R.A.W. Assmilk Soap

Black Milk

Years before I met Aliass, or ever dreamed of American Spotted Asses, I had a secret name for an otherwise unnamable substance I desired to tap in flows of words and submerged memories. I called it “the black milk.” Every time I sat down to wrangle with poetic imagination, I would begin by asking: “Where is the black milk now?” By this means I would begin a descent into dark crevasses of longing and memory and work my way toward shadowy figures and desires buried in remembering tissues. Even as it stood for something inchoate, fearsome, and hard to grasp, I sensed that this black milk also possessed some kind of homeopathic, transformative power to cleanse and redeem. Years later I found something akin to this ghostly poetic material, but more real and powerful, in Aliass’s singular mammalian brew – as I imagined into the milk she made for Passenger during our first long-ass journey from Mississippi to Virginia in the summer of 2002.

Eventually, I rediscovered a black-milk inoculant in Paul Celan’s 1945 poem, “Deathfugue”: “Black milk of day-
Black milk as a trope figures as a kind of absence inscribed into material substance. The blackness of milk becomes a shadowy residue of lost connection to somebody, some-where, however formless or unnamable. While the losses that haunted me are nowhere near as horrific or devastating as those to which Celan’s poems bear witness, I’ve come to understand that my own struggles with language-as-mother-tongue are also driven by a sense of loss and betrayal. Guided deeper into the black-milk/mother-tongue nexus by Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, and later by the psychoanalytic insights of Julia Kristeva, I looked back at my own black-milk hungers to try to find out what shadowy figures abide

2 John Felstiner, “Preface,” in ibid., xxii.
in them. In an essay on Bachmann’s fiction called “Living and Lost in Language,” Gisela Brinker-Gabler writes: “Rejecting contact with the mother tongue cuts off the past and might be a life-saving strategy, if there is some profoundly detested experience.”3 As a contemporary of Celan’s, Bachmann shared his struggle to cleanse language of the terrifying ways it was twisted and stained by the Third Reich. That idea resonated for me, though I didn’t know then what “detestable experience” might be the source of my troubles. Later, I came upon Kristeva’s description of the mother tongue in Strangers to Ourselves, in which she describes: “Not speaking one’s mother tongue. Living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory, from the bittersweet slumber of childhood. To cut off one’s mother tongue cuts off one’s childhood and whatever past there was in that language.”4 But what if that mother-tongue language is not, and never was, a strictly linguistic or exclusively human one?

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Technically speaking, I was born on an Air Force base, and not in a barn. But the barn is nevertheless where a native tongue came upon me, in time. From my earliest reckonings, an ancestral family farm in Ohio was a visceral source of the most profound wonder, encountered whenever we came from our suburban Vacaville cul-de-sac to visit my grandparents there. An ordinary patch of grass or motes spiraling in a lofty beam of barnlight brimmed

3 Gisela Brinker-Gabler, “Living and Lost in Language: Translation and Interpretation in Ingeborg Bachmann’s ‘Simultan,’” in If We Had the Word: Ingeborg Bachmann, Views and Reviews, eds. Gisela Brinker-Gabler and Markus Zisselsberger (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2004), 86.
with infinite richness, all particles of the greater mystery that lived there in the dusty aura of common beastly being. This mystery was most fiercely embodied in the other big domestic mammals who lived there, along with the bright-eyed ghosts of their own ancestors, going back generations. On that old farm my mother had frolicked in her childhood with spotted horses named Marblecake and Cupcake, and this same barnyard is where I first encountered the magic of my Aunt Angelique’s mesmerizing friendship with the big chestnut gelding, Irvy.

When I was little, my aunt’s long-legged thoroughbred horse Irvy was the lone inhabitant of the old barnyard, and some of my first memories are of his boundless and thrilling presence. Irvy was more than a big equine; he was an entire environment. Being near Irvy was an utter immersion in a presence of rich earthy odors, sounds, and sensations. His head seemed as long as my whole body. The rubbery lips and whiskers of his big kind muzzle coming down from way above, looming close and sniffing, then blowing out a cloud of sweet hay-smelling breath…. Irvy could not have seemed more magical if he was actually a friendly fire-breathing dragon. He was just “horse,” of course, and soon enough I learned to call all the beasts by their proper names and put them in their places.

Thinking back on those primal experiences on the Ohio farm, I later came to believe that my own black milk sought to somehow recover forms of kinship with the mysteries of otherworldly lives I’d first tasted in my mother’s barnyard, so to speak. No doubt these experiences taught me wonder and respect toward friendly muzzles found on the other sides of stable doors and barbed-wire fences. But why this looming sense of loss and shame lurking in the cobwebby corners and lively dust of barns I find myself in to this day?

As I grew up into the late twentieth century, I began to glimpse the darker elements of agricultural systems
and histories, even as the culture I lived in was begin-
ning a profound shift of awareness toward what came to
be called “animal rights,” broadly speaking. I noticed the
many different ways that human exceptionalisms, hier-
archies, and materialist commodifications of lives shape
relationships bound to stables and barnyards. I became
aware of enduring colonial and racist legacies, indigenous
genocides, and the effects wrought on ecologies by neo-
liberal industrial-capitalist techno-cultures – and, more
and more, how all these elements are interconnected.
Slowly over time my education and linguistic proficien-
cy gave me a framework of words and concepts to name
these forces, yet still none of them could encompass what
I long for most, nor assuage the growing sense of betray-
al: that what I have been taught to believe is all wrong;
that there are multiple, possibly infinite mother tongues
woven through all kinds of lives in places, not just the
syntactical languages of human speech and thought. But
the betrayal comes in ignoring all the others, as the blus-
tery arrogance of human logos always seems to bulldoze
over quieter, less visible wisdoms of untold stories and
becomings in timeplaces.

Here we come again to the conundrum of mysterious
black-milk hungers, and to that specific site where, for me
early on, the conflicted desire seems to have taken root in
my own troubled mother tongue, that is to say, the by-
gone Ohio barnyard animated by the specters of big do-

estic friends like Irvy, and later a bay gelding named
Moon, who belonged to a transitory vet-student tenant,
and whose sweet sweaty fur I can still conjure the smell
of, from the one time the vet student and Moon took me
for a ride at Christmastime some forty years ago. Even
more poignantly, perhaps, those encounters with Irvy
and Moon took place in the landscape where my mother
spent that singular summer of her own childhood in the
mid-1950s, away from the strict rules of her military fam-
ily and living for a spell with her wild young Aunt Jean,
who was seemingly half-horse herself (and who was, incidentally, the first woman to earn a degree in animal husbandry from Ohio State University). My mother would recall running wild in the pastures all summer with her older brother and a friend named Bonnie, riding bareback and braiding flowers into Marblecake’s mane. An old photo of my eight-year-old mother shows her in a short dress with her hand on the sleek spotted shoulder of Cupcake, Marblecake’s foal. And other old photos plucked from the family scrapbook: Cupcake grown up and in her winter fur, hitched to a sleigh in deep snow; Cupcake in a sea of green grass, carrying one of my mother’s cherubic younger cousins bareback, surrounded by a flock of family Dalmatians.

Fig. 1. Cupcake as a filly with my future mother Christie and her big brother, Alan, in Ohio, circa 1955. Photo courtesy of Christie Bolender.
I suspect that, in some magic and fateful way, Aliass began with Cupcake. I only ever glimpsed Cupcake in the flesh once, a far-off patch of bony brown and white seen fleetingly from a car window as we passed an impossibly green Virginia hollow where she’d been turned out to pasture with cattle in her old age. From all I’d heard about her, it was like seeing a mythical beast across the veils of time. My mother’s recollections of that halcyon summer with Marblecake (Cupcake’s mother) became part of my own story before I even had ears, and more so thereafter, as the generations, horse and human, twisted down through the later decades of the twentieth century. Through my childhood, my mother’s stories, and the longings and kinships borne in them, took earthly forms in encounters with real dogs and horses. I can still recall the sweet-edged, dusty smell and wiry mane of Cupcake’s own foal, Crumb, a black gelding who was a beloved and notorious trickster. He was a member of the extended family, whom I befriended during the springtime trips we took over the years to visit Great Aunt Jean on her own family’s horse farm in Virginia.

The ancestral farm in Ohio mostly succumbed to the sprawls of Columbus. Needless to say, it was not the only one. As more and more family farms disappeared under housing developments and parking lots, the sprawl of asphalt and mown lawns gradually cut off access to certain reliable sources of raw mysteries and dusty interspecies

5 I can’t resist evoking Nabokov’s narrator Humbert Humbert here: “I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.” Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (New York: Vintage International, 1997), 14. Since technically there is no law on the books forbidding it, my platonic love for Aliass may not demand quite the same degree of frightful eloquence that Humbert calls upon to try to justify his immoral dealings with the underage human girl, Dolores Haze. Nevertheless, I think Nabokov might recognize the gesture of homage, given the ways questionable adult passions are sometimes kindled by vital encounters submerged in the murky depths of childhood.
kinships found in such places. Primary among these desertions was the loss of my own family’s horse-boarding enterprise in Virginia, though I was not present to witness its demise, exactly. And eventually I realized this: it was not just the abstractly troubled mother tongue that haunted my negotiations with language in the purgatory chasm we humans inhabit between words and living bodies; it was also the loss of my mother’s place of belonging, both real and imagined, the place she loved and nurtured and fought for and lost – her own family horse farm, and the dreams and desires that manifest for a time in sixty acres of rolling creeks and pastures, slatted barn-light, cedar groves, and hardwood forests all around.

My special brand of black milk may have welled up from that lost Virginia farmscape and the familial meshes rooted and left buried there. But, importantly, the sense of haunting loss is bigger than any one biography: all landscapes bears witness to cascades of displacement, vanishings of all kinds from any given place in the tidal waves of colonial and extractive enterprises over centuries past, along with looming losses ahead. Most of all, the black milk figured a sense of having lost connection to a matrix – a beyond-mammalian mother tongue as a way of belonging in places – much larger than that of any single bodily being or species.

So my black milk figured a specific breach – the body of language as a substance darkened with the loss of some embodied mother tongue, held (but not wholly)

in the “body’s nocturnal memory,” as Kristeva calls it in *Strangers to Ourselves*.

At the same time, I glimpsed a vague promise of redemption, the shadow of what was lost reabsorbed into substance, made present again – as assmilk. The black-milk-as-assmilk trope promised a new way in, somehow – one that could flow through the barriers made of words and names that are supposed to distinguish “us” from “them,” where I was cultured to assume that taxonomies and syntaxes are exceptional faculties that hold us humans high and clean above the mud that killable beasts (beloved or otherwise) are mired in.

Soap

As soon as our soap has been put into orbit, none of this will be necessary.

– Francis Ponge, *Soap*

When I received an unexpected gift package from France in 2005, the *savon au lait d’ânesse* (assmilk soap) I found inside presented an ideal form in which to hold all the poetic musings and material possibilities of assmilk as a metaphorical cleansing agent. In the mid-twentieth century, French poet Francis Ponge wrote an experimental text titled *Soap*, wherein he explores the idea that his “processual poetry” on the essence of soap might act to cleanse habitual and crusty ways of reading, writing,

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7 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 193.

8 Following Giorgio Agamben, Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich illuminate a vital emergence that animates a mesh of practices they call multispecies ethnography: “Animals, plants, fungi, and microbes once confined in anthropological accounts to the realm of zoe or ‘bare life’ – that which is killable – have started to appear alongside humans in the realm of bios, with legibly biographical and political lives.” Kirksey and Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545.

and using language to interface with the material world: “So we slip from words to meanings [...] by a glistening inebriety, or rather an effervescence, a cold ebullience which, besides, we come out of, and here is the great lesson – with cleaner, purer hands than before this exercise began.”

While I find much to love in the wild bubbling wordplay of Ponge’s *Soap*, for my own purposes the poem alone could not go far enough. While inevitably rooted in semiotic processes, I wanted to find a way to propose wordless intra-actions of bodies in timeplaces as the *stories that matter most*, in this case. And then suddenly, *savon au lait d’ânesse* offered a way to hold tangled bodies’ unwritten storyings, through milk made of immunological interactions in timeplaces.

Drawing on its own distinctly embodied sources of black (ass)milk and poetic hope, R.A.W. Assmilk Soap proposes that cleansing certain “lyes” of the land, mixing them with the beneficent properties of locally brewed assmilk, might work with imagination to neutralize some of a place’s buried ailments. Along with the not-to-be-taken-for-granted cooperation of she-asses, the milksoap-making act also depends on a transformative chemical process known as saponification, which significantly changes both assmilk and another essential soap

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10 Ibid., 19.
ingredient, lye (sodium hydroxide). Lye alone will burn the skin fiercely, but when mixed with milk and base oils and stirred until it “traces,” lye neutralizes to become the solvent agent in soap, and so the ultimate cleansing substance.\textsuperscript{12} The chemical transformations embodied in saponification echo back to the black milk as it functions in Paul Celan’s poetics. In his “black milk,” Celan (whose name I often mistype by accident as “Clean”) seeks to “find words for ‘that which happened,’ as the poet called the Holocaust or Shoah […] how to speak of and through the ‘thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech.’”\textsuperscript{13} Transformative power abides in the poetic act, as John Felstiner observes: “The cadence and imagery of [“Deathfugue”] engage atrocity with art, as Celan would go on doing during the next quarter century.”\textsuperscript{14}

Later in the twentieth century, artists began to reckon directly with toxic legacies, not only within languages polluted by “deathbringing darknesses” but also within living bodies and earthly ecologies. The environmental stains, shames, and fears that ecological artists address and seek to cleanse have chemical names that read like twisted inverses of Celan’s distinct and breathless neologisms, from phthalates to dibenzofurans – many of which can be found, biomagnified, in the milk of any mammal living today. Artists hoping to reckon with toxic legacies must seek conduits for hopeful gestures in landscapes blasted by past horrors and present complex global economic and political forces. Through different media and political and historical trajectories, ecological

\textsuperscript{12} As one stirs the mixture of milk, lye, and oils for anywhere between twenty minutes to two hours, it gradually thickens. When it has thickened such that a line of it dripped onto the surface remains there without sinking, this is called “tracing,” and it means saponification has begun and the mixture is ready to be poured into molds to fully saponify and harden.

\textsuperscript{13} Felstiner, “Preface,” xxii.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
artists and poets perform acts of remediation via biological processes, as in the cleansing work of mosses and hyperaccumulators in significant works by Jackie Brookner, Mel Chin, Deanna Pindell, and others.\footnote{sue-spaid-ecovention}

I return to again and again to Brookner’s \textit{Prima Lingua}, as it performs both bioremediative and metaphorical action on polluted agricultural runoff flowing over mosses and other plants that clean the waters as they roll over a big rock shaped like a human tongue. Brookner’s early biosculpture suggests that the healing powers of invisible, biological processes are an essential part of an original mother tongue that all earthly bodies speak. At the same time, the work of contemporary multispecies storytellers and poets – like Adam Dickinson in his feisty metabolic explorations of embodied chemical legacies – remind us that words, however toxic or tonic they may be, are also irremediably part of naturalcultural inheritances that permeate earthly lives and generations to come.\footnote{adam-dickinson-anatomic} With careful attention, we might come to recognize how the mother-of-all-tongues is a porous matrix of bodies-in-process that always enfolds us, whether we are aware of it or not.

\footnotetext{15}{Sue Spaid, \textit{Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies} (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2002).}

\footnotetext{16}{Adam Dickinson’s practice of metabolic poetics explores the question of whether poems too can act on bodily systems, rather than just reacting to the myriad toxins imposed upon them. Adam Dickinson, \textit{Anatomic} (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2018).}
Rural Alchemy Workshop (R.A.W.)

Our paradise, in short, will it not have been the others?
– Francis Ponge, *Soap*

Like any dairy product laced with violent histories and persistent global toxicities, assmilk must always be a product of its time and place. Indeed, the means to transform assmilk’s potential meaning-making properties from conceptual blueprint to material manufacture of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap required much more than just amenable she-asses. This speculative ass dairy also needed a home base, a hideout from which to reckon with our implicit immersions in both global webs and local ecologies. In 2008, it happened that our familial herd settled precariously on a neglected farm of nearly ten acres on the edge of a town called Carnesville in rural northeast Georgia. It was on the anxious outpost of the Carnesville farm that the Rural Alchemy Workshop was founded, thanks to the keen determination of Sean, my indefatigable partner in R.A.W. husbandry, who applied his formidable gifts to navigating the tribulations of small-town law and shady backroad rural real-estate dealings. In time our place in Carnesville became a little secret scrappy-ass rebel base. We nurtured lives and dreams in a backwoods barnyard of wire-fenced paddocks, surrounding a lofty old slatted barn that sheltered the long- and short-eared equines, a weird assortment of chickens, and the wild rats, deer, squirrels, ants, and snakes (to name a few), alongside a squat cinderblock dwelling for the humans, dogs, cat, and mice by the millions. Here the makings of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap became materially possible – and achingly necessary.

Even as we assiduously nourished a certain familial peace-of-ass within the fence lines and wooded edges of

our Carnesville homestead, the R.A.W. was threatened on every side by economic, political, environmental, and cultural forces that chafed and galled, beyond the meager means of rural alchemy to assuage. As trash left behind by the farm’s past inhabitants continuously surfaced in the barnyard mud, I was haunted by these and other looming ghosts and monsters of all kinds of historical and environmental pollution.¹⁸ As in many places across the American South, traces of racial and environmental exploitation are barely buried in the sandy soil. White-columned front porches of antebellum mansions and crooked slave shacks renovated as backyard garden sheds evoke memories of plantation economies founded on slave labor, reliant on the suffering of humans, mules and others and the plundering of forests and soils and whatever other entities could be made to serve its rapacious hungers. Alongside this fraught history, the postindustrial South these days is scarred by other more visible and voracious global consumer economies, evidenced by acres and acres of asphalt, endless Walmart and Dollar Store parking lots and Pay-Day check-cashing places in half-abandoned strip malls edged by gas-station convenience stores and fast-food drive-thrus.

I remember with a shudder one day in 2002 when Aliass and I got lost driving on the Alcoa Highway on the outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee. I was hauling Aliass in the ramshackle trailer behind the Black Caprice, looking for a place to leave the rig and set out on foot and hoof again. What I encountered on the Alcoa Highway made me lose my nerve entirely. The horizon was nothing but acres of blinding car dealerships and heavy-machinery lots for as far as the eye could see in any direction — an

impermeable desert far more forbidding than Death Valley could ever be. If the vision of an endless Alcoa Highway is not enough to unsettle lingering pastoral idylls, one can always turn to gut-wrenching images of ravaged Appalachian mountain ranges, clear-cut old-growth forests, Gulf Coast beaches strewn with tarballs and dead seabirds, or drowned neighborhoods in the paths of unprecedented storms.

But as Merle Haggard has it, “If you don’t love it, leave it.” From our perspective within the R.A.W. homestead, Haggard’s “it” might have been Carnesville, the country, or even Planet Earth. But in any case, love it we did – that little plot of compromised land and every mortal body living on it – with every means at our disposal. One steamy summer night in 2010, the R.A.W. ass herd grew by one more when Passenger gave birth to a foal sired by Henry. Aliass stood by quietly on guard in the dark while Passenger labored, pacing back and forth until the time came when she lay down in the paddock dirt and with a tremendous groan birthed the little wet wisp, who was born solid black as a shadow under the full moon.

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Six months after Nicholass Moon (aka Little Nick) was born, the R.A.W. Ass Dairy was in full swing. Passenger made milk for Nick, and I collected some of it for Assmilk Soap, with essential guidance from our gracious veterinarian, Dr. Alice Beretta, and advice gleaned from Jean-François Wambeke of L’Asinerie D’Embazac, an utterly magical ass dairy near Toulouse in the South of France. Beside the twinkling waters of the foamy brown creek, I

20 You can glimpse the magic of L’Asinerie d’Embazac on its beautiful and informative website: http://www.embazac.com/.
stirred a mixture of lye and oils and Pass-milk, and dark as it was with local, historical, and global-industrial-capitalist-petrochemical traces, it was just as densely sweet with abiding desires, kinships, and intimate rememberings. Even as Passenger’s body biomagnified the many invisible pollutants in our midst, her udders also nourished numerous beneficent processes, from the growth of Little Nick’s bones and whiskers and thick ass fur (so thick, in fact, that on winter mornings I often found him covered in a layer of frost, like icing on a warm little cake) to the nurturing of distinctly human poetic hope, however strained, that this inextricable mixture of toxins and intimate exchanges might homeopathically heal some of our times’ most catastrophic disconnections.  

At the same time, other shadows lurk within the assumptions that allow me to hold a herd of asses scripted to my poetic purposes – some of those same forces that shape and distort the lives and bodies of millions of bovine mothers around the globe. Embedded in Assmilk Soap is the hard-to-ask question of how the she-asses feel about contributing to it. Passenger would let me express her milk without objection. But then again, she was born into my hands and tends to trust (and even scheme to manipulate) them. But Passenger’s role as a dairy ass has a darker precursor. The first she-ass to contribute milk for the project had a different story to tell. Rose, as we called her, was a wary and beautiful black jennet with a striking white muzzle and underbelly, whom we bought from a shady Southern ass dealer with her fluffy black three-month-old nursing foal. Rose had not been handled much, and she didn’t take kindly to being milked, being mistrustful of humans in general and me especially, and with good reason, I guess. Nor did she like it much when our farrier, Hoyt Silvey, had to knot her up

in a cat’s cradle of ropes so he could trim her hooves. Rose would tense up to flee or fight whenever I approached her, and needless to say she was unwilling to let down her milk in response to my pullings and proddings. After a while she would trade about a teaspoonful of milk for a few carrots, but it was a tense and unpleasant negotiation for both of us every time.

Wranglings with Rose present a dark episode in the history of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap. After recognizing Rose’s misery in her role as a dairy ass, we delivered her to a neighbor who needed a companion for his lonesome Arabian horse. But she left a fertile legacy in her troubled wake. Her foal, who we call Henry, stayed with us and grew up to be a handsome jack. When Henry was about two years old, he sired Little Nick (at Passenger’s persistent urging), passing on his rather rare, all-black coat color to the herd’s newest member. As Nick grew up, he and Henry became a striking pair, both solid black from muzzle to tail and nearly indistinguishable.

Over the years, the R.A.W. continued to explore new forms of artful ass husbandry within the knowns and unknowns of the makeshift home we all made together on the edge of Carnesville, insulated to some degree from the nearby interstate commerce by the burbling coolness of the shady, glittering creek, the buzzing cicadas, and haunting calls of invisible whip-poor-wills from the evening woods. Yet it was not easy to feel at home, for a variety of reasons. Along with a general sense of ominous presences in the local landscapes, there was the woe that welled up in me every week when our nextdoor neighbor Mr. Crump burned his plastic household trash, and the noxious black smoke wafted through the scraggly pine trees and into the lungs of the herd – donkeys, dogs, horses, humans, cat, birds, and every other breathing being, even coating the leaves of the trees and garden greens. Traces of it likely ended up in Passenger’s milk. And let’s never forget the chickenshit. Carnesville was
the seat of a Georgia county that boasted the most industrial chicken houses of any in the United States, and every winter the farmer who leased the hayfields next door would spread the reeking manure of millions of bald and miserable birds onto the fields as fertilizer, so that the next rain would roll it downhill and into our soils, creek, and well water. Carnesville is stained in other ways, so many ways, and it is our fault; all of us are implicated. As we well know, Carnesville is hardly the only place so stained in this so-called Anthropocene age.

With all these R.A.W. reckonings in mind, I went out one January morning with a special bar of Assmilk Soap, made especially for our Carnesville barnyard with bits of plastic trash and broken mirror, fur and creek-mud and leaves and acorns from the massive old water oak by the barn. I scrubbed for hours with everything I had. I washed the mud, the fouled creek, the sad depleted soil. I soaped up the dead pine trees in the asses’ paddock where the powerline crew sprayed herbicide one day when we humans were not at home to stop them. I spent that whole winter afternoon with my bare feet sunk in the cold mud and manure of the barnyard, washing Carnesville with the faint hope that it’s possible to maintain a plot anywhere on this wracked earth that remains unpolluted enough for porous bodies to thrive.

R.A.W. Assmilk Soap must be a powerful solvent to equal the fearsome pollutions of hopes and homelands it goes up against. But I can testify to this much: every time I poured the measured ounces of powdered lye into foamy assmilk in the process of making soap, the mixture sizzled and steamed and glowed bright and hot as a barn fire. The first time I poured lye into Passenger’s milk, the reaction was so strong it cracked the jar. That last batch I made in Carnesville, the mixture of assmilk and lye got so hot it actually turned black.

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Of course R.A.W. Assmilk Soap’s cleaning powers are more metaphorical than material. It cannot wash away the visible scars of industrial wastelands, but it does try to reckon with hidden stains in embodied muzzles and tongues – poisonous ideas and classifications that enforce asymmetrical burdens borne by exploited bodies and ecosystems, and the ways distinct toxins linger in our bodies, thoughts, and utterances. R.A.W. Assmilk Soap really finds its potency by calling upon human imagination to bring buried stains to the surface of attention. These ordinary-looking bars of soap foam up in the usual way when they mix with water, but the real power resides in collective meaning-making gestures.

Tapping this, R.A.W. Assmilk Soap has engaged a collaborative approach, inviting human individuals to encounter the beneficent properties of assmilk in cleansing suds, and to lather through layers of whatever forms of pollution (chemical, psychological, linguistic, and so on) threaten the places and bodies we love. Along with assmilk, each bar of soap also contains other unique “ingredients” gathered by a collaborator. These ingredients evoke a place, way of life, memory, conundrum, or relationship that the soap’s imaginer wants to wash in some way. A few significant batches of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap have included mixed milks from both she-ass and human sources. In keeping with the aims of a collaborative project called *Domestic/Wild*, artist-choreographer Emily Stone’s R.A.W. soap bar included her own breastmilk. The label of this soap tells a story of imaginative exploration.

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22 One early batch of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap was part of a collaboration with artist Emily Stone called *Domestic/Wild*, which culminated in an experimental performance that Stone produced in Portland, Oregon in January 2010. *Domestic/Wild* explored tensions between the bounds of domesticity – especially as they are experienced by homebound mothers of small children – and the body’s inherent mammalian wildness and wisdoms.
into feral places we find even inside our own bodies and homes:

Ingredients: 100% RAW milk (ass and human), organic base oils; question; dust from under couch (terra incognita); grass, leaves, and sticks picked up by Athena at night; a green note from my Dad; small portions of a nest that had two dead baby birds in it; a burnt match and a small bit of firewood. (Emily Stone, 2010)

Ingredients of R.A.W. Assmilk Soaps have ranged from bits of botanical species of a specific bioregion to personally or culturally loaded objects or substances, like artist Bill Kelly’s mix of rain, motor oil, and blood, or poet Claire Hero’s teeth of a road-killed coyote. Each soap label reads like a dark little love poem to the complexities of our multispecies habitations. Each bar of soap is an experiment, an ongoing interrogation.

Meanwhile, we know too well that almost anything can be traded on the global market these days, from preteen girls to cloned embryos. Much as I invest conceptually in the power of Assmilk Soap, though, it is not a product for sale. It isn’t pretty or packaged, and it isn’t scented with alluring perfumes. Aside from the fact that R.A.W. Assmilk Soap is intimately bound to the fortunes of one little ass herd, the scale of any ethically sound ass dairy is limited by economic and sociocultural realities that affect the lives of domestic donkeys around the world. Meanwhile, as a cleansing product R.A.W. Assmilk Soap is only as solvent as the imagination that a washer is will-
ing to wet it with, and it is not for the squeamish. Each soap is embedded with objects of significance (gnarly tufts of assfur, or shards of found veal-calf bones), along with other special ingredients and whatever affective layers of meaning, longing, memories, and taboos a washer imbues it with.

In the end, I would say that I make Assmilk Soap because I am a member of a strange and uniquely language-laden species, trying to find a place in the world with respect to others while navigating minefields of shame, divisive definitions, and earthly desecrations. Everybody alive must come to recognize the sources of what sustains us in order to survive, and by those recognitions and connections we each come to grasp what and who we become, where and how we belong. In its own distinct ways, R.A.W. Assmilk Soap holds foamy hopes for more inclusive storyings through loving and careful attentions to recognizable knots that bind lives together within specific timeplaces. Where earthly belonging in changing worlds is not a static claim to specific real estate or exclusive way of being, we might begin to imagine new forms and practices of belonging: make new paths, plodding with hoofworn and hope-ridden persistence, toward more just and inclusive stories for possible ass futures.  

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And this brings me back one last time to the black milk, and to the particular forms of reckoning with both exclusions and newfangled (be)longings embedded in Assmilk Soap. In spite of all the buried trash and broken mirrors in our Carnesville barnyard, years of careful R.A.W. husbandry in the woods and paddock mud finally revealed another source for my shadowy assimilk hungers. Not

surprisingly, this source was discovered once more in the cracks between names and bodies, and more so in the flowing and fertile spaces-between.

For a brief spell in the early days of his life, we called Passenger and Henry’s little black foal by the name MoonPie, after the trademarked chocolate-coated cookie-and-marshmallow snack product manufactured by a secret industrial recipe at a factory in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I bestowed this name on the newborn ass with a dash of irony, in the unspoken desire to simultaneously claim and refute legacies of Cupcake, the long-gone spotted ghost-horse of my mother’s childhood memories. In other words, I wanted to acknowledge the inheritance of my mother’s storied barnyard loves – so fundamental to my growing up and sustaining a mixed-species family of my own – while at the same time marking the more unwholesome elements of industrial-consumer exploitations of bodies, lives, and labors that infiltrate global systems and earthly places. These mostly hidden elements permeate and reshape tissues and landscapes, from the gnarly knots of enduring beastly affinities to the sharp and shiny techno-industries that engineer bovine bodies to be milked dry by relentless robots.\textsuperscript{25}

But then things did not go smoothly in the first few days of the foal’s life. In the heavy summer heat, Passenger was ornery with postpartum discomfort and difficult lactation, and I ended up having to encourage the newborn to suck canned goat’s milk from a bowl in order to stay hydrated and nourished. In that precarity of the foal’s first days, I found myself regretting the name MoonPie. Every name has its hidden histories and associations, of course. But along with the load of chemical preservatives and lesser-known iniquities of colonial sugar production that taint every sweet treat, the MoonPie brand is his-

torically entwined with industries reliant on the hungry, laboring bodies of coal miners and field hands to whom the MoonPie was primarily marketed through the first part of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{26} Traces of linguistic toxins remain, too. Paul Beatty reports that “chocolate moon-pie” was one of a robust lexicon of racial slurs familiar to Black Southern ears.\textsuperscript{27}

I didn’t know all this then, but as the frail foal seemed to swing in a liminal space between life and death, I sensed a danger in associating his fate too closely with that cellophane-wrapped, petrochemical-preservative-laced industrial snack product, as this life he inherits already teeters unsteadily between (auto)biographical being and killable commodity. So it happened that in keeping with a new ass family tradition, I came to un-name the newest member of Aliass’s herd, from MoonPie to Nicholass Moon (aka Little Nick). Invested in this gesture was a hope that his unning might repel certain associations, carry on a different legacy and maybe even nourish possibilities for more wholesome ass futures.

We all made it through the postpartum rough patch, and after a few days Pass and Nick established a good nursing equilibrium. The darkest days of that summer (if not the hottest) were behind us as we rolled into a steamy August. One morning when Little Nick was a few weeks old, I was hanging out in the paddock with him and Pass and I saw him do something interesting. He was bent down awkwardly between his still-wobbly, widespread front legs, trying to nurse from a small clump of grass.


His little black muzzle worked at the green wisps with the full force of his nursling hunger, puckering around the stems in an earnest, if experimental, effort to suck sustenance from it. He gave up after a minute, as his efforts failed to yield sweet assmilk from the grassroots and dirt. But he was onto something, nonetheless. His moment of conflation foreshadowed a big leap he would take soon enough from milk to roughage. He was already beginning to learn to pluck and chew, and so laying claim to the herbivorous life he was born into.

At the time, I was amused by his mix-up of mother-body and other lively presences in the surrounding environment. For the young ass, this was just a transitional moment. But as I reflected on this episode later on, I came to realize that my own confusion on this matter – of where and how we find sustenance and ways of belonging in earthly places – has been lifelong. Like Little Nick, I’ve been seeking nourishment among the roadside weeds and dirt and asphalts of landscapes, places where I found myself entwined with others in time: I’ve tried in vain to suck a black-milk brew of flowing places and otherly ways of knowing from the landscapes I have passed through with Aliass and others, from lichen-crusted rocks and barks and tall seedy grasses, from birdcalls and cattails and thorny brambles and mud-puddles, and from blazing asphalt, endless mown lawns, and moony hayfields. In the circuits of all these long-ass journeys and habitations, I never could find one sweet spot that would yield it. But I always felt some rich dark earthly substance was present, flowing just under the surfaces of seemingly discrete bodies, coursing invisible and potent through infinite webs of nameless tissues and minerals and leaves and watersheds.

In this experience, the search for nourishment in compromised ecologies is as much a psychological or spiritual hunger as a biological one. Each in our own special ways, Little Nick and I felt around our shared environments,
looking for what we needed most to help us stay alive and find sustaining ties. And in different ways, through that sweltering Carnesville summer and beyond, we each found what we needed in the bright eyes, lickings and fly-kickings, and familiar dusty fur of an ornery ass family (humans, dogs, pine trees, and other wild unknown lives included). For the nursling foal, Passenger’s milk gave essential antibodies, microbes, and proteins he needed to develop and grow. For a human with other hungers, R.A.W. Assmilk Soap continues to hold the inscrutable stories that interwoven lives are always making together, full of shadowy hopes, sticky knots of care and desire, and foamy residues of deeply-lived immersion in places we pass through.
Fig. 2. The last batch of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap may be its fullest expression, and maybe also the most potent postscript. Made in our new ass homestead in Oregon in 2013, this R.A.W. Assmilk Soap contains the remains of frozen milk I saved from Passenger’s lactation after Nick was weaned, prior to our move from Carnesville to the West Coast in 2011 (aka the Big Ass Family Road Trip). This soap batch also contains fresh milk my own mammalian body made, mixed with the requisite lye and oils and three generations of ass family furs. But this last batch is NOT more potent because of the fact that it contains my own human milk – supposed to be endowed with exclusive potential for meaningful expression, then provocatively mixed with the bodily fluids of a beastly Other, whose exotic stories are thus privileged but nevertheless held apart. No, that’s not it: this last batch of Assmilk Soap is the most potent because it holds and binds so many tangled knots and traces of a familial herd of mammals and many others in timeplaces, not-archiving in its inscrutable ways the tales composed among meshes of vertebrates, microbes, plants, and myriad unnamed others. Our most intimately unknown stories, passed on in m<other tongues and otherwise. Photograph by the artist.