



*Mandrake uprooted by dog to protect man from its magic.*

## EDITORS' NOTE

For this second issue of our journal, we asked poets, essayists, storytellers and image-makers to create work in response to the following question: what is the creative/intellectual labor that plants and non-human animals do for us? We expected that the answer would become as much a formal investigation as it would be a topic of the works we would receive. After all, the act of representation—in writing, in images, or otherwise—is not a wholly un-creaturely pursuit, squeezing some communicable sense out of the gurgling slop that is consciousness, the mind contending with its own creaturely disorder. Our prompt lent itself to formal experiments that play at a definition of nature's labor. Does nature do work? Does it produce art? If so, are these actions only ever carried out under the force of a human whip?

Acts of representation reflect the tension in the human encounter with wild-life; the ordering, reasoning mind grappling with unchecked excess within and without. The surrealist philosopher-poet Georges Bataille sees plants, animals, rocks, water and sky to all be inextricably mingled together in endless “polymorphous coitus”<sup>1</sup> —oceans condensing into the shape of clouds that rise up and burst into storm, wetting the earth with rain so the flower can grow in elegant colors up from the mud to then quickly wither, spreading around itself vivid fragments of its former brilliance. Wild inclusivity; relentless concerted self-proliferation and self-reinvention; immodesty; non-constraint; these traits, all

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(1) “The Solar Anus,” in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 5-9.

orbiting around a fundamental propensity to excess, paint the signifier NATURE with its hypnotic beauty. Bataille calls the excessive quality of nature formlessness,<sup>2</sup> a term which distinguishes its dynamic voluptuousness from the domesticating abstraction which philosophy, poetry and, by extension, all acts of representation impose on the natural world. He says that while philosophy's goal is to give nature shape by dressing it in a "mathematical frock coat,"<sup>3</sup> nature actually has no shape, is uncontainable, and thus "has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere he charges poetry with a similar crime, criticizing the poets for aesthetically idealizing nature and thus eliminating from it the transcendent, unspeakable ugly-beauty and beautiful-ugliness.<sup>5</sup>

Formlessness exceeds and defies art, exemplified in the staggering sensory experience presented by a dead body. The philosopher Michael Taussig, recalling his time as a young medical student first confronted with a cadaver to dissect, writes:

There was the corpse spread eagled on its table  
in various shades of gray and blue with shards  
of yellowing fat and an insufferable odor of  
formaldehyde; by its side was my textbook displaying  
the body in shimmering symmetries of reds and

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(2) "Formless," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 31.

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) "The Language of Flowers," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 10-14.

blues and all the more accurate, not to mention beautiful, for being thus rendered. So what has happened? The art in nature turns out to be an art of nature! It is like treason, the same as when a child realizes Santa Claus is a man dressed up.<sup>6</sup>

The formless, exemplified in everything from autumn leaves to floating dandelion spores to the marsh teeming with life to the disorienting smell of a dead body, is the persecuted category for which Bataille advocates. Nature in its formlessness has no rights. Is art, with its impulse to sculpt and refine, an attempt to give it rights? Must we assign shape, boundaries, distinguishing features and definitions to nature's undifferentiated polymorphous abundance so that it might claim license to survive? Must we require the wildlife that we see and are to articulate into discrete, discernable, governable, representable and thus exchangeable subjects? Would this articulation be a labor of and for justice? On the contrary, Bataille observes that inevitably an "eruptive force accumulates in those who are necessarily situated below."<sup>7</sup> The bubbling fury of the volcano, the "legendary satanism"<sup>8</sup> of the mandrake root and the irrepressible innate expressivity of sexual organs mark a resistant energy that is not reactionary but primary. An eruptive power that precedes and defies the constraint of representation. Art refines and nature revolts. Or, in the face of humans as art-making beings, nature is revolt.

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(6) "The Language of Flowers," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 98, JSTOR.

(7) "The Solar Anus," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 5-9.

(8) "The Language of Flowers," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 10-14.

Perhaps it is the case that without this exhilarating polarity art would lose its ability to move us. The works collected in this book give ample room to that oscillating dance. They are acts of describing, illustrating and naming that lay bare the irresolvable tension in which they are held between generosity and destructiveness.

“Seashell,” “The Mountain,” and “The Penguin 2” by Birhan Keskin are poetic reminders of the simultaneous kinship and antinomy that the human finds in her relation to the elements; of how difficult it is “to speak against the morning” and “against the earth,” a contact, an address that is at once both an intimate facing and an opposition. In a 2002 interview with Pelin Özer, Keskin remarked that “writing too many poems is a betrayal to both the words and the trees.” Accordingly, allusions to the significance of speaking or not speaking in her work imply the ethical weight of the poetic act. The writer can never own but can only try to point to that silence whose path “the mountain knows” but “you don’t.”<sup>9</sup>

“My friends, there are signs of life.” This phrase, its speaker knocking from an other-realm on the door to the human-made, ushers the conclusion of Fernando Quiguá’s prose poem “Dream Bear Deleted Lines.” This and its partner piece, “Of Jackals,” journey into the anterooms and ante-anterooms of thinking, feasting on a dirty and delicious pre-logical creatureliness. Under the roaming associative threads of palpitating thing-words, there lie questions: how to draw the shape of me once I see my undeniable affinities with other

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(9) Keskin, Birhan. “Yeryüzü karşısında konuşmak ne zor!” Interview by Pelin Özer. Cumhuriyet Kitap, 30 Apr. 2002

forms of life? can my thought hit the bodies of others? what if a jackal, a cat, a bear or big-foot could write?

“Fly,” by Claire Devoogd, experiments with the way prose renders movement, exemplifying the strange mobility of a noun—both frozen in place and charged, simmering—in the word “fly.” The fly is an insect named after how it moves; what it is, its being, is “a complex of touches buckling movement.” Devoogd’s circling within the fact of being-in-a-word, being-in-a-sentence, being-in-prose, makes a critical theory that’s finally, actually urgent because in its seeking to repair broken connections, it acts while it is read. It’s a writing that feels with hands and feet for proximity with things, and for love.

Jeff Benjamin meditates on the plants of, in and alongside industry—the resonating caverns, concrete and machinery, the green that shades these spaces, the humans who have also shaded them. Benjamin searches out points of contact: among the page, the machine, the worker and the plants, both those that overwhelm such sites now and those that have been, to varying degrees, collaborators in industry, conscripts to it. This is a tensile relation. These things reside in an extra-temporal sympathetic assemblage with one another, a complex groundcover, from the potted plants thriving in a textile mill, their introduction intended to make mechanical labor more tolerable for those employed to do it, to the tree milled for a page of paper, to the myrtle, one-time human symbol of human grief (“tough, undemanding and hard to kill,” a gardening guide describes this vine: in other words, an ideal industrialized worker), which creeps out of a cemetery over a cement mine, to the weeds overwriting a grave in a work of fiction.

Each of the four poems by Miriam Atkin takes a particular life form—the macaw, the long-tailed widowbird, and the skunk cabbage and the garden eel—as its archetypal center of interest. The writing sets into motion these differing bodies—including the poet’s own—through the visible space between the mouth and the hand, instruments for searching, tasting, feeling and connecting. Making tiny steps toward some unknown future, these works barely punctuate time, perhaps to render it ineffectual; instead, they place it in an open parenthesis, a door for ancient voices to seep through so as to mingle with new ones. The breath of the poet measures itself in this open space by way of a whistle. It then leaps back into a sonic vastness of deep listening to find words that name things as they are.

“Enviably Crows and Unnameable Weeds, Freedom Cows and Death Bouquets” by Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves is a chain of linked text objects weaving around an ongoing act of thinking. The flow of fragments constitutes not a product but a process where what words are and how they function alters and adjusts according to the temporal needs of a thinking body seated at a cafe before a variegated philodendron. There, in the unfolding of a day, words change their form and function in concert with how and why a moment calls them forth. Does thriving demand predation? Can atemporal language return us to the void? To sit in one’s verbal being but not to thrive. To accept, mystified, that the creature moves by its own light with no reference to the enforced machinery of success and its excesses.

James Loop’s Saturn functions absorptively, pulling all ways toward its subject—this fruit, the medlar—which, as it follows itself more deeply into the body it laps toward meaning, becomes saturated with history, world, thought, self and

other. These aspects dissolve with it into a sensual appeal, both performance (whether in the mode of the YouTube DIY homesteading video or of poetries and rhetorics, past and present) and immediate delight. What kind of consumption or consuming is speaking—both performance and delight—through which these messy things of life must pass, that it passes messily through? Schopenhauer asks his readers to acknowledge the primacy of suffering, that pain relative to pleasure always exceeds and overruns the latter. “If you don’t believe it, compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is eating the other.” The medlar, rotten when ripe, name, seed, food and symbol, becomes an offering, and thus a vulnerability: the huge vulnerability which it is to let oneself be eaten. And, delightfully, it asks if this might not also be a pleasure. Fruit or flesh, we are, after all, eating and eaten things. These points of offering and acceptance rot or ripen into a consent to presence, to the compromise and confession of this consumptive situation. Name, seed, fruit and symbol: the subject these descriptors couch absorbs and feeds them; Loop convenes a concomitance of terms from which an individual and final object can’t be extracted, always being partial, dissolving, rotten, ripe, savoring.

Nicola Masciandaro annotates recognition of human being among a world—imagination, ideation, vision—as plant-like-ness, if likeness is a quality which grows into itself in the process of its being recognized, becomes the material of its own vehicle. The fact of green confronts vision—envisioning Masciandaro’s “Green Imagination,” I imagine the image, greened, as a mirror held up to a leaf. In such a confrontation, in a greening which overwhelms the leaf not seeing itself, the image becomes visible as a sight which resides in excess



of sight. Of course, this doesn't foreclose on it. Green, in its uncanny spectral position, as Masciandaro notes, is significant of longing; then it's also an extension—the imagination stretches itself out; delicately, the green unseeing continues.

The tread of Sahar Muradi's poems is both resolute and soft, with the snow underfoot left hardly marked. Her phrases are decisive units, each rounded off, a story in itself, yet extending in friendship to its neighbor. These syntactic, sonic bodies and the actual bodies they indicate all have distinct boundaries and yet participate in an ever-unfolding process of mutually becoming brethren. The components of inner experience—*thinking jaw sound*—are shuffled in with outer objects—*tree with a raised skirt*—becoming brethren. The donkey ambles by and, watching it, the word grows a tail, the two becoming brethren.

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-Miriam Atkin, Claire DeVoogd and Öykü Tekten