

Editorial: Creative Writing and Arts

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In his famous book *The Others: How Animal Made Us Human* (1995), Paul Shepard writes:

Longer than memory we have known that each animal has its power and place, each a skill, virtue, wisdom, innocence—a special access to the structure and flow of the world. Each surpasses ourselves in some way. Together, sacred, they help hold the cosmos together, making it a joy and beauty to behold, but above all a challenge to understand as story, drama, and sacred play. (173)

One of the founders of human ecology, Shepard (1925-1996) conceived of this discipline as an intersectional field, embracing biology as well as philosophy, environmental history along with anthropology and psychology, thus paving the way to what we now commonly call the “environmental humanities.” In all of his works, from *Man in the Landscape* (1967) to *Nature and Madness* (1982), a very special emphasis falls on the co-evolutionary pathway of our species. The way we experience, know, speak, and imagine the world—even our sense of the sacred—have been shaped, Shepard acknowledged, by this long encounter with nonhuman animals. Perception, language, creativity, *culture*: this is what happens “when species meet,” as Donna Haraway would say a few years later.

Once more, the integral role that the “animal humanities” play in this broader trans-disciplinary debate is validated: if nonhuman animals have made us human, as Shepard maintained, then the humanities are unthinkable apart from this radical co-implication. And this mutual predicament is what our *Ecozon@* issue titled “Animal Humanities, or, On Reading and Writing the Nonhuman” explores. Here again the connection between the “Special Focus” cluster and the Creative Writing and Art section proves to be extremely strong. As Deborah Amberson and Elena Past write in their superb Introduction, “it is precisely here, in the space of literary language, cinematic image, artistic creation, ethical thinking, and the philosophical imagination, that the nonhuman animal, long defined as being without logos and without reason, might speak most clearly.” The variety of creative contributions in our section—two sets of images, a considerable selection of poems, and a comic short story—could not resonate better with this statement. Let us explore this rich array in full detail.

The first contribution is visual, and it consists of a selection of six pictures from the project *Great Apes in Feminine* by Spanish artist and ecofeminist activist

Verónica Perales. The project, which is vividly illustrated in the artist's abstract, is meant to give visibility to the female subjects in primate studies, often obscured by the conceptual "grouping" of these species. Hence the necessity to give these "apes in feminine" not only *faces* (in Lévinas's sense), but also names. And so, Perales's portrayals become liminal experiences: with their mutual ties and individual appellations (both essential to the narrative sequence of these artworks), Nadia, Coco, Virunga, Muni and all the others participate in drawing, as Diana Villanueva Romero suggests, a "space of relation between the human and the nonhuman that responds creatively to the kind of configuration of the humanities that is needed" (n.p.) in a time when human culture is called to cross the borders of our species. A similar vision and sensibility also animates our second art contribution, Nuria Sánchez-León's *La vida como producto, Life as a Product*. The pictorial series created by this artist who explores the mergers between ecological activism and "public art," is again animated by the claim against the reduction of living beings to a dimension of objectual anonymity, something which completely erases the human-nonhuman evolutionary ties as well as interspecific ethical considerations. In her contribution, while the slaughtered pig bodies are almost undistinguishable in texture and shapes from the bodies of human babies, human babies are in turn transformed into packed meat. And so, entering in such a close proximity with these bodily subjects, the artist turns the species difference into a granular intimacy of fates.

After visual works, poetry takes the stage. And here we have a considerable richness of voices, which articulate human-nonhuman encounters in a rich array of modulations. Our first two authors are already known by *Ecozon@* readers. The first, Florian Auerochs, is a German scholar and writer, working in the fields of queer and feminist criticism, animal studies, and psychoanalysis. His *Notes on Endangered Species #1* is a two-poem suite engaging with the animal body, be it vulnerable, endangered, or extinct. Under his eyes, the real body of the animal, whether a starfish or an ibis, overlaps with virtual images ("I watched them / crumble / in the dark / on youtube") and mediated emotional reverberations ("viral / tears"). The second short suite is *Water Droplets: Amidst the Zodiacs and Constellations* by Jacob G. Price, two bilingual poems about the ongoing change that is inherent in natural cycles. Written in both English and Spanish, Price's verses describe encounters of beings (seagulls, phoenixes, trees, puddles, humans) and elements (rain, ground, stars, the celestial spheres), marking secret correspondences among all of them: "I awake and see my son in a puddle. / I mutter to the trees, / 'One among so many, / so many among one.'"

The next two poets are making their first appearance in *Ecozon@*. They inaugurate their collaboration with our journal by way of two extended groups of lyrics, all in bilingual versions. The first of these two authors is the renowned Colombian writer, translator, and filmmaker Juan Carlos Galeano, who is also a Professor of Spanish at Florida State University. Here presented in Spanish and English, Galeano's sylloge *Amazonian Cosmologies: Six Poems* is the result of a

combination of influences, encompassing motifs of Amazonian folklore as well as Japanese imagistic poetry, Surrealism and the Hispanic and North American poetic traditions. This short anthology is a very good sample of Galeano's poetic "cosmovisions" and "cosmologies of reciprocity." As he explains in the preliminary note (strongly recommended for reading),

the religious cosmovisions of Amazonians [...] believe in the existence of visible and invisible beings living in multiple spheres of the world. [...] Spirited rivers, forest, boulders, winds provided me with the fabric for themes of movement, love, violence, and rebirth elaborated in the folktales of Amazonians [...]. The poems want to become a sort of spiritual history of the place—for poetry is an emotional and sentient world speaking through our bodies.

All these beings and worlds appear in the six poems, embodied in the forms of pink dolphins, young snakes, anacondas or mermaids, who are in turn figures or children of the Yakumama, the "Mother of all Water Beings." Writing about the Colombian poet, Joni Adamson has commented: Galeano's poems are about 'transformational beings' that "take the forms of trees, dolphins, birds, or clouds," or that sometimes "transform themselves into the shape of humans" (n.p.). All these beings are "persons," as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uses that word, revealing that "humans, animals, plants and spirits are participating in the same [multinatural and multicultural] world" (Adamson and Galeano, n.p.). Involuntarily resonating with Shepard's words, in Galeano's poetry these Amazonian "sacred" beings really "help hold the cosmos together" (Shepard 173). The last poetic guest of our Spring issue is Antonello Borra. His *Quattro poesie inedite da Alfabestiaro (terza parte) / Four unpublished poems from Alfabestiaro (third part)* reconnect with collections of verses previously published in Italian, English, and German by this multilingual Italian poet and translator based in Vermont, where he also teaches Italian Literature. The title *Alfabestiaro* is a pun in which the words "alphabet" and "bestiary" are hybridized. As Borra writes in his insightful (and also highly recommended) introductory note about his poems,

[w]hen human beings forget that they too are animals, they forfeit their soul: 'anima' in Italian. It is this simple, linguistic truth that is at the root of these animal poems, in which the human voice lends itself to each of the different creatures that speak in the texts. The hope is that readers will smile, or laugh, and then start taking a good, long, hard look at themselves. And think.

In these four poems, the human animal lends its voice to a magpie, an ibis, a blackbird and a bear, mixing loving irony with a sense for earthly dwellings and the surprise of unexpected connections, as in *L'orso / The bear*: "Paradise is a place / here on earth, / and that's why I prefer / that corner in the sky / where I already have my wife / and my daughter pulling the wagon."

The human also lends its voice to a speaking nonhuman creature in our last piece, Robert Davis's "The True Story of Edgar Allen Crow." The tale is a fantastic comic story based on an actual encounter that the author, a very original and prolific Californian writer, had while taking his four collies for a walk in a park of

San Francisco. As Davis writes, with his usual tone of understatement: "This is a comic take on some bird friends I see daily, and have noted their highly intelligent behavior." What happens in these amusing and captivating pages is that a super-smart crow lures the dog's owner with his capability not only to grab cookies, successfully competing with pigeons (and dogs), but also to articulate complex conversations and even to start his own business. With his surreal irony and impressive talent for storytelling, Davis uses anthropomorphism as a litmus test for revealing both animal talents and human flaws. In doing so, he inspires us to ask whether what we commonly consider "anthropomorphic" might be instead an extension of zoomorphism to the human realm. As Joseph Meeker once wrote, "I am not suggesting that all plants and animals possess human qualities, but that much elaborate philosophizing about human behavior has been mere rationalization of relatively common natural patterns of behavior which are to be found in many species of plants and animals" (161). Even if we know that crows do not really start their business in the field of hot dogs, seeing these human-animal resemblances in the "comic mode" is surely something which reinforces our Darwinian family ties, reminding us, as Shepard said, that the nonhuman animals are the ones that make us human.

In conclusion, speaking of encounters and ties, we would like to pay here a heartfelt tribute to the memory of one of our contributors, Peter Bergthaller, who recently passed away. His beautiful photographs of marine life will continue to tell us the stories of his meetings with nonhuman ones.

Works Cited

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