The Unnaming of Aliass
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Published by Punctum Books

Bolender, Karin.
The Unnaming of Aliass.

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Despite thousands of hours spent huddled over its contents, gnawing on roots and bones, I am still not sure this ought to be a book – at least not in the guise of a monograph with a lone author’s name on it. At the same time, this seems like a good spot to recognize the particular ways that this project has been a reckoning with the limits, possibilities, and troubling assumptions of the Book from the get-go. Nothing is resolved here; in an effort to honor the involvements of all those whose tales one cannot possibly claim to tell, this volume puts the prickly question of whether or not it ought to be a book at the core of its proceedings.

Over the course of a long-ass journey across the US South in 2002 – born as it was of a book-that-wasn’t – the idea has stuck in my mind that my companion Aliass carried a few special books in the black synthetic saddlebag, along with our pink plastic sunblock and bug spray, notebooks and water-bottles and crumbled rice cakes. One book, I am pretty certain, was my tattered copy of Watt. I also recall, from the Wilderness Trail campsite the night before, reading William James at the graffiti-laden picnic table... but no, I don’t think that was one on the road with us that day. Anyway I don’t remember, and no catalog exists of that little lost library. So, despite a certain hunger
to archive, this lacuna leads me to wonder: is it not for the best that I have forgotten, since the premise of that original journey was that the exclusively human linguistic apparatus of a book – whether as fat papery codex or pulsing digital record of syntactical thought – could not contain, and might indeed compromise, the seamy flux of living tales that comprise our passages in timeplaces?

Well, yes. This was a premise of sorts, a paradoxical passion that originally drove me and Aliass to hoof it all those back-road miles that summer long ago. And the desire to buck the assumptions of the Book, to resist exclusive rights to human authorship, remains at the heart of our dusty barnyard becomings to this day. One could certainly make a case that Aliass has unfairly borne the burden of a voluminous mass of human expressions, desires, fears, hopes, and longings for a long time. So while I admit to certain poetic and narrative urges to commit fuzzy memories to prose – to somehow cling with words to, say, the bygone billowing curtains of fireflies that lit our path in a darkening Tennessee forest, or full-blown moonlight sifting through barn slats, or the bite of fat wild blackberries on our tongues – one thing I have always known for sure is that this project must resist the reflective lure of encompassing memoir, in which the ass herself is but a foil, antagonist, or comely sidekick. What unfolds going forward must be otherwise, must do otherwise.

One other thing I can say for certain is that Aliass and I never would have made it one blasted mile without the assistance and encouragement of swarms of friendly strangers, strangely wonderful friends, and myriad mysterious others encountered in the places we have passed through, all of whom nourished and sheltered us in different ways. Many generous and brilliant humans have woven their creative wisdoms, wit, friendship, and support through this project over many years: Adam Brinton, Christine Cearnal, Jack Christian, Rennie Elliot, Adam Lore, Kelly Marksbury, Jacob Mitas, Melanie Mo-
ser, George Murer, Alex Ney, Beth Sale, Emily Stone, Julie Stein, Christine Toth, and many other friends, students, and fellow wanderers of varying species we met along the way. I owe deep thanks for care and support to Alice Beretta DVM, Maria Cortes, Amy Krohn, Philomath Montessori School, Marie Skersick, Richard and Pam Skersick, and the Smiths. Sebastian Black, Jessica Bozek, Shane Carpenter, Layne Garrett, Kate Herron, Susanna Hill, Richard Lucyshyn, Douglas Smith, and Eli Queen shared their reflective lenses, improvisational brilliance, and illuminating poetic visions.

In certain spectral ways, the dream of Aliass-to-come was born in the barn on Maple Hill Farm, where the Mutt of Gold and I were lucky enough to live next door to the lofty studio where our dear friend Alice Provensen created wonderful picture books about the farm’s inhabitants and beloved ghosts. Later on down the road, we were welcomed into other special barns, guest rooms, basements, backyards, and pastures by old friends and new: Vanessa Batts, Maria McFadden Beek, Don Eulert, Becky and Judy Gale Roberts, Amos and Coulter Fussell Harvey, Karen Hawthorne, Kevin Hayes, Kristina Holm, Laura Rittall, Oak Ridge Riding Club, Ketch Secor, Charlie Strothers, Jeanne Thompson, Libby Tucker, and many others who offered gifts of gnarly crabapples, dusty memories, and shady places to graze or lay down in the leaf litter along the way. And to all the nameless others and friendly roadside grasses in places we passed through, regards and gratitudes: in places known (more or less) as Abbeville, Badlands, Betty Davis Grocery, Bluebird Road, Boyd Tavern, Carnesville, Cedars of Lebanon, Clinton Hollow, Como, Damascus, Fincastle, Mosset, Naked Creek, Nameless, Noon, One Mile Lane, Orland, Paradise, Paris (Tennessee), Perigord Noir, Pleasant Valley, Philomath, Roanoke and Rowan Oak, the bygone Tallahatchie Bridge (and what’s below), Whites Creek, Wilderness Trail, Val-
ley of Dooms, Weyers Cave, Les Eyzies... and so many overflowings between and beyond.

I cannot possibly say what all we owe to Mariann Black, who not only brought me and Aliass together and outfitted us radically for the road but who also saved our ass more times than anyone could know. Also in unforgettable ways, Tom Bolender was there for me and Aliass at the ragged end of the trail. Down the road in Roanoke, Cheryl Haas welcomed us into the long-eared camaraderie of her rambunctious herd and cared for me and Aliass and Pass in many ways. On what has to be the most beautiful farm in the galaxy, Fred Taylor offered us boundless friendship, radical mechanical genius, and a wondrous place to come to ground.

The shaping of a slow-ass poetic implosion into an enduring art-research practice over almost two decades owes massive gratitude and reverence to my exquisite mentors Laiwan, Ruth Wallen, Ju-Pong Lin, and Goddard College's singular MFA–Interdisciplinary Arts program. Lately the Rural Alchemy Workshop has been richly augmented by fertile, dirty glimmerings and earthly wisdoms of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology, Kultivator, and dance for plants. Pamela Albanese has been a steadfast friend and inspiration since we were seven on Green End Avenue. L-Haw (Lydia Peelle) has lit spiraling and deliciously thistly paths since (Mule) Day One, and on and on they g((o)).

Wrangling our R.A.W. ass storying experiments into rippling realms of multispecies studies and art-research in surprising ways, Eben Kirksey has been an enthusiastic champion of this work for a decade. Engagement with vital creative-critical research nodes owes much to the support of Environmental Humanities at UNSW in Sydney. I am especially grateful for the inspiring guidance of Thom van Dooren and Stephen Muecke. For infusions of hot feminist compost, I bow to Astrida Neimanis, Jennifer Mae Hamilton, and Lindsey Kelly. Insights came
from early readers Jay Babcock, Jennifer Blair, Mark Bilbrey, Nathaniel Brodie, Emily Crawford, Nancy Cuthbert, Richard Dillard, Jeff Fearnside, Julia Johnson, Inman Majors, and Bonnie Roop Bowles. More recently the project was gifted reassurance and brilliant provocations from Ida Bencke, Sophie Chao, Felicity Fenton, Kristin Guest, Tessa Laird, Stephanie LeMenager, Natalie Loveless, and Laura McLauchlan. Out of the blue, Erin Manning, Brian Massumi, and the global 3Ecologies posse entertained a rather odd not-book proposal and embraced its ass-backwards ways. It is an utter thrill to be associated with their radiant immediations, and another gift to be part of the radical generosity of punctum books, piloted by the miraculous Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy.

The most onerous burdens of this project have been borne by those I hold dearest, especially the unnamed one(s). Whatever is good here is dedicated to them. For the gifts of implosive words and sustaining barnyard kinships and care, my mother Christie Bolender has my muddiest, hoofworn gratitude and love. Here I stand in grateful awe of the generosity and brilliance of my partners in rural alchemy: Sean Hart, who builds, hangs true and holds open the most beautiful barn doors and postlibraries I could ever imagine, and Rolly Kestrel, who listens and cares deeply for the wild secret tales of you-no-hoos and mother tongues to come.