) to take care of another" (292). This is to enter into (dialogue with) a forest of concepts that Nicholas Royle suggests could be termed an "animological discourse" (2013, 187). For Royle, thinking through the 'question of the animal' and our entanglements

with specific animals is another way of thinking about "the *sociality* of writing as *drama*" (186, emphasis in original). Such sociality of becoming-with the other has, as Fudge continues, "implications for a concept of agency" (2015, 22) for both human and nonhuman; such a perspective foregrounds nonhumans as both "social and textual agents" (McHugh 2009, 24).

Where Fudge has 'itstory' and Royle 'animology', what I propose—*we* propose—is that creatural writing is a practice of embodied and felt *collaboration* (*with* the land, *with* spirit guides) that leads to 'asking better questions' of the nonhuman experience and the human–animal relation. If we ask, as Sara Ruddick compels us to, not what rights you have, but, more directly "What are you going through?" (1980, 348) then the answers you provide give me a better sense of what *my* species is going through, entangled as we are. *Creatural writing as a collaborative practice of writing the disaster*. It is because these, and other, writers have an understanding of their entanglements—and responsibilities—that they invest their narrative practice with the 'grit under the fingers' habits of coming as close as they can to nonhuman agency, to pay moral attention in asking Ruddick's question, and 'listening differently' to the answers.

In *The Awareness*, Pig 323 is told her name by another of her kin who reads the tag puncturing her ear. "323? Yes, she thought, good. The digits belonged to her, like her hoof, like her stout legs. Amid the pen of replicas, she owned something unique" (Stone and Doyle 2014, 43). There is much here to say—too much in fact, a whole chapter on these 'digits' that are numerical and hint towards the opposable thumb; of the 'pen of replicas' that are both her kin and the writing machine. But let me concentrate on naming. By naming you Anton, I have, like the authors of *The Awareness*, understood that to name you is to make you subject to the law of proper

nouns. Why Anton? A serendipitous name. Antonomasia is the practice of the substitution of a phrase for a proper name, such as “the little corporal” for Napoleon (Bonaparte, not Napoleon in *Animal Farm*). By calling you Anton, this reverses and brings attention to the process of naming, a task we save for ourselves as humans. The noun proper to you inside industrial agriculture is *pig*. Nothing else. To call you Anton is to name you otherwise, to highlight this naming as a gesture in language that attempts, at least metonymically, to place you properly. Antonomasia is a gesture that fails if we save it for ourselves, like so many other failures when it comes to our species relationships.

Bear with me, Anton. I am working to get you out of this mess.

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