Gee, Death! Haw, Time! Alas, did I truly believe I could keep my hands on the wheel of driving global futures by holing up with my little spotted ass family in a heavenly wild rural Appalachian hideout?

For a while I kind of believed this, yes.

Preserving hard-won idylls of pastoral peace is assuredly a worthy enterprise, as philosophers far back as Lucretius assert. But say we do find the *locus amoenass* we seek. We may glory in it for a time, but eventually we come to see, one way or another, that the shelters we call home are only stable so long as we grasp that no peace (not even a sweet Virginia peace-of-ass) can ever be static. Bulldozing into any idyll of cattle-dotted pastures and wild hard-wooded hills comes the inevitable big *but*. Even the deepest sull (short of death) can only pretend to hold back the Roundup-Ready, Tar Sands-burning geopolitical ravages of our times for so long.¹

Almost Heaven

For two years after we arrived in the Roanoke Valley at the end of our long-ass journey across the South, Aliass and I lived in daily wonder and grassy sustenance on the splendorous 100-acre, mountain-ringed expanse of a magnificent old farm, tucked into the Appalachian range near a little hilltop town of Fincastle. Aliass had a roomy box stall in a corner of the sprawling barn and a little paddock beside, where she slowly ate holes through big round bales of local grass hay. The Mutt of Gold and I settled into a small cabin on a ridge overlooking a sweeping valley pasture, surrounded by woods and blue-black mountains and edged to the northeast by the roiling, magical, many-colored Catawba Creek. The Mutt of Gold had spent that summer with my mother when Aliass and I were on the road. It had been a tough decision, but in the end I realized my concern for her safety and well-being, and hers for me, would make it too difficult to undertake the journey with the kind of openness necessary. As always, reuniting with the Mutt at the end of the journey was like slipping back into my skin. So the Mutt and Aliass and I spent the halcyon late summer and early fall of 2002, waiting for “the Passenger” to arrive. In a fog of blown-out exhaustion after a harrowing summer on the road, coming back to the elusive Lost Virginia – arriving into this phenomenal farmscape of astonishing beauty, grassy swaths of pastures and cedarblown towering sycamore creeksides and ridges – made it feel like we had achieved a kind of happy-ass afterlife. “Almost heaven,” as John Denver has it.² A veritable passtoral paradise.

² These are the opening words of John Denver’s classic sentimental mountain song, “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” and a rather ironic soundtrack, since the present state of many places in West Virginia is about as far from the idea of heaven as one can get. John Denver, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” Poems, Prayers & Promises (rca, 1971), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivrEljMfXYo/. Meanwhile, Beth
The first few nights after we landed on the Fincastle farm, the Mutt and I had slept in the barn beside Aliass's stall, then eventually moved into the cabin. The weeks wore on as we waited. Equines most often give birth at night, but I had none of the fancy stall video monitors or alarm devices that breeders use to keep alert to impending labors and possible complications. In early September, I would lie in the dark of the cabin on the ridge with the windows open all night, listening toward the barn in the valley below through the hoot-owl calls and trilling raccoons. I listened like this all night long, with all my nerves tense, as if the unknown energies of the night woods and tall grass fields might somehow transmit what was unfurling inside Aliass's body. Eventually the Mutt and I moved back to sleeping in the barn, curled up in a tent in the stall next to Aliass, listening in half-sleep. Those nights we dreamed amidst the burping ruminations of sheep in the fold across the barn aisle, the scrabblings of unseen possums in the beams and rafters, and the curious snufflings of a pair of standard poodles named Rubens and Guggenheim, who belonged to another artist-tenant and often stayed in the dog run next to the barn. The poodles peered in at us, on and off all night long, their faces popping up on the other side of the chain-link to sniff and blink from under their curly mops of fur.

When Aliass finally began to labor, it was a bright mid-September afternoon. The foaling went on into the hours of the night. The birthing process was likely fairly normal, but harrowing nonetheless, as Aliass groaned and writhed on the ground for hours with her muzzle contorted in a terrible grimace. Finally a little pale bulb

began to emerge from her vulva, and then with a few more groaning thrusts from Aliass, the whole shiny wet ghostly-pale sac that held the foal slid out and lay quietly pulsing in the straw. In the dim light of a dusty bulb, Passenger was born at last.

The next morning after the vet’s foal-check visit, I followed a deep urge to carry the placenta and amniotic sac out across the Great Pasture and give them to the creek. It was a little ritual, pitched with desire to share the good fortunes and rare treasures we’d gathered on the long-ass journey and harrowing labor’s happy outcome, in gratitude for our present habitation in this most beautiful place. I had some vague desire to share the happy event of Passenger’s birth within what Gary Snyder calls the “deep world’s gift economy.” 3 I didn’t have much clue who out there might enjoy the placenta (or Hoo, I should say, given an intense encounter with a Great Horned Owl who stared me down with huge yellow eyes one day from a sycamore limb beside the creek, in a way that still makes my hair stand up when I think of it). But I wanted somehow to share the bounty with other inhabitants of the place, recognized and unknown. So I carried the placenta and amniotic sac in a bucket to the creek-side and stood with the Mutt of Gold on the bank, exhausted and grateful. As I released the placenta into the rolling water, the amniotic tissues flowed around shiny black rocks and into a pool, where the deeper creek-water twisted and filled and billowed it up like a ghost. In one sense, I never felt closer to the presence of that other mother tongue I had searched for so long – never felt so deeply part of a matrix of lives and ways unfolding and woven through an environment. Meanwhile, the reception of this ritual

Fig. 2. The amniotic sac that held Passenger within Aliass floats in the Catawba Creek. Photograph by the artist.
in its wider watershed ecology remains entirely uncertain. For all its intentions toward generosity and wishful connection, this same gesture might be for others an act of pollution.

Given all this, I can’t fathom if it is easier or harder to reckon with threats posed by ourselves and others to beloved places where creeks and mountains roll, full of wildly unknown lives and energies and torqued histories, where spotted asses graze and frolic among industrialized techno-cattle in historic global pastures. But I do know that writing this, wanting this, feels like grasping toward a ragged and fantastic old dream. But no place is safe or unchanging. Porous mortal beasts of every kind must find ever-shifting ways to navigate highways and low ways, ever-changing lands and global cyberspaces. So, like the recognition that holding “timeless wilderness” inside national parks is mostly a quaint tourist’s dream or savvy marketing ploy – a mirage maintained by historically fraught and complex territorial and biopolitical negotiations among scientists and other fauna, from reintroduced gray wolves and grizzly bears to mosses and microbes – I slowly grasped that our passtoral way of life in Fincastle was precarious and terminable. At the same time, a certain scrappy resistance, gathered from wanderings with a certain stoic beast, led me to grasp this: if any fragile, contingent peace-of-ass is to survive, its articulated forms must be retrofit for rough roads and turbulent times. In other words, a twenty-first-century nomadic ass family has gotta have some kind of wheels. And when the time comes to move, it better be ready to roll.

So it was that in the summer of 2004, a strange American hybrid vehicle known as the Dead-Car Wagon made a

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slow crossing, departing from the gates of a rural Virginia NASCAR speedway and heading south, to end its journey across the state line in Rockingham County, North Carolina, in a deserted church parking lot in a sad town called Eden. Resurrected from the stripped body of a 1980 Ford Pinto, the Dead-Car Wagon was pulled by a team of American asses, Aliass and Brawnson, and driven by two human “poets” who grappled with a knotty mass of aesthetic and ethical drives and desires, vague hopes, and idyll longings. As a vehicle of human imagination, the Dead-Car Wagon was a strange material-cultural-artistic articulation, hitching vague aspirations of human meaning-making to the fearsome physical and cultural weight of a scary American automobile and then launching it dangerously into a rural Southern transportation infrastructure. Out on the roadways for three harrowing days and nights, the grim and surprising specter of the Dead-Car Wagon rattled southward, creaking ominously amid the groaning frictions of flesh and fur, metal on metal and sweaty leather, and of course rubber on the road. Just exactly where this thing hoped to go, and whether it could ever arrive at any real ass destination, remains an open question.

I put the word “poet” in scare quotes on behalf of my own reluctance to claim the designation; fellow Dead-Car teamster Jack Christian is a full-blown, innovative contemporary poet who not only claims the name but gives it new relevance and bad-ass audacity for our age. See Jack Christian, *Family System* (Fort Collins: Center for Literary Publishing, 2012).
Among the beautiful blue-black Appalachian hills and pastures, dwellings, and hardwood forests of rural Southwest Virginia – where Aliass and I landed at the end of our long-ass journey, where Passenger was born, and where we found a home that I loved deeply but could not sustain – the Dead-Car Wagon arose like a mangled metal apparition from some oily underworld. It grew up from a site where poetics of fraught American places meet material traces of soils and grasses, mines and metals, trees and shade, and shiny black creeks of Appalachian landscapes with their own secret dreams and half-buried histories.

Taking up residence in the phenomenal environment of Fincastle, Virginia had been a stroke of amazing good fortune for me, second only to finding the wondrous ass herself back in Tennessee. Along with magical conjurations of my mother, who found the Fincastle cabin-for-rent while Aliass and I were out on the road, another factor had also helped to land us in this specific blissful habitation: I had gained a spot in a unique yearlong creative-writing Master’s degree program at Hollins University in nearby Roanoke. That fall I began the program, wherein the pressure to generate written works in the form of poems, stories, or literary nonfiction was intense and unrelenting. I was lucky to get in; the program was small and competitive back then, renowned for turning out small batches of writers like a fine whiskey under the loose and ludic guidance of the inimitable literary magi-

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cian, Richard H.W. Dillard. And really, I should have had it made. As I was told by one of my teachers, it should be a piece of cake to write up my long-ass journey, as a journey is by nature a linear narrative. All I had to do was recollect and render those experiences into colorful prose scene by scene, and I would have a compelling memoir, easy as pie. The golden rule of creative writing: write what you know. Haw!

Indeed, it might have been easy, if not for the insistent, burning desire to find ways to inhabit and frame untold/untellable tales at the overlapping edges of human–assine adventures – that is, that fervent desire to let wordless interweavings of bodies-in-time be the text, which in turn drove a longstanding refusal to take on authorship of experiences with Aliass. Even more so now that we were immersed in the brimming presences of such a phenomenal environment, printed words on a page seemed woefully inadequate as means to reckon with questions of becomings and belongings within in a barely reckoned multispecies world. So that year in Fincastle became a kind of artistic pressure cooker, where pushes to generate good poems and prose rubbed against the drive to make spaces otherwise, for diverse and even imperceptible naturalcultural meshes to express their own stories in places. Even as I immersed in inspiring literary works and churned out page after page of text, the urge to address such questions directly beckoned me to move beyond words on printed page, beyond writing poems or lyrical short stories in any form previously tapped. How could bodies moving through timeplaces become a different kind of poetic gesture, written (or not) with respect for the hidden layers of places and others we find ourselves among?

This pressing question became the main fuel for the project called the Dead-Car Crossing, which emerged over passing seasons in Fincastle like a scary flowering from roots in performance art, poetics, and most of all
from the rural Southwest Virginia landscapes that powered its drives and longings most materially (not with gas but with local grass and hay). Merging poetic urges with the drive to ground human imagination in material bodies and ecologies, the Dead-Car Wagon evolved as a collaborative performance with poet Jack Christian, a native Virginian who also, it so happened, had a newfound passion for possible poetics-of-outside, and an eye for the mangled glories of junkyards and hidden histories sunk in marred and majestic Appalachian hollers.

A.M. Radio (Pontiac)

The boy perceives the voiceless moment: he hears a grim man charging two mules locked in a yoke to drag the carcass to the edge of the field.
– Maurice Manning, “Pontiac”7

One fine autumn day I was in the barn mucking out Aliass and Passenger’s stall. Lost in thought, I rolled the wheelbarrow down the aisle and out to the manure pile, which was growing day by day in a grassy spot at the back of the barn suggested by the farm’s beneficent landlord, Fred Taylor. Oak and poplar leaves fluttered down from the trees. All of a sudden, as if seeing it for the first time, I noticed the hulking frame of an old maroon Pontiac Catalina that was quietly rusting away in tall grass, weeds, and vines in the grassy place next to where I dumped manure. The presence of a dead car was not in itself noteworthy; defunct vehicles are everywhere. Like a new breed of postindustrial ghost or monstrous roadside weed, they sit still in all weathers and slowly rust away in cluttered yards and other abandoned places. That omnipresence made it all the more strange when all of a sudden this

dead maroon sedan snagged my attention in a different way, almost as if it was emitting a transmission just below conscious hearing. Then an even stranger thing happened. As if the old Pontiac Catalina had spoken directly to me with a desire to reveal its own secret name, a pair of words came blaring into my head: “American Masturbator.”

Surprised and delighted by this little irruption from the seeming undermesh of poetic imagination, I seized upon the phrase, and from then on I knew the dead Pontiac – rooted in its grassy site beside a patch of hardwoods behind the barn near the little hidden pond where peeper-frogs make insane springtime choruses – by this peculiar epithet. At the intersection beside the rusty red gate into the Great Pasture, the rusting hulk of metal, plastic, vinyl, oily residues, and mouse-nested wires known as American Masturbator effectively came alive as a vital figure and imaginative transport. This dead car with its stolen Native American name became a kind of opening or intersection in the understoried landscapes of the
Fincastle farm, as the heat-seeking imperatives of poetic imagination slowly fused with hidden histories and wilder environs in which the possible new lives of this dead vehicle were enmeshed. From then on, in daily comings and goings around the barn, I had newfound regard for the Pontiac Catalina and its secret cargos. I began to pay attention, tune in and listen for its transmissions. As if in that unexpected encounter, the dead-car radio was suddenly, invisibly switched on.

Looking back on this seminal scene reminds me of an episode in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Gathering Moss*, in which she describes how one day the familiar forest landscape around her longtime research station seemed to open a lit path and literally lead her to a new place. This encounter gave her both scientific and spiritual insights into her work of studying mosses – insights that seemed to come straight from the assembled ecologies of the rocks and mosses themselves. Kimmerer’s scene draws on her native Potawatomi heritage, describing the cultural orientation whereby living lands communicate directly with human inhabitants in webs of mutual respect.8

The sense of plants, birds, or mossy boulders “speaking” directly to humans is not an integral part of my own Western cultural heritage or philosophical tradition in the way it is for Kimmerer, but the experience she describes is nevertheless familiar, if from a different cultural inheritance. Artistic and poetic practices of all stripes tend to rely on the sense by which impulses and layered figures seem to arrive from “outside” the sphere of rational thought. And in a way, that day, I was especially primed for such ethereal transmissions. I had just fallen in love with the *Collected Books* of Jack Spicer, a poet whose body

of work famously relies on a distinct practice of tapping into an “outside” of language.\(^9\)

This (in)human “outside” is the subject of the influential essay “The Practice of Outside,” by Spicer’s dear friend and fellow poet, Robin Blaser. In this homage, Blaser describes a distinct mode of drawing on irrational connections as Spicer’s means to go beyond “the humanisms which do not measure up.”\(^10\) Spicer’s poems unfailingly disturb and unsettle logical and linear thought, while at the same time stirring a haunting familiarity and warmth, through a welter of visceral feelings unmoored from rational sources. Reading Spicer feels like having conversations with ghosts — and not necessarily human ones, either. These poems are like dialogues with the humans we have never been.\(^11\)

In “Heads of the Town Up to the Aether,” one of the serial poems in Spicer’s \textit{Collected Books}, mythical shades like Orpheus and Eurydice flit in and out amid fragments of baseball statistics, commercial jingles, and San Francisco gay-bar jokes. Shadowy presences float through the multilayered poems like scraps of radio heard from a distance, and Spicer makes both ghosts and old-fashioned radios resonate.\(^12\) Mingling in the airwaves of that Fincastle autumn with Spicer’s ghostly voices, then, the

\(^9\) Jack Spicer’s Vancouver Lectures in particular describe this aspect of this practice, which in typical Spicerian fashion he likens to communications of “little green Martians.” Major lectures and other important insights are collected in Spicer, \textit{The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer}, ed. Peter Gizzi (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).


\(^11\) This wording echoes Haraway’s specific reinvention of “We have never been human” in \textit{When Species Meet}, which in turn borrows from Bruno Latour’s significant assertion that “We have never been modern.” See Bruno Latour, \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

\(^12\) In one of his fake “explanatory” footnotes in “Homage to Robert Creeley,” Spicer writes, “the recalling of Cegeste’s voice was done on a
old dead Pontiac rose up as an ideal poetic vehicle (especially with its odd and monstrous doppelganger known as “American Masturbator”). Maybe because I sensed the impending end of times in our blissful Fincasstle homestead, the desire to stop time and tune into barely audible, beyond-human voices that flowed through the woods and creeksides and deep in the barndark was more intense than ever. After all, in its slow change from gas-guzzling automobile to decaying habitat for birds, mice, and honeysuckle vines, a dead car stands for a kind of stopped time. And as it turned out, I was going to need this special mode of transport sooner than I realized.

Jack Spicer may be onto something when he says that “a poet is a time mechanic and not an embalmer.” Either way, in spite of the fact that living with a little happy ass family in the gorgeous hills and coyote howl echoes of southwest Virginia taught me a few tricks by which to slow, distort, and even turn sweet-ass moments inside-out, I could not stop time altogether. Seasons passed in Fincastle. Little furry Passenger grew bigger, and the grass and vines, thistles and glory-beaming pawpaws came and went. With the end of academic funding, limited prospects in a depressed Southwest Virginia job market threatened the home and barnyard economics of the peace-of-ass rooted in that place.

I did not know where we would go, but I knew this much: If we had to leave Fincastle, it would be an uprooting unforeseen. If I had to move the ass family from this hard-won dream of Virginia belonging, such a departure would require extraordinary transportation. Indeed, the vision came to me one day that the only way to leave this place would be with a wagon, a kind of catafalque made of the dead Pontiac Catalina, pulled by a team of asses.

13 Ibid., 25.
Pinto Madness

The articulation began as a notebook scrawl, a stick-figure sketch in which a team of three spectral asses (two abreast and one up front, known as the Unicorn Hitch) pulled the carcass of the dead Pontiac through indeterminate space. The impulse to make a journey was inevitably bound to previous experiences on the road with Aliass. Whether writing poems or refusing to do so, similar pressures – to make imagination do concrete and “real ass work in the world” and to attend to beloved places in climates of frayed histories and threatening global futures – fueled the creative energies that went into bringing the Dead-Car Wagon from notebook scrawl to material incarnation.

In any real sense, though, it would require a serious mule team – more asspower than Aliass alone could ever generate – to pull the motherlode of American Masturbator from its green hole. Over time, the vision evolved as the impulse did not fade. If the Dead-Car Wagon was really going to take to the road, it would be necessary to find a smaller substitute for the Catalina. That was when the Ford Pinto came onto the scene in a fiery burst of green ass flames. The inevitable companion to the implosive cultural figure of American Spotted Asses, this quintessential American car was loaded with its very own explosive hidden cultural weight and woeful scorched capitalist histories. I vaguely remembered the Pinto as the butt of bad-car jokes in the 1980s, but research into the history of the popular Ford model revealed the noto-

15 Some of the wording and insights here come from an unpublished talk that Jack Christian and I gave at American Studies Association conference in Washington, DC in 2005, where we spoke on a panel titled “Performance.”
rious Pinto’s special role as the black burn mark in American automotive history.¹⁶ Most folks are not aware of the actual record of motorists maimed or killed because of a design flaw that the Ford Motor Company engineers knew about but did not fix for max economic gain: the Pinto’s bumper was only two inches from the gas tank, and so any rear-end collision over ten miles per hour could, and often did, cause the car to explode. At higher speeds, a bump from behind sometimes caused the doors to jam, trapping passengers inside the burning vehicle. Indeed, on the frozen January afternoon that the Pinto came to Fincastle from rural Maryland, a neighbor came by to look it over and recalled, sometime in the late 1970s, passing the burnt asphalt of an entrance ramp in Indianapolis where a woman and two children were immolated in a Pinto the day before.

But more than all that grim history, it was the Pinto’s resonance with American Spotted Asses that made it inevitable, “Spotted Ass” being, of course, a fanciful name for pinto donkeys. As it turns out, even the mottled hides of Aliass and Passenger articulate a darker underside of American history. As a kid growing up around the colonial horse worlds of the Northeast US and later Virginia, I vaguely remembered a time or two when I heard someone say that spotted horses “don’t belong in the show ring.” When I dug into this a bit – asking friends about their own memories and finding a few relevant texts – I discovered what I suspect is at the heart of this old prejudice, in the US, anyway: a holdover from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century associations of pinto coloring with the so-called “Indian pony.” As Frank Roe put it plainly back in 1955: “The plainsmen regarded

¹⁶ Mark Dowie, “Pinto Madness,” Mother Jones, September/October 1977, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/1977/09/pinto-madness/. This classic article from Mother Jones is subtitled: “For seven years, the Ford Motor Company sold cars in which it knew hundreds of people would needlessly burn to death.”
Fig. 4. A pair of Paint Horses that Aliass and I came across one morn-
ing as we passed a longhorn cattle ranch in rural Tennessee. The
horses were aesthetically matched to the bovines they grazed among.
Photograph by the artist.
the pinto with contempt because the Indian liked it.”

Similar racially charged associations came from England and Europe more broadly, where spotted coats on horses have long been associated with gypsies and considered anathema in thoroughbred breeding (with a few notable exceptions).

In some cultural configurations, pinto coloring is still associated with “bad breeding,” while other cultural sites and institutions, like the American Council of Spotted Asses and the American Paint Horse Registry, have embraced the genetic inheritance of spots with fetishistic enthusiasm. In the late-twentieth-century West and beyond, I saw pinto horses come to symbolize certain kinds of “American pride” and even the ubiquitous height of horse color fashion in various arenas. To wit: Countless times I have watched local rodeo queens parade past in a spray of glitter and fake flowers, or gallop into the rodeo arena with a flourish, on black-and-white pintos. They thunder around the arena in spangled red-white-and-blue attire, while the queen waves or brandishes an enormous Old Glory and the loudspeaker blares some stirring modern-country anthem of American patriotism.

By whatever means equine pinto genes came to stand as synonymous with certain breeds of American “freedom,” this blurry conflation of piebald spots and stars-

18 Richard Nash, email communication; Harriet Ritvo, Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).
19 Founded in 1962 against the odds (of racist, misogynist, anti-pinto cultures) by Oklahoma cowgirl Rebecca Tyler Lockhart, the American Paint Stock Horse Association is now the second most successful and popular horse breed association in the world. This promotional video from the American Paint Horse Association on YouTube gives a sense of the history and worldwide scope of present-day Paint popularity. aphavideo, “American Paint Horse Association: A History,” YouTube, September 10, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9mLOpt3oik.
and-stripes apparently proved a bold and ready marketing tactic for the Ford Motor Company in the 1970s. When I first began to consider the Ford Pinto model for the Dead-Car Wagon, I found a postcard on eBay that provides an interesting articulation, to which I articulate another, different version of the spotty American history hidden in these forms and names. Significantly, this cultural shift coincides with the allure of the pinto leading to the organization of the American Council of Spotted Asses in Montana in 1969. If indeed the pairing of the Ford hatchback and young Pinto horse in this postcard was intended to evoke a promising nexus of freedom and speed, as seems to be the case, then the newfangled American Spotted Ass version, where a young Passenger faces off with the dead car, means to present an ironic challenge to the assumptions behind American freedom and need-for-speed, which is anything but free.²⁰

I found the broken-down, orange 1980 Ford Pinto on eBay and made arrangements to purchase it and haul it back to the farm in Fincastle from the rural Maryland town where it had sat rusting for years. As it happened, the seller was a young man named Blaze, who ran a vineyard and, oddly enough, kept a pair of Medicine Hat pinto horses with his girlfriend. Adding to the somewhat spooky and ominous mood of the Pinto’s acquisition is the fact that the town where we picked it up in the dead of winter is the same one where the scary Blair Witch Project legend and film took place. The dead car arrived in Fincastle on a frigid New Year’s Day 2004. There it slid ominously off the U-Haul tow dolly and settled on the brittle winter gravel, gloomily awaiting its resurrection in the driveway beside the barn.

In order for the Dead-Car vision to leave the imagined spaces of the hard drive and notebook page, the project

Fig. 5. 1971 Ford Pinto promotional postcard purchased from eBay.

Fig. 6. Passenger poses with Jack Christian and the carcass of the 1980 Ford Pinto in Fincastle, January 2004. Photograph by the artist.
required the real material transformative tools and magic of barn and the body shop. Quite literally, the Dead-Car Wagon was born of a place, when Fred Taylor, renegade engineer and landlord of the Fincastle farm, took the project under his wing – or more specifically, into his fully outfitted mechanical shop and more so his imagination and skill set. Through the deep winter and into the spring, the shop rang with a clatter of hammering, drilling, and welding of mangled metal scraps, while the asses called impatiently from the nearby barn for breakfast or dinner. Deep in the shop night after night, we tore into wire harnesses and rusted bolts and seat-track latches with unbridled frenzy for hours on end, wielding tools undreamed of. What weather and time had already accomplished toward disassembling the Pinto – stripping its capacity for destruction and speed, consuming it in rust and turning its interior into a nest for rodents, its floorboard into a lattice for vines – only fed the hunger to strip it further and, pound for pound, to make it new.21

The drive was strong to transform this machine that was responsible for much destruction – stronger than the sting of bloody knuckles and the forces of gravity and rusted bolts. Out came the engine, axles, and other heavy systems; the car was stripped down to its hulking orange unibody, bolted seats and a makeshift brake system Fred devised and built into the engine compartment. Then I welded a hay-wagon’s running gear to the front axle so that we could attach a tongue made from a young black walnut tree that Fred and I harvested from the woods. One day in March when the grass was still pale, Jack and I pushed the Pinto out into the pasture, and I tied Aliass to it with a rope. She moved forward, the rope went

taut, and the Dead Car rolled. From then on, the Dead-Car Crossing gathered a frightening, if slow and creaking, momentum. I carved a doubletree from the same black walnut as the tongue, to which Aliass and Brawnson (the long-legged gelding borrowed for the team from my friend Cheryl Haas’s herd) were hitched. With one ass on either side of the tongue, the team could just barely pull and steer that awful beast of a dead-car wagon – if only on level ground.

Toward the In-CAR-nated Poem

We pin our puns on the windshield like
We crossed each crossing in hell’s despite.
– Jack Spicer, “Car Song”

Poets of all kinds pine, it seems, to diminish the sense of distance between words and the world of things they are supposed to name. From Romanticism and Dada to Spicer’s kindred language poets, from Amanda Ackerman’s parapoetic collaborations with flora to Adam Dickinson’s explorations of his own body’s petrochemical burdens, contemporary poetry proffers a diverse range of practices whereby poets radically trouble assumptions about the natures of human language and its material entanglements. Yet most poetic practices remain bound to words on a page in some way, limiting to some degree the possibilities for messy material multispecies co-composings.

22 Hills were a different story, and so this problem was handled by unhitching the team and hooking the Wagon to the Black Caprice on the more treacherous inclines and declines of the journey.


24 Even as they remain bound to pages in some formal ways, poets like Ackerman and Dickinson radically expand the limits of collaborative poetic inclusion in wild multispecies directions. See Amanda Ackerman, The Book of Feral Flora (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2015) and Adam Dickinson, The Polymers (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2013) and Anatomic (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2018).
Poets and storytellers have long imagined “Nature” as a source of inspiration or material, sometimes exploiting or undermining the complexities of natural systems in the process. At one brilliant extreme of this is Vladimir Nabokov’s Kinbote, the crazed narrator of *Pale Fire*. Megalomaniacal Kinbote believes the natural world, with the poet John Shade as scribe, is busily writing the saga of Kinbote’s own biography. As Kinbote exalts when he finally gets his hands on the poem that is supposed to embody his (possibly imaginary) lost homeland of Zembla: “Solemnly I weighed in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, and for a minute I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement, as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture on the bruised and branded sky.”

Nowadays we recognize by scientific means that fireflies and bats do make decodable signals, if very much on their own behalves. Still, Kinbote’s longing resonates and chafes; who among us has never leaned into a cozy feeling of synchronicity where other earthly creatures like birds and insects, trees and grasses, and whole cosmos of living energies seem to be fluttering about to attend to small but significant tasks at the edges of human fates, like Disney birds and woodland creatures who twirl and tie Cinderella’s ribbons and bows – or maybe more like invisible migrant laborers who pick fruit and spray weeds to keep North American agricultural economies working, or the diverse species of pollinators who make them possible at all? Kinbote’s megalomania seems to warn readers, though: Beware the trick of Western myths that encourage us to see individual (and even collective political) fates as heroic paths of Progress toward futures (whether dystopian or victorious), pitched against Na-

ture. Better to ask: Who rides in the shadows beside our driving human heroic quests, and who makes them possible through movements and lives we don’t see? In light of grasses, asses, and untold others whose supposed silence disguises infinite varieties of liveliness, can we learn to tell our own stories in search of belonging without trampling on the tales of everybody in our paths and wakes?

Enter, with creaking uncertainty, the Dead-Car Crossing. Reveling with ironic fervor in the riot of movement-naming, Jack Christian and I called the Dead-Car Wagon “in-car-nated poetics” and imagined it might present a radical new frontier on the map of American poetics – or at least a smirky retort to avant-garde language poet Charles Bernstein’s famous call for “the ultimate concretization of poetry.” 26 Beyond the jokes and wordplay and renewed passion for Bruce Springsteen, though, the Dead Car vision was driven by sincere desire to enmesh poetic imagination in territorial ecologies. Artistic desire to counteract environmental damage and do ecological good parallels what scholar–poet Jed Rasula calls “ecological imperatives” in American poetry. 27 Such impulses that are not new, by any means, but they do seem especially pressing in times when each of us is more and more aware of harms we perpetrate on places just by driving to and from them.

Even so, while poems and performances may enmesh with specific environmental concerns, most contemporary artists are suspicious of pitching a direct relationship

27 In This Compost, Jed Rasula connects Walt Whitman’s wish for people to read his poems only out-of-doors to Gregory Bateson’s Steps to an Ecology of Mind: “‘The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body,’ writes Bateson [...] ‘it is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem.” Jed Rasula, This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 234.
between art and intended purpose. Even “off the page,” the capacities of poetic imagination to affect material matterings remains an open question, which becomes more ethically fraught with uncertainties when other species are directly implicated in the “poem’s” realization. We understand that poems, stories, and other forms of human artistic representation have capacities to move thusly attuned human minds in various and particular ways; but we can only wonder what work might poems do otherwise (whether directly or invisibly) to intervene in the well-being of worldings? What kinds of unforeseen responsibilities and obligations do we take on when we set out to put poetic visions into material worlds?

Both aesthetically and politically, the notion of taking the “poem” out on the road in the form of a Dead-Car Wagon imagined its slow-ass crossing as an intervention, a hope that it might present a rolling, open challenge to rural American infrastructures of place and passage, Fordist-driven car culture, extractive industries, suburban sprawl, hidden histories of colonial migrations and Manifest Destiny, and remembrance of wayside exchanges that are impossible when so many places, along with ecological communities they contain, are rendered into terminal blurs in windshield glass. As it evolved, the Dead-Car Wagon’s artistic drive to “blast poems off the page” and into in/visible infrastructures of rural Virginia roadways embodied pressing desires to make art “work” in more direct ways for trees and creeks, green ass pastures, and wild pawpaw trees.28 In spite of many uncer-

28 Steve Baker describes the embrace of irony frequent in postmodern modes. He quotes ecological artist Mark Dion, who claims artists who incorporate environmental concerns into their work do well to “to employ ‘the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humour,’ which are less readily or imaginatively employed by the institutions which seek to promote particular ‘truths,’ such as science or the entertainment industry.” Steve Baker, The Postmodern Animal (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10.
tainties, the Dead-Car Crossing was driven by urgent questions of “what a poem can do” in times of ecological crises to intervene and act meaningfully in places. So arose the vague hope that putting a “poem” into material form and taking it out on the road might somehow be an act of goodwill toward the wilder worlds of rural Southwest Virginia, if only in some scattered, ethically impossible to grasp way. At the same time, the assemblage as a whole was frayed by ethical and aesthetic tensions where other species are involved, especially when artists pose their works as ecological projects that hope to work for the good of the world in some ambiguous way. What is the possible value of this “incarnated poem” for other species involved in its passing-through places?

Assymmetrical Burdens

Of all the oddly pitched burdens Aliass has borne since that fatesome day we met in Tennessee, the Dead-Car Wagon is surely the most onerous. The act of reanimating a gnarly old Pinto and making Aliass and Brawnson pull it precariously across winding miles of Virginia hills and hollows raises knotty ethical quandaries. As the Dead-Car Wagon’s entire conceptual and material weight hung on the delicate body of one little American Spotted she-Ass and her (fortunately brawnier) partner, the asses were knotted and buckled up in representations and material ropes and scraps of harness and tied to the hulking metal weight of the ominous dead car. Always a danger with any traditionally humanist-oriented poetry or artwork is its tendency to stray from its roots in and consequences for assemblages of material bodies. This material-poetic incarnation, which made artistic sensibilities thrill and shiver, made Aliass tremble for other reasons altogether. How was it ever justifiable to hitch gentle Aliass to that ominous mangled-metal, dystopian-ironic road beast
and then make her pull its grueling weight through miles of unfamiliar and dangerous territory?

I have often proceeded with the understanding that Aliass, in her domestic assness, can never fully unhitch from human obligations and desires – specifically, in this case, she is bound to her task as equine ambassador to creative possibilities of human–ass becomings. In return, I am obligated to keep her in good health and company, safely accommodated, and free from suffering, all to the best of my abilities. Yet the human passions and big-ass questions at the core of our adventures together

Could I ever “set Aliass free” to live among wild burros somewhere in the US? This is a fraught idea, given the problems facing BLM-managed wild horses and burros in the US West and Southwest. But to consider what this kind of freedom (from obligations, containment, boredom, but also care) would mean for Aliass and her family herd seems vital, even as “wild” donkeys are not free from human intervention in their fates. See, for instance, Abraham Gibson, “Beasts of Burden: Feral Burros and the American West,” in The Historical Animal, ed. Susan Nance (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 38–53.
are always bigger than our mortal bodies, which I suppose is why I have been willing to risk our lives and limbs out on dangerous American roadsides, time and time again. One of the most perplexing quandaries we’ve carried along, inside a practice that seeks to disrupt dominant stories and ground more inclusive tales in assemblages of bodies-in-places, is this: How do forms of human poetic imagination either nurture or diminish possibilities for multispecies worldings in places? The sinister tension inherent in the ideas that humans manipulate the “Nature” of others is not a new concept, but increasingly we turn to the ways that species – and not just humans – shape each other in evolutionary co-patterns, both helping and hurting, sometimes with ethical awareness, other times unwittingly. What happens to our ideas about art and poetics, more specifically, as we realize that other species also co-opt each other for practical and possibly even aesthetic purposes, for better or worse?

The Dead-Car Wagon was a fearsome hybrid articulation, a “material-semiotic actor” assembled from an oddly combustible mixture of frayed hopes and ironies, ethical galls and pressures, and unseemly cultural histories. I was also keenly and uncomfortably aware that the very spots on Aliass’s body are shaped by human cultural hungers for certain kinds of spectacle – even as the spots

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30 Contemporary discourses in environmental humanities bring new light to investigations of possible material-poetic narratives. Donna Haraway specifically poses poetics as a tool for rethinking modes of representation/meaning-making and embodied knowledges when she writes: “From the early stirrings of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, many poets and biologists have believed that poetry and organisms are siblings. [...] I continue to believe in this potent proposition but in a postmodern and not a Romantic manner. I wish to translate the ideological dimensions of ‘facticity’ and ‘the organic’ into a cumbersome entity called a ‘material-semiotic’ actor.” Donna J. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 595.
actually elide the histories of bodies beneath. A literal articulation of American Spotted Asses to the fraught history and image of the Pinto hoped to fuse the poetic with the material and thereby present a “concrete” material-semiotic figure to navigate how landscapes change as we roll forward into the twenty-first century.31 Resonances of its articulation spoked out of concerns about the history and hegemony of U.S. transportation systems and car culture, spiked with resentment and conflicted anxiety born of being trapped inside the flaming car culture infrastructure as it endangers and renders inaccessible so many possible exchanges between places and passage through them – rural or otherwise. Still, whatever sassy articulations of material-poetic imagining the Dead-Car Wagon may have put forth, it was Aliass’s and Brawnson’s bodies – as representations but also materially – that carried the bulk of the weight of the Dead-Car Wagon from its inception. And in true Aliass style, the she-ass did so with fortitude and grace that make my heart ache for all of us. My dear sweet Aliass, my vocabulary did this to you. I can only hope troubled loves will let us go on.32

31 Putting forth the Dead-Car Wagon a “material-semiotic actor” may not justify its most egregious impositions on certain sweet ass bodies any more than calling it a “poem” might do. Yet to disengage from the Romantic ideas of human/Nature relations, as Haraway does here, broadens the possibilities of this relationship: “Like ‘poems,’ which are sites of literary production where language too is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction.” Ibid., 595.

32 Jack Spicer’s last words, spoken to Robin Blaser in a San Francisco hospital bed, offered to readers by Robin Blaser’s loving generosity: “My vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on.” Blaser, “The Practice of Outside,” 325.
The Road to Eden, NC

Come summer, it was time to go. The team of asses grazed in the paddock, trained and ready. Too little to pull, Passenger would walk beside, and the Mutt of Gold would ride. We mapped the distances and hoped the hills wouldn't overcome the Wagon's dubious braking system: Martinsville Speedway to Eden, NC. I screwed a “Farm Use” tag onto the hatchback of the Pinto, and so the Dead-Car Wagon clanked off into the ill-known hills of Henry County, Virginia, toward the Carolina state line. We hitched up on the grounds of the Martinsville Speedway and rolled out, after a slow ceremonial maiden loop around the outside of the Speedway. And went on down, deep into Henry County and toward the border in a three-day trip through a kind of pastoral hell.

There were pleasant moments and exchanges, as well. A local man named Billy Agee saw us pass and later brought us three dozen eggs from his own chickens and enough packages of deer-meat to feed the hordes of nameless ghosts who rode with us. Other folks offered water spigots, weedy pastures, or shade to rest in. In that sense, the Wagon's passage did serve to inspire acts of remembering and connection for some of the local human inhabitants. Ruby Craddock and her yellow dog welcomed the Wagon in her driveway as we passed, and, later, all Ruby's kinfolk up and down the Odell Road came out to meet us. Wesley, a five-year-old boy from the windowless trailer across the road hung around for an hour or so with his mother, where we stopped in a field to rest and water the team. His questions, all beginning with “Hey, y'all...” were as probing and constant as a mockingbird’s song. A bearded man named James stopped his pickup in the roadside ditch and told us about all the empty houses up and down the road, many of them abandoned by cancer victims. He said the pistol on his hip was for shooting snakes in the hay pastures.
We liked to imagine that the Dead-Car Crossing as an “in-car-nated” performance reached “outside” traditional poetic spaces and practices, into local environs in ways a poem on the page could never do – especially in regions where many inhabitants (human and otherwise) do not read poetry as a pastime. At the same time, the realization of the journey confronted us with the fact that however we might gesture toward an “outside” of linguistic stricyles, we cannot escape certain modes of word-image-bound meaning-makings and representations – any more than the blasted Dead-Car Wagon could escape the infrastructures of global fossil fuel economies or the asses could escape the terrible creaking burden to which they were harnessed.

So we set out sweating and clanking in the Dead-Car Wagon on the rural roads of Henry County to chase ghosts through the “haunted landscapes of the Anthropocene.”

But if we’d known how real it would get out there, we might have been inclined to “chicken out at the edges of it” (in Spicer’s words) and never set foot, hoof, or paw onto that hellish-hot road down to Eden. We did not foresee the first night’s plague of huge horseflies that made the donkeys groan and lay down in the dirt like they would die. We forgot to watch out for ticks and poison ivy. We didn’t anticipate the bullet-holes in Jack’s Toyota, nor the maggots writhing in Brawnson’s gall on that endless second day. The road offered no shelter from stress, heat, mechanical grinding, or the wicked thunderstorms from which the herd fled for refuge in a weedy cattle pasture. And most of all came the uncertainty of whether it was worth it – what it was we hoped any of this would do.


for the places we passed through or any past present or
future lives.

The weight and tensions inherent in the Dead-Car
Wagon project were monstrous indeed, in ways that ren-
der the hitching of Aliass and others to its unwieldy bulk
and conceptual contrivances questionable and ethically
dangerous. While these ethical tensions are inextricable
from the overall aesthetic drive of the Dead-Car Wagon,
the question remains open as to whether one can balance
the ambiguous “workings” of poetic imagination against
the groaning, sweaty labors and hardships, unforeseen
perils, and grievous foundering of bodies and souls that
unfolded when the “in-car-nated poem” hit the real-ass
road. We drove on, nonetheless, saying “Hup, Brawnson!
Hup, Aliass!,” clucking and cracking the reins to keep the
team moving and groaning on into the oppressive heat,
all in the belief that if poetic articulations (in whatever
form) are to be forces that resist and reckon with violenc-
es of toxic parking-lot sprawl, they must press hard into
places of conflict to remain vital. Even so, the realization
of its harrowing three-day journey demands reckoning
with particular questions of responsibility: What do we
imagine poetic visions really do for the worlds they in-
habit? Whose bodies bear the most onerous burdens of
this effort, the galls and scars? At what costs? And who
benefits? I guess the real question is: What led us as art-
ists to hope or believe that the Dead-Car Wagon really
could do anything for the places and livelihoods into
which we imposed its form? As an act of “incarnated
poetics,” the Dead-Car Wagon set into motion became a
monstrous intrusion, even as the social, global-econom-
ic, and environmental pressures it moved against made it
seem justifiable, even inevitable.

In the wake of it, at intersections of thinking and prac-
tice where contemporary art meets academic forays in
feminist-materialist science studies and energy humani-
ties, the “material-poetic” articulation of the Dead-Car
Wagon might bear forth nuanced possibilities for artistic practices to intervene in becomings of American roadways and barnyards. *Might*, I say. The cultural weight and energy of the project pulled not so much against its seeming opponents in car culture, wracked colonial histories, and fossil-fuel consumerism as toward a vague hope that the crossing might artfully blast black-hole headlights into oncoming traffic, and shoot the green flames ripping from the Dead-Car Wagon’s rusty wheel-wells into local woods and waterways. But beyond all this talk of imagining and articulating ideas (if ironically) toward hopeful movements into earthly futures lies a lurking suspicion that it might have been some kind of redemption the Dead-Car Crossing was seeking, deep down – as if to assuage some of the shame of partaking in endless extractive oil-and-asphalt nightmares that harm earthly bodies and beloved places. But if redemption was really what this voyage secretly sought, in the end, in Eden and onward, it was nowhere to be found.
At the end of that strange road trip, we were glad (and a little surprised) to have survived. Yet a nagging sense of failure and uncertainty haunted the afterlife of the Dead-Car Wagon. In human social circles, Jack Christian and I spoke of the Wagon’s aims as a radical and risky artistic intervention driven by genuine concerns for rural Southern ecologies and sociopolitical struggles. But in recollecting the swell of uncertain feelings that settled in like clouds of exhaust as the Dead-Car Wagon came creakingly to rest that final hour, in that empty church parking lot just up the road from an abandoned mill in postindustrial Eden, we were maybe not so sure. Ambivalence about what (if anything) the Dead-Car Crossing actually gave to the world (whether politically, aesthetically, or ecologically) throbs through the final lines of a poem Jack Christian wrote called “After the Project.” In the exhausted wake of a journey fueled by fretful concern for past and future earthly places, what we have done and/or might yet do, the passage feels more like an epitaph, writ in the cracked rearview mirror of one more haggard-ass American road trip:

_We arrived in Eden hungry, and camped open on a thin sheen of leaves beneath a giant tree growing from the center of a vast parking lot. Its roots ran like rivers through nearly all the vacant spaces. Weeping, the tree asked us what we needed. Then, without a word, it dropped its fruit, which in a frenzy we horded._\(^{35}\)

\(^{35}\) Jack Christian, email communication.