PART I

“What you gonna do about yer ass?”
Exit Music
(for a Road Trip)

“What you gonna do about yer ass?”
– Sun Ra, “Nuclear War”

Yes, even untold stories must begin somewhere. So let us set off from a crossroads where a certain cocked-and-loaded question, posed by Sun Ra in a song, collides with the velocity of a big black American luxury sedan, a gas-guzzling Chevy Caprice Classic speeding down the length of Mississippi on Interstate 55 on New Year’s Day, 2001. This is a firsthand report, as I was the driver of the Black Caprice in question, intent on gleaning inspiration from passing landscapes beyond the glass and prone to scrawling cryptic postcards on the steering wheel while

1 The motto of this chapter reflects the pervasive influence of Sun Ra and especially the song titled “Nuclear War” in which this provocative query is found. There isn’t enough time or space to encompass the full scope of entwined musical, visual, poetic, and performance legacies that Sun Ra gifted to earthlings before he left the planet in 1993. But I wish to pay homage to Sun Ra’s resounding influence as a provocateur of “space” and “race” in US cultural discourse. For more, see John F. Szwed’s biography, Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998). More importantly, you gotta listen to the music, especially: Sun Ra and His Outer Space Arkestra, “Nuclear War,” Nuclear War (Atavistic, 2009).
speeding down the interstate. Still in the early days of a weeklong cross-country road trip, the Mutt of Gold and I had rolled out of upstate New York a few days earlier with the aim of witnessing a breadth of American places as we headed for winter refuge with friends in the mossy milds of the Pacific Northwest. The trusty Mutt was in her spot in the backseat. Riding shotgun were a copy of the *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* and a slew of mix-tapes that my buddy Adam Lore had sent along as soundtracks to the rolling transcontinental quest.² I thrust the first of these into the Caprice’s cassette player as we headed south from the smokestacks and pyramids of Memphis, Tennessee and rolled on down into the piney unfoldings of North Mississippi hill country.

I had not planned to take the Mississippi way, but Mississippi happens to be a place with a certain special gravity that can pull a gas-guzzling nomad in, again and again – just as it did this day. After a steamy neon New Year’s Eve in Nashville saloons the night before, I lit out with the Mutt of Gold early that morning, heading west. I had hoped to take Interstate 40 all the way to Oklahoma before dropping down into Texas, but the empty highway was laced with the remains of a terrific ice-storm that had paralyzed the Mid-South and shut down all of Arkansas. Hell-bent on making the Texas border by nightfall, but with Interstate 40 closed west of the Mississippi River, my only possible route was to cut south at Memphis and roll down the length of Mississippi on I-55 through that clear, cold, icy New Year’s Day 2001.

So it happened that we were in North Mississippi, just approaching the exit for Senatobia/Como, when I first heard “Nuclear War” by Sun Ra and his Intergalac-

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² Adam Lore is always eager to share his passion for rare, radical, and wildly transformative social music, and he spreads his gospel of musical intoxication through his Brooklyn-based imprint, *Fifty Miles of Elbow Room*, [https://www.50milesofelbowroom.com/](https://www.50milesofelbowroom.com/).
tic Arkestra. From the first strange thrums of bass and synthesizer hums that came through the Caprice’s speakers, I felt the song throb deep inside my skin and bones. As the song murmured on through those miles of rolling hill country, past frozen swamps, furrowed fields, and scraggly stands of pine, a welter of uneasy feelings began to stir beneath the blur of passing landscapes. I rode on with my heavy foot on the gas pedal of the Black Caprice, deeper into the roiling Mississippi hills, listening to the lyrical refrains and strange intonations of “Nuclear War”: “Nuclear war, yeeeaahhhhhhhh, nuclear war, yeeahhh... It’s a motherfucker, don’t you know? When they push that button, your ass got to go. What you gonna do about yer ass?” I listened to the song over and over, utterly mesmerized. With every mile certain tensions of those times, not to mention other dim pasts and futures, trembled deep below. By the time I reached the Louisiana border in the late afternoon, forbidding revelations rumbled under the surface of that romantic American road trip like a rickety Gulf oil rig about to blow.

Looking back now on that wayward trip – and really that entire fraught millennial time – I might hazard a guess as to what came to pass on that headlong westward drive. The more miles I drove, the more I realized that I experienced nothing of the places I passed through and left behind nothing but toxic fumes. The sense of American places I was supposedly gathering on this trip was more like a subtraction. I only smelled or felt the native air when I stopped for gas somewhere, wherever. From my plush seat in the Caprice, the country was all the same big truck-stop parking lot. I hardly ever met a soul of any species in those towns I blew through. It didn’t have to be this way, but I was caught up in compulsive, need-for-speed highway adventure mythos that ultimately cost much more than the price of gasoline. I was on the verge

3 Sun Ra and His Outer Space Arkestra, “Nuclear War.”
of grasping that my great cross-country drive was less an exploration than a compulsion, shaped by specific histories of industrial and capitalist exploits, a symptom of a manifest reaping of false freedoms that wring rapacious loss of places and unknown ways of being.

I was at a truck-stop in Tallulah, Louisiana late that afternoon when the full force of Sun Ra’s question hit me. In a burst of frustration born of friction between myths of American “freedom” and all the knowns and unknowns that their consequences obscure and harm, I scrawled a desperate message on a scrap of old ’80s rainbow-unicorn stationary and mailed it back home to my future self. The missive said only this: “What you gonna do about yer ass?”

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Now I need to pause from the driving tale to ruminate more fully on the word “ass.” What is one’s ass, in this context of ethical action (i.e., what to do about it)? And where is it located? There’s the ancient beast of burden, and there’s the lower human body part, but neither of these denotations encompasses the ass-entire that Sun Ra’s Intergalactic Arkestra invokes as they chant: “Gonna blast you so high in the sky, you can kiss yer ass goodbye.”

The Oxford English Dictionary grants “ass” the status of what they call a postpositive intensive, which means one can append it to any descriptive term to intensify the meaning: i.e., “badass,” “crazy-ass,” and “sorry-ass,” to name a few. My personal favorite example of this construction is uttered by the long-lost mother in a gut-wrenching scene from the 2012 film, Beasts of the Southern Wild, when she tells her estranged six-year-old daughter, Hushpuppy, “Nobody likes a pity-party-havin’-ass
woman." Clearly, “ass” is one little word that gives a good bang for your buck in the American vernacular. As I have said before, I was forbidden as a girl to say this word, which my mother claimed was not “ladylike.” But as I listened over and over again to the Arkestra’s melancholy chant that day, I got a sense that this “ass” they sing of embodies much more than one little word can contain, because enmeshed within the question of what to do about “yer ass” is a challenge to every one of us as a special agent and earthbound beastly becomer, an old and deep question of action, belief, and desire that reaches beyond bounded bodies in timeplaces, far-outward into the meshes of worlding paths and the varying speeds we travel them, and even into a kind of swarming void where knowing and the edges of specific beings dissolve.

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So back to the cross-country road-trip, then, where as a bewildered American interstate motorist and aspiring poet-artist, I heard the sly resonance of the song’s call but had no clue how to respond. So I just kept driving west. At that stage, I was dimly beginning to gather the implications of the “ass” as put forth in “Nuclear War” – that we all have one, that is, and that it might not be just another static possession or asset but rather something we do, something we are responsible to, that is, the ass as an instrument of ethical, aesthetic, even ontological action that embodies what we desire, honor, and hope to see thrive within the worlds we care for. Meanwhile, I was dimly coming to understand the ways that most of the special privileges and freedoms I took for granted often compromise bodies, ecologies, and tangled ways of life in earthly places. And yet, in the course of this westward

4 Behn Zeitlin, dir., Beasts of the Southern Wild, screenplay by Lucy Alibar (Fox Searchlight, 2012).
drive, I wantonly indulged in the same destructive, slippery global resource-extractionist forces that my ass, in this sense, was supposed to stand against.

The days of that doom-ridden road trip wore on, mile after mile. I just kept driving west and flipping the “Nuclear War” cassette. Every time the song came around again, the Arkestra’s chant that pulses through it seemed more strange and urgent: “Nuclear war, yeeaaaaaahhh, nuclear war, yeeaaahhh... it’s a motherfucker, don’t you know, when they push that button, yer ass got to go. What you gonna do about yer ass?”

The pressing urgency of this question brings us (perhaps inevitably) to the crash in the desert. Two days after Tallulah, dazed by miles and the lull of spectacular desert landscapes rolling past in the window panes, the Mutt and I were coming down into Arizona, out of the Apache National Forest where I had strayed from the interstate for a night to stay with acquaintances in a prefab model home in the middle of an arid llama pasture in New Mexico. It was late morning. I raced through the dazzling desert light toward the I-10 in hopes of making it to California by sundown, with a long way still to go. Winding down the two-lane highway among striated pink cliffs and stands of gnarly pine, I was in too much of a hurry to do more than gawk at the rock monoliths and swathes of dry cactus landscape, and then in turn at the makeshift desert homesteads of plywood and hand-painted signs that lined the roadsides through the outskirts and town of Safford, Arizona.

I was listening to “Nuclear War” again as I came around a curve and saw the two-lane county route stretch out long and straight ahead of us toward the interstate. After so many days on the road, highway speed gets to be a habit. I let my foot go heavy on the pedal as I zoned into the hypnotic flow of the song and shot west toward California, watching the pale unfamiliar colors of the desert unfurl in the windshield. Right about then I passed a
scratched-dirt lot full of fighting cocks, each chained by a leg to a tiny triangular hut. In my hermetic, maroon-upholstered capsule of the Caprice, I was teasing out some vague notion about suppressed violence, speed, and the compression of mortal time – as witnessed in the shimmer of sunlight sliding along the iridescent rainbow blade of one rooster’s tail-feather as it lifted lightly in the wind, reminding me of a Wallace Stevens line I could not quite bring to mind... when I crashed into an orange pickup truck and skidded into the broken glass and weeds at the edge of the highway.

Here in this split second of the crash, I crossed over from easy, unhindered speed into an abrupt caesura. I sat frozen and watched a silver hubcap go rolling off into the ditch in slow motion. After a long, shaky moment, I got out of the driver’s seat and stood on the roadside, knowing with all the certainty of mangled metal and oily rising smoke that it was time to take responsibility, in more ways than one, for the destructive forces, assumptions, and half-baked beliefs that manifested in my lone westward drive. As I stood there beside the mangled right fender of the Caprice, “Nuclear War” blaring out of the car speakers, eerily. The Mutt of Gold was panting like a locomotive in the backseat, and I swear on my future American ass that a sourceless ash was falling like light snow or fallout from the cloudless desert sky.5

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The collision in the Arizona desert was a shock to the system, and it gave me new ears for the ever-more haunting ethical and aesthetic admonitions borne in Sun Ra’s pressing-ass question. For one thing, the faded but ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust. US Cold War kids grew up in a late century where images of mushroom clouds seemed as iconic to desert landscapes as the saguaro cactus, not to mention the globally significant reverberations of the Chernobyl meltdown and the psychic residues of a widely watched 1983 Hollywood television miniseries called The Day After. Even as specific Cold War-era memories fade and rise, the specter of annihilation and swelling waves of extinction becomes ever more real, complicated, and immediate in a fearsome era of ecological woe and grief, where countless species and places are caught up in skeins of melting ecosystems and rapacious capital extractive schemes. How much more fraught do questions of “what to do about our asses?” become as we witness slow devastations of earthly ecosystems already well underway and realize the inextricable ways we are all implicated in their decline?

If this all sounds like vague doom-saying, so it is and was – vaguely understood and articulated, that is. But Doom was what I knew best, growing up – apocalyptic extremes to which thinking defaults when it lacks critical tools to parse complicated environmental conundrums. This sense of doom remains a dominant mode within environmental politics, where, as Susan Harding points out, discourse often crystallizes around preacher’s son Al Gore’s powerful cooptation of the Christian “jeremiad,” as deployed in the documentary An Inconvenient Truth to motivate a sense of guilt and urgent need for redemptive action in regard to global climate change. In other words,
we are all born sinners in global industrial technoculture: *How we gonna get clean?*

The crash in the Arizona desert was a kind of wake-up call to unreckoned complexities and unimagined possibilities of material realities I was failing to attend to, especially the energy systems, infrastructures, and assumptions of seemingly inescapable oil-driven lifeways that are "shot through with largely unexamined cultural values, with ethical and ecological consequences," as Stephanie LeMenager demonstrates in *Living Oil.* Oozing and lurking at the periphery of awareness, ethical provocations and hidden energies trembled through "what you gonna do about yer ass?" How might a person learn to live in the frictional complexities of neoliberal petro-global capitalist times, within exhausted tropes, impossible desires, and irresolvable conflicts? Swinging between easy extremes, with pastoral bliss on the one side and mostly invisible multispecies holocaust on the other, the challenge lies in finding immediate, inventive, DIY (or better yet, DIT or Do-It-Together) ways to imagine worldly becomings that match the complexities at hand. Over

6 Susan Harding, “Get Religion,” in *The Insecure American: How We Got Here and What We Should Do About It*, eds. Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 376. Indeed, this dynamic laces through all kinds of environmental discourses and ecological art practices.

7 Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2. My nomadic road-trip wanderings in this era of the Black Caprice were laden with literary tropes of (US American) freedom and self-discovery that obscured the fossil-fueled material realities of these drives.

8 Questioning the assumptions of individualism that often characterize Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and some hacker cultures, ecofeminist collectives in Australia have proposed alternative models of Do-It-Together (DIT). Hosted in Melbourne in 2019 by the Ecofeminist Fridays research collective, the 4th Hacking the Anthropocene Symposium proposed a DIT theme in order to explore: "What does it mean to strive for collective action when queer, Indigenous, anticolonial and posthumanist artists, scholars, and activists have so deeply prob-
time, the embarrassment and shame that steamed up through the cracks of that crash carried a nascent sense of newfound responsibilities to complex hidden systems and the “shadow places” that make pretty windshield vistas and pastoral idylls possible, as Val Plumwood asserts – crazy webs from which a person could no longer withdraw in quaint dreams of innocent communion with tadpoles and wild grasses.⁹

The slow and radical cultural shift to ecological awareness over the last decades of the twentieth century took hold slowly in the cockpit of the Black Caprice, within a growing astonishment that these vital others I was just discovering had been right here all along – the low-growing plants and trees, all the hot- and cold-blooded and carapaced bodies, alive and aware, present and mattering – along with the ever-growing grief born of the ways industrial cultures have and continue to compromise all of them (and some much more than others). I should say that it was not for lack of spending time outdoors as a kid that I was so ignorant of ecologies. Like many suburbanized the anthropocentrism underpinning taken-for-granted colonial understandings of both collectives and agency?“ https://hackingtheanthropoceneiv.wordpress.com/.

ban kids, I grew up in the view that the beyond-human world was a mere backdrop – an undifferentiated and fairly static mass called “Nature,” which was more or less an empty stage set in which human actors and our charismatic familiars in the spotlight were the only significant players. So much of what we learned in those days worked to reinforce the separation of the Human subject from the muddy mass of raw and ruder forms of being. At the same time, lived experience, body memory, and gut instincts – visceral, bone-deep ways of worlding amidst others’ ways of knowing and becoming – told a different and deeply conflicting (if for the most part untold) story.

“Longing for Old Virginia”

So the road trip rolls on. We made it to the West Coast, the Black Caprice banged up and mangled on the passenger side fender but otherwise more or less intact. After eight weeks of couch-surfing between Portland, Oregon and Olympia, Washington that winter of 2001, the Mutt and I returned home to Maple Hill Farm (aka the Hollow) in early March. The Hollow was a farm where we had been holed up for several years, as tenants in a beautiful, bare-beamed converted barn apartment on an old Hudson Valley estate that was fifty-some acres of rolling, stone-walled pastures bordered by stately maples, special oaks, and deep hardwood forests where the tang of leaf litter changed rapturously with the seasons. In the Hollow we had brought in the new millennium (the Y2K hullabaloo) in true Luddite style, with an antique pinball machine and a handmade old-time mountain banjo. And there in

10 It may be worth mentioning that I was one of many in a cohort of mostly white, middle-class, liberal-arts-inclined young folks who became fascinated in a deep way with what Greil Marcus called “the old, weird America” in his liner notes to Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*. This bizarre collection was reissued in 1997 and
the pastoral Hudson Valley, I was enmeshed in the writing of a slowly unfolding fictional narrative, a novel-in-the-making that tracked the adventures of a raw-boned renegade wrangler and barn-burner named Juniper Ales, who was in the midst of a secret southward journey on a stolen, blue-eyed pinto horse named Totem.  

From the Adirondack foothills to the darkly folded Appalachians of Virginia, Juniper and Totem plodded south in search of redemption and resolution of unnamable losses. Scene by scene they slowly made their ways toward a final reckoning with troubled pasts and uncertain futures. They waded at dusk and dawn along backroads, through withering chicory and Queen Anne’s lace chest-high to the horse, and they clip-clopped mile after mile under swooping wires and weird buzzings of blasted power-lines terrain. They took shelter in abandoned barns, roadside rest-area picnic shelters, and thin patches of woods that skirted the edges of interstates, driveways, and endless mown lawns.

This tale was driven, as fiction often is, by a feverish desire for something lost or scattered or hoped-for and precipitated a groundswell of passionate exploration of antiquated American musical traditions – if not always into the depths of seamy histories in which they are situated. Greil Marcus, “The Old, Weird America,” liner notes in *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1997).

Hidden histories were embedded, if obscured, in the fictive figure of Totem, who was inspired by a real pinto horse I met while working one summer as a wrangler at a dude ranch in upstate New York. This ranch boasted “the only cattle drive east of the Mississippi” and a familiar cowboys-and-Indians Western theme. Kin to appropriations of native names for American car models in the 1970s and beyond, most of the trail horses working at the ranch had names that appropriated and flattened histories of colonial conquest and native genocides. Folks ambled the woody trails aboard Cherokee, Apache, Cochise, Navaho, and so on. Scores of native critics have called such appropriations into question over recent decades. For an analysis of the broader phenomenon, see Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
hidden. Meanwhile, certain well-worn tropes undergird the quasi-Western narrative drive of any renegade rider in search of redemption. What exactly did the lone pale rider on a blue-eyed paint horse hope to redeem or re-discover in her desperate ride toward a lost Virginia home? In the figure of the iconic horseback hero trespassing through forbidding postindustrial landscapes, the narrative carried persistent American/Western legacies, even as the wasted places along a specific US Appalachian north–south axis – trash-strewn highway-sides, seamy rural cinderblock roadhouses, and convenience-store parking lots where bad things happen – replaced the spectacular backdrops of striated Western basin-and-range canyons and horizons.¹²

Not surprisingly, the adventures and reckonings of this fictive (anti-)heroine Juniper Ales drew on a raw adolescent biography riddled with festering buckshot memories of lost, cedar-blown hills and sweaty, adolescent days full of pounding hoofbeats and red dust. “Longing for Old Virginia” (as the old Carter Family song goes), I holed up in the upstate Hollow for years, hoping to tap-tap-tap

¹² Late-twentieth-century Westerns in film and literature – from Clint Eastwood’s Outlaw Josey Wales and Jim Jarmusch’s Dead Man to the devastations of McCarthy’s Blood Meridian and Border Trilogy – complicate the genre of the Hollywood Western and dash old-time expectations of happy endings. Juniper and Totem would never see a happy end, either. But even as it navigated postmodern simulacra and traversed the ruins of postindustrial landscapes, The Ride’s teleology still clung to charred remnants of what Joseph Campbell famously identified as “the Hero’s Journey,” along with what cultural theorists Jewett and Lawrence call “the Western monomyth”: a narrative structure wherein the stability of an Edenic white settler home/family is threatened by some dark force of evil or chaos, and the hero rides in to redeem or restore it – or if all else fails, to paint the town red and burn it to the ground, as in Eastwood’s High Plains Drifter. Meanwhile, in real places, the mythos of the lost “homeland” to which the hero returns often rests on erased histories of indigenous genocide, slave labor, and essentialist white settler claims to tenuous belonging and Manifest Destiny.
(on an antique typewriter, of course) into the lofty realms of high-blown lyrical Southern fictive prose like William Faulkner’s monumental modernist tomes and Cormac McCarthy’s opaque Southern Gothic Tennessee novels, believing (after memorizing Faulkner’s 1950 Nobel-Prize acceptance speech) that both personal redemption of past losses and the supreme task of artistic imagination lay in the (modernist) effort to “create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.”

I dreamed of authoring as heir to that grand, thunderous legacy of hyper-lyrical Southern fiction – never mind the inimitable Western – and I devoted myself to hammering out a novel that bore south a wayward tale, wherein a renegade wrangler on a stolen pinto plodded inimitably toward fiery reckoning with a lost Appalachian home.

Still, beneath all the old on-the-road tropes and formal contrivances, the fictive Ride I sought to write strained to reckon with the crumbling of older figurations and possibilities of emergent becomings. Even the ancient horse-and-rider copula, silhouetted against an empty landscape, was no longer as clean-lined as it once seemed.

This relation, like all the others, was troubled by new fric-


14 In Coming Home to the Pleistocene, Paul Shepard makes this assertion: “The long shadow thrown over the earth’s ecology is that of a man on a horse, the domestic animal which, more than any other consolidated central power, energized the world-wide debacle of the skinning of the earth, the creation of modern war, and the ideological dissociation from the earthbound realm.” Paul Shepard, Coming Home to the Pleistocene (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1998), 109. These are strong words, and they leave aside many of the brighter aspects of human-equine coevolution; but inevitably the shadow-plays of horseback power and domination are part of the figure in question, from ancient wars to modern-day rodeos.
tions, old longings, and barbed conflicts that to this day rub certain tender, fleshy spots raw.

Palomino of the Past

James Clifford warns that “[q]uestionable acts of purification are involved in any attainment of a promised land, return to ‘original sources,’ or gathering up of a true tradition.”\(^{15}\) Taking this admonition seriously, I ought to steer clear of casting nostalgic glances toward my earliest years in Vacaville, that northern California “Cowtown” now idealized as a far-off, hazy land of childhood innocence (despite the fact that I came bawling into the world on a US military base in Fairfield). But I just can’t resist the hazy scene, where in a patina of pale dust and wonder a primal horse rises up on the Western horizon, a palomino named Eggshell that my mother used to take me to visit on the edge of town. This glowing Palomino of the Past appears across the field, camouflaged against the pale parched hills of Solano County, as we stand in the roadside dust and offer withered apple slices across the barbed wire. (Eggshell merges with my mother’s reminiscence of her own childhood love for cowboy movie star Roy Rogers’s gilded stallion Trigger, whose tail hairs she treasured as a girl.) Golden hills rise and roll in the haze of that old Vacaville where I was born, which of course no longer and maybe never did exist, where I hearken back to the childhood wonder of billowing self-in-others, blurry becomings amidst trees and snakes and mimosa blossoms and the slippery tadpoles of Alamo Creek.

Vacaville was where I first felt the electric thrill of touching whiskery-velvet muzzles at the rundown local stable known as RancHotel. And naturally Vacaville was where I began to grasp a mother tongue: beginning

with domestic animal sounds, the “moo” and “meow” and “hee-haw,” followed inevitably by names and nouns. Eventually grammars took hold and enfolded a budding humanity in all the old Western hierarchies, classification systems, and dualisms that seek to separate it from the flowing wholeness of that old wild world. Like so many of us, I suspect I grew up seeking redemption of this original mythic breach – a sense of separation that began way back in Vacaville (that hazy and fluid timespace of early childhood) with the linguistic and ontological cleaving of “Human being” from other “animals.”

Later in life I learned and even reveled in deeper nuances of naming practices, such as the distinctions between nicknames and proper names, or between pet names and taxonomic classifications. In worlds of domestic-species breeding and showing, for instance, horses, dogs, donkeys, and others often have two names: registered names, which range from succinct or poetic (American Pharaoh, Secretariat, Cloud Computing, Dare Me, Junior Pro, Perfection, and so on) to spews of nouns and adjectives seemingly strung together at random, which often include some form of the name or branding of the enterprise that bred them. Take, for instance, a champion Guernsey Bull from Missouri in the early twentieth century, who was dubbed “Dolly Dimple’s May King of Langwater.”

Hard to imagine farmhands addressing or even speaking about the heifers and bulls and rams and sows they cared for by proper names like these, however much affection they might feel for them. Show horses have their “stable names” – that is, what their friends call them – and these can be affectionate, silly, or at the very least expedient: Buddy, Bob, Blue, or Boo-Boo. And then there are the other names, the ones beyond words, which we either never know or, if we heed trainer-philosopher Vicki Hearne, we

may with respect and careful attention earn the right to grasp – if only in our limited human ways.17

However dominant practices might assert distinct separations of species based on names and categories – most especially “human” and animal” – experiences of entangled lives assert otherwise. In spite of flesh-tearing barbed-wire fences and other material and linguistic barriers set up between species, we come to be and recognize ourselves and others through processes of fluid intra-action, a concept described by scholar Karen Barad to expand the more limiting “interaction.”18 Barad’s insights, from within a radical practice of feminist particle physics, hold that bodily boundaries do not break along material differences so much as they are imagined, constructed, and maintained by human habits. Rather than the discrete division of kinds of bodies – male/female, animal/human, and so on – Barad offers the simple (yet radical in terms of Western philosophical and religious traditions) assertion that human bodies are not distinct from other biologies, even as we proceed with ordering worlds through “onto-epistemological cuts.”19 In other

18 Barad coined the term “intra-action,” which critiques the more limiting sense by which “interaction” implies entities are essentially discrete material bodies. The concept of “intra-action” dissolves “re-lata” – things and bodies – into webs of relations where everything is in a constant material process of becoming with everything else. Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.
19 The posthumanist relational ontology that Barad calls agential realism “refuses the representationalist fixation on ‘words’ and ‘things’ and the problematic of their relationality, advocating instead a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world (i.e., discursive practices/ (con) figurations rather than ‘words’) and specific material phenomena (i.e., relations rather than ‘things’).” Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Signs 28, no. 3 (2003): 814.
words, what we know and believe about the world, and the ways we make and unmake each other within it, are not so much determined by transcendent material truths as by the ways we learn to cut and cleave bodies by various means. More often than not, for humans, these cuts are done by acts of naming and hierarchical storying.

In spite of efforts to classify and sort animals, insects, plants, and microbes in clean-lined categories of static being, muddy, messy snarls of bodies-in-places reign. They shake off tight-laced names and grammars that hope to contain them, as surely and exuberantly as a dog shakes off a waterlogged coat and splatters everything in her midst. This vibrant mess was the truth of my growing-up and remains the substrate of a way of life, but not because my mother raised me up on animal alphabets and endless stories of great dogs and horses. Rather, it was the immersion in fur and flesh, a life enmeshed in mud and sweat, manure and dust and sweet-smelling roughage. Because when my mother fell in love and married for the second time, it was not a man she fell for but a tangled knot of dog–man–horse. For better or worse, richer or poorer, this family knot of different bodies we became remains to this day a swirling centripetal force that pulls all matters of care, desire, and responsibility into its multispecies field of gravity.

Man–Dog–Horse

So many gut feelings flit through childhood viscera – those sick little rushes and flutterings that come, whether as premonitions or fleet recognitions of some irreconcilable shift, dim knowledge of a border being crossed that can’t ever be crossed back. I had feelings like this every time we watched Johnny get up into his saddle to ride Aquarius.

It always began like the genteel first step of an old country dance. The man in his boots and cowboy hat
stepped up to the withers of the quivering roan mare, and she in turn would raise her blazed head high, nostrils flared and eyes white and wild. They would stand frozen like this for a moment, like a monument, suspended with every tissue tensed. And then they’d begin to furiously spin. Sparks would fly as the mare pivoted and stamped her shod hooves on the gravel or asphalt. The man, stepping nimbly at her shoulder, angled for a chance to grab the saddle horn and slip the toe of his boot like a bolt of lightning into the flapping stirrup at her side. Meanwhile his golden dog, Scrapper, would bound around the pair in tight circles, a blur that orbited the spinning man and mare, weaving amidst the tangle of boots and hooves and letting out an occasional excited yelp. It was like this every time Johnny got on Aquarius to lead us out for a ride. Sometimes it was over fast; other times it took twenty minutes or more. Once, only once that I witnessed, the mare reared and lost her footing in slippery grass at the edge of a reservoir and fell over backwards, pinning Johnny to the ground for a long moment, where he lay still and ghostly pale beneath her weight with a strange expression on his face before she rolled sideways and leapt to her feet. Still holding the reins, Johnny rose slowly and went back to her side, where she stood a little dazed, spraddle-legged and blowing. He moved his fist that held the reins toward her withers and the saddlehorn, and the crazy spinning began all over again.

In spite of the chaos, Johnny never failed to make his quick-draw move. And he never missed his aim, that lightning leap of his left boot into the flapping stirrup always hit just right in mid-air as he vaulted over her back, where he’d settle into his saddle like he was easing into an armchair. The golden dog would dart forward and back again, round and round the whirling pair, as once in the saddle Johnny gathered up the reins, adjusted his seat slightly, and just barely touched the mare’s flank with his boot-heel. At this, all three (man and dog and
mare) would spring forward as one in a graceful flow of motion. Aquarius would raise her silver-tufted tail and off they would sail, sucking the rest of us into their wake. If Johnny happened to have lost his cowboy hat, which was often the case, he’d double back and swoop down and grab it off the ground, leaning down nimbly and barely coming out of the saddle. And so we’d be off on our way, out on the roadsides to ride through the days.

A horse of her own is a privilege so many postdomestic girls dream of. So it was a dream-come-true for me at age seven, and a coming-true of my mother’s dream, too, made possible in the flesh when Johnny came spinning into our lives with his half-wild, red-roan mare and halo of a golden dog. From the first encounter one April afternoon at the ramshackle riding stable operated by Johnny’s older brother, Bobby, this wild whirl of boots and paws, hooves and dirt and braided reins became a familial way of life. Who could blame a young single mother for falling in love and getting roped into the mythic, centripetal force of this? After all, she had moved us all that way to the old colonial shores of Rhode Island in search of a certain grit and salt-of-the-earthiness she felt suburban California lacked; if nothing else, she wanted a place where she could have a backyard pony for her kid. And lo and behold, there at the rundown riding stable, she found a seam of true grit and golden fur that ran straight down into a deep, dark motherlode.

In *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers*, historian Richard Bulliet presents his concept of the “postdomestic” as a recent phase of human–animal relations where humans in the developed world, no longer integrated in the practical lives, deaths, and sex of other animals, tend to accord them higher social status. In broad strokes, Bulliet cites the widespread keeping of pets, animal rights, and “elective vegetarianism” in the West (mainly the UK, US, and Australia) as evidence of postdomestic trends. Richard Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
For years, our weekend family pastime was to saddle up the horses in the backyard and ride out around the suburban neighborhoods where we lived, cutting through brambly primrose thickets behind strip malls and housing developments and paying surprise visits on horseback to Johnny’s extended family and friends all over the island. We would clop up and stand in their driveways to “shoot the shit,” as if it was the 1890s instead of 1986. The horses would sidle and chomp their bits; they sometimes got to graze on clipped lawns or rip silky corn off the thick wall of whispering stalks as we rode along raspy edges of cornfields in late summer. We paraded around the settlements of the colonial island as if paved sidewalks were old cattle trails, as if the gas-station parking lots – where we’d hold the restless horses while Johnny ran in for a pack of smokes and another six-pack for the saddlebag – were weathered Western trading posts rath-
er than the outposts of global corporations. On the soil of old Rhode Island, where the only visible traces of pre-colonial cultures were the Native place-names that rolled off our tongues as if we owned them, we rode tall in our saddles along the roadsides, iconic shorelines, and secret muddy paths through estuaries and shadowy patches of old hardwood forests.

What matters of this past to present-ass unfoldings is that certain ways of worlding and belonging took shape through domestic knots of humans, dogs, and horses, immersed together as we all were in specific trees, grasses, rocks, waters, and infinite nameless other lives tangled in places we inhabited and explored. This world was forged as much through daily routines of care for shared hungers and hygiene as it was lit by the special wonders of exploring unknown forests, fields, littoral wetlands, and beaches inside an array of overlapping mammalian senses. Places, as such, were made of distinct odors and visual recognitions of bark, leaves, mosses, soils, rocks, and seaweeds that my human sensory organs could make out; but environments were also woven through with acquired sensitivities to flickering shadows or suspicious sounds that equines care about, and to the meshes of hot invisibilities that excite dogs, who invite us into their newsflashes with such exuberant generosity.

But then here is the rub again: elaborate knots of species never reveal all their twists and turns at once. Often we attend to bright bulges of outer surfaces and forget about darker twists hidden within. Twining bright and sinister threads through histories of biocultural gives-and-takes, domestic knots of *Canus familiarus–Homo sapiens–Equus caballus* and others bind us in ethical quandaries and responsibilities that come with loving other
social mammals in societies where they are both “flexible persons” and disposable commodities.\textsuperscript{21}

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I was an idealistic teenager in 1989, newly attuned to animal rights and environmental discourses (if not a critical politics of the full and foul scope of global industrial capitalism), when our family moved to the rolling colonial farmscapes of central Virginia with the dream of developing a horse business. The farm we found was a neglected landscape of rough magic and exquisite beauty: sixty acres of secret lives lived in cedar-shot cattle pastures, wooded hills, winding creeks, a massive old oak-beamed barn, and a deep mysterious lake at the heart of it all. On this plot of land, we grounded a horse boarding stable and training enterprise. It was a manifest family dream. For years we moved day-in and day-out through slatted barn light and dewy pastures and swinging gates, as the farm’s daily workings honed specific skills and habitual ways of caring and belonging with other bright-eyed, sensitive mammals – each of whom we loved, admired, and also enslaved to specific economies and customs that decided the lives of (mostly Thoroughbred) equines in that American place and time.\textsuperscript{22} The business struggled,

\textsuperscript{21} Studying “animal children” in human households, Eben Kirksey builds on Israeli scholar Dafna Shir-Vertesh’s concept of “flexible persons,” describing how she “coined this term to understand how animals are shuttled among moral spheres where they enjoy different rights and privileges. Pets are often loved, incorporated into human families, but they can be demoted at any moment, moved outside the home and family, as household income or personal circumstances shift.” Eben Kirksey, Emergent Ecologies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 106.

\textsuperscript{22} The thoroughbred racing industry is one major contributor to both the longstanding public passion for horse heroes and the darker side of myths and markets that revolve around them. Thousands of long-legged equine athletes who fail to become Seabiscuit or Smarty
as they tend to do, barely if ever breaking even. The family foundered, as they do, too. Eventually the farm was lost, through a series of baroque financial and legal unravelings that hardly matter anymore.

What does matter still, in the haunted barn light of present-ass questions, is the sense of estrangement from that specific place – an “ecology of care,” in artist-researcher Natalie Loveless’s words – and so the kinships and belongings grounded in it.23 Exile from “homelands” real or imagined breeds bewildering experiences that often lead humans to nomadic and nostalgic turns of mind and politics, even as contemporary awareness of diasporas, mass extinctions, and genocides through the ages herald the dangers of rooting any essential sense of belonging in bounded plots of land or ways of life within them, as Emily O’Gorman writes.24 In some cases, estrangement from places of belonging lends itself to artistic attempts to conjure lost communions through the traces that remain of bodies in places: memories, im-

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24 Environmental historian Emily O’Gorman offers both powerful critique and hopeful proposal for “belonging” in her entry on the word for the Living Lexicon for Environmental Humanities: “While belonging has been taken up in ways that promote essentialist categories of inclusion and exclusion, and that disguise specific relationships, the promise of this concept is that its emphasis on fit might be usefully reimagined to provide insight into contested spaces of biocultural relationships, how they are created and contested and with what consequences for whom? Both critique and relationality can help us open new possibilities for belonging.” Emily O’Gorman, “Belonging,” Environmental Humanities 5, no. 1 (2014): 286.
ages, names, and familiar and shadowy figures. This urge, I suspect, is what brings this story crashing back to the Hollow, where holed up with the faithful golden Mutt, I furiously tracked the ill-fated quest of an imaginary protagonist on horseback, a ragged wrangler heroine hell-bent on riding south to reckon with a lost home, buried in a Virginia-bound way of life sunk in mortal time.

Exit Music (“Adapt or Die”)

Even in the pastoral peace of the Hollow, specific emergencies of the age wailed like tsunami sirens. While ecological concerns and postcolonial critiques eroded any essential sense of a safe, stable, and innocent homeland in which to dwell, the vast implications of genomics, cloning, and other technoscientific wonders worked from the inside-out to loosen epistemological holds on “natural” biological bodies as stable entities. Back at the writing desk, I tried hard to hold tight to the reins of a renegade wrangler’s fate and ignore all this twenty-first-century biopolitical hocus-pocus.25

Each morning, I sought to pick up where I’d left off with the tale, a heap of scattered scenes through which Juniper and Totem clopped on through thick roadside weeds, cracked leather and asphalt, sweat-caked fur and barn-beam ashes. But then each day, after a light lunch, I would settle back down at the very same laptop and make the rent by copyediting articles for BioMedNet’s late webzine, The HMS Beagle – the tag line of which happened to be “Adapt or Die.” I checked links to databases and web-

25 Science-studies scholar Joseph Dumit points at that, whether or not we are aware of it, we live in the “Biological Century”: “There is quite simply no space outside the laboratory, no space that isn’t kin to a lab, and no part of the lab that isn’t a site of social, political, and artistic regulation and invention.” Joseph Dumit, “Foreword: Biological Feedback,” in Tactical Biopolitics, eds. Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (Boston: MIT Press, 2010), xiv.
sites of burgeoning biotech firms, and I added basic HTML code while listening to Radiohead’s *OK Computer* over and over and over again. After the fall of dark, it was back to the past-present where Juniper and her spotted companion plodded on in a sort of rebellious anachronism, as doomed in her era as Billy the Kid had been in his own, immersed in the groundswell of changing landscapes, economies, and obscured realities both geographical and psychic.

Season after season we went on living like this in the lovely, rough-beamed barn apartment in the pastoral Hollow, roughly a hundred miles north of New York City, liking to imagine this mode of dwelling as an aesthetic withdrawal from unsavory economic and global/local political pressures.\(^\text{26}\) During the day, I engaged (if reluctantly and from afar) with the demands of the market for freelance copyeditors in the New York publishing industry. But amid the lofty whitewashed beams of my quiet dwelling with the Mutt in the renovated barn, I fed and sheltered a solitary beast of poetic imagination as if it was a secret unicorn or rare wild orchid – fragile and flighty and liable to be destroyed (or at least soiled and disenfranchised) by “the Real World.”

All this brings us back to the crash in the desert, where with this mess of tanglesome tensions as a backdrop, Sun Ra’s “what you gonna do about yer ass?” koan demanded new reckonings with energies known and unknown, in places full of others, and in time became a catalyst for action. In his own sly idiom, Sun Ra partook of an ancient cross-cultural hope that human acts of imaginative ex-

\(^{26}\) The barn I speak of happens to be both real and imaginary, having sheltered generations of inhabitants of Maple Hill Farm. This storied barn appears in a number of beloved, frank, and funny children’s books by Alice and Martin Provensen; see especially Alice and Martin Provensen, *The Year at Maple Hill Farm* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978) and *Our Animal Friends at Maple Hill Farm* (New York: Random House, 1974).
pression have a certain power to transform the material world. Rooted in a far-seeing cosmic crossroads of the far and near, the “out there” and right here – where Ancient Egypt intertwines mythopoetically with the rings of Saturn – Sun Ra’s Astro Black Mythology invests in the capacity of creative acts to shape the material world, with special love for the transformative possibilities of words turned inside-out.

I had sensed the pulse of all this volatile possibility throbbing through the fateful Sun Ra song that New Year’s Day, as we sped obliviously southward through the rolling Mississippi pine forests and fields: What you gonna do about yer ass? But I had yet to fully grasp the catalytic charge hidden in words turned inside-out and the slippery possibilities of the pun to blast us (back) down into dirty, fleshly, root-bound earthly assemblages. Soon enough, an unexpected figure would reveal itself. And so I would come to discover the explosive, secret powers of a chimeric (if humble) beast of burden, who was hidden in the loaded ass question all along.

Sun Ra proposed that music and lyric can move us in more than just metaphorical ways. In the opening sequence of the film *Space Is the Place*, Ra declares that the Arkestra will play a song that, by means of a process he calls “transmolecularization,” will literally transport its audience away from this planet, where his people have suffered too much, to a distant and better galaxy where all beings can be whole and free. Sun Ra’s Astro Black Mythology calls for a greater consciousness of the ways that lyric acts, music, and all forms of performance blur boundaries between static categories; from his insistence that his music could “transmolecularize” listeners from one place to another to his deep plays on the double meanings of words like “race” and “space,” all of Sun Ra’s colorful talk about the Space Age was arguably a sly call for all listeners to be present and work for a more harmonious place where we are, as much a matter of the transformation of the Here as transportation to Elsewhere. John Coney, dir., *Space Is the Place* (North American Star System, 1974). See also Szwed, *Space Is the Place*, 51–109.