

Unconscious Nobility: The Animal Poetry

Dan Wylie

“Isn’t it possible for two human beings to inspire and comfort each other simply by being together?” He wanted that; otherwise the outlook was hopeless.

“I dunno what you mean,” she said. “If you don’t know what the other person thinks, it’s like a couple of animals.”

She walked looking down.

“For that matter,” she added somewhat gloomily, “it’s still like animals when you know what the other person thinks.”

She had left off her make-up for the afternoon, and was wearing a cotton frock, inside which her easy-going figure was given full play. She had, for the moment, something of the unconscious nobility of some animals, moving intently on felted pads.

(1970, 205)

This exchange from Patrick White’s novel *The Vivisector* captures a central aspect of one of the critical environmental problems of our time: human relations with other creatures. The man – the artist Hurtle Duffield – recognises that without communion between creatures, the outlook is indeed “hopeless.” His interlocutor, Nance, recognises two further things: that the problem of communion is one of ‘knowing’ what is in the other’s mind, what he or she thinks; but also that there is an animal element in our being which is behind or beyond mentation – which is, so to speak, alimentation (or in this case, animal sexuality). White’s own commentary in that last paragraph points to that impulse in humans to find animality liberatory in some way, a mode of existence to be welcomed for being both unconscious and noble.

I want to suggest that Harold Farmer's poetry works repeatedly in this area of ambiguity, a zone of tension triangulated, as it were, between three impulses. First: a notion (or even the fact) that a sense of community depends on 'knowing' what the 'other' is thinking or feeling, and on being able to articulate that knowledge. Second: suspecting, or even knowing, that certain reaches of the mind of the 'other' are fundamentally, and fascinatingly, *unknowable* – of the realm of the unconscious. And third: knowing (or just fearing or hoping) that any secure distinction between ourselves-as-humans and ourselves-as-sharing-animal-traits is artificial, or at least permeable. Hence, while Farmer's wild animals are perpetually on the brink of disappearing from sight and understanding, it is precisely that mysteriousness which attracts us, can sometimes envelop us, and even speak to us. In having spoken and been spoken to, we are somehow ennobled.

In this zone, poetry occupies a commensurately ambiguous position. Poetry is part of that mentation which distinguishes us from animals, marking out our humanity in rhythm and metaphor and abstraction; but it is also that which potentially acts as a conduit to the intuitive dimensions of our inner animal. Hence a number of Farmer's poems are almost as much about poetry as they are about their animal subjects.

I

Harold Farmer – the back cover of his single published volume, *Absence of Elephants* (1990) tells us – was born in Namibia, educated at universities in Zimbabwe, Cape Town and Australia, and taught for some time at the University of Zimbabwe, until 1988. He now lives in California. *Absence of Elephants* was published in Zimbabwe by College Press; a somewhat obscure beginning, perhaps, though he has subsequently been published in a number of American magazines. Despite the slightness of his visible oeuvre so far, he is, I hope to show, a very strong poet. The bulk of the poems are African-set, and many of them deal with animals, ranging from the elephants of the title poem down through leopards and snakes to chameleons, spiders, and even termites.

Let me start an exploration of a small selection of these poems with one that at first appears to have no connection at all with our animal theme. Farmer opens his poem "Thinking of America" with the line, "I cannot find the words I need / in America." This is interestingly ambivalent: are the required words absent from his pre-formed vocabulary, and therefore incapable of describing this new place; or are they absent from the place itself, so also rendering him dumb – or both? Mere observation is inadequate:

The things I might have written of,
 paper birds floating above the docks,
 are nameless, escape my lines.
 My lines themselves snag, dissolve,
 telling me only one thing:
 poetry can't travel.

(14-15)

If the poem itself seems a partial refutation of the idea that “poetry can't travel,” the next, and closing lines refine the idea of what poetry is:

The man possessed
 has no choice. If he leaves, he leaves
 his words behind, and him they call
 through all the hours of the night.

(15)

Poetry is not, in other words, a mere collection of words: the words of poetry are essentially an expression of possession and possessed-ness; poetry is precisely that within one's being which cannot be taken away from an originary locus or soil, which will continue to “call” in the psychological darkness of displacement. To put it even more strongly, poetry *is* rootedness, at-home-ness, and vice versa.

This idea is extended in another poem with an African setting, “Victoria Falls”:

Backwards the river flows: the tide of blood
 beating upstream in reversion to the heart.
 Small men squat by the river banks, dark nodules
 impervious to the menacing tides;
 their blessed fortune, canoe or coracle,
 dug-out or raft, swung past all settlements,
 sucked backwards to the highland source,
 remote associations of the heart recalled.

(25)

Though set on the Zambezi river, the “dark” men who paddle against the stream towards some primordial “heart” are of all and any culture: the essential thing is to “associate” with the source of life itself, where a stability “impervious to the menacing tides” might be found. That source is not just conjured up, it seems to me, as mere contingent “associations,”: it holds the

potential for a different kind of commensality in being actively ‘summonsed back to a living present.’

Is Farmer trying to forge a new mythology of origins, or refurbish an old one, one that runs counter to inhibitory, civilised “settlements”? There may be something of this in “Old Rhodesian Home,” a poem in which a “dead” house, whose dust is thought of as mingling with that of “primitive caves,” provides a setting for a conflation of humanities and times: “It was not for nothing we discovered / the past, but out of complicity. / These caves, layered with paintings, were our homes” (27). That past tense is important, too: as we will see, even the animal poems may (as Farmer himself has indicated [2005]) be interpreted as reflecting the political realities of white settlerdom in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

In a related poem, “Kalahari Bushmen” (23-4), Farmer evokes the worldview of the Bushmen as something of an ideal. But he “want[s] to do more than dream” about Kalahari Bushmen: he wants rather some kind of actual contact and presence *within* them, to *be* them. He wants more than having them “telling tales / of me, as I might speak of them,” something beyond the inflictions of difference inherent in their divergent languages. But he knows that something will elude him:

Whose is the story? It is not
the legend of the Kalahari Bushmen,
little men who vanish into the sand,
nor a fund of information I’ve amassed.
The story is in the passage of wild bees
hurrying across the stones after honey.
It is in the cry of the meercat, the barking
of baboons as they scuffle among the rocks.

(24)

Notice here the trope of vanishing, which we will see again and again, a trope not only of the people themselves disappearing, but of the story losing its forms and boundaries in the intricate activities of the natural world itself: that is, “*in the passage*.” At the same time, something *is* evoked in language:

What I say is what the landscape,
tracks of the Bushmen across the plains,
has led to, the lode of honey
or the white lip of the salt pans.

(24)

Not “What I say *is* the landscape” – that would be too strongly Sapir-Whorfian – but “what the landscape . . . has led to” – which itself is at once ordinary and elusive. At the end of both these quotations, the movement is from human-based communication – “story,” “What I say” – to the intricate, almost automatic motions of the general natural world – something akin, perhaps, to certain modes of Deep Ecology, though without Deep Ecology’s overtly activist tone. What begins as a longing to be a human (a Bushman) within a more satisfying kind of community, ends in some form of identity with other creatures (and *their* voices). But what kind of communality is this, in the end, and is it feasible? Seeing some kind of brotherhood with other humans, such as Bushmen, is one thing; but how far into the other realms of creaturehood can a human go? Is this move no more than an impossible, even dishonest atavism, a “primitivism” fraught with a kind of colonial romanticism?

We can track Farmer’s shift into what might be termed a ‘commensality of the natural’ through other poems which evoke a past even more distant and primeval than that represented by the Bushmen. What is discovery of the past for, Farmer seems to ask, if not to recognise our *complicity* in it, perhaps in both positive and negative senses, and to recognise that radical cultural – even species – differences notwithstanding, we have all flowered from the same root, have lived out our possessed-ness in the same *oikos*? Our primary purpose is to celebrate the fact that the “consortium of living things” (“Lizard” 26) exists at all. In all of us reside (my pun):

residual spirits tightening the stem
of every bush, bracing the leaves,
and extending through the root system
their claim to the earth’s core.

(“Remembering Oakland, California” 28)

Using a natural image cognate with, if not necessarily derived from, current conceptions of evolutionary “branching,” Farmer here offers a broad framework for his treatment of possible communion with other creatures within the evolutionary “tree” – and not necessarily just those usually considered closest to us.

Central to this reaching back into evolutionary commonality, is the question of what precisely might be at that “core.” If we can perceive, or intuit it, can we then express it, from within our language-bound humanness? Farmer is clearly aware of the notion that in some way or ways, language brings what we perceive into existence, or at least into *meaningful* presence. At the same time he realises that full reality is going to escape the

nets of language. Can poetry nevertheless reach towards an essential animality?

II

In his treatment of some of the ‘charismatic megafauna,’ Farmer worries repeatedly at the triangulation of tensions outlined earlier. In one direction pulls the evident alien-ness of the animal. In several poems, our understanding seems to end at the surface of the animal’s hide, or even at its shadow. This is from “Buffalo”:

Buffalo are the hardest things to see in the bush
and the meanest. They inhabit the small hours,
spaces nothing else enters, slight hollows between trees . . .
...
It’s hard to count on anything with these brutes
nestling against one another in the all-absorbing mud.
...
The herd
gathering itself, closes on entropy,
generating new resources in the dense undergrowth
...
They multiply in the shadows, ranging themselves
in an endless pact against the contours of the light.

(10)

While the buffalo may be read ‘politically’ as correlatives of the stubborn meanness of white Rhodesian settlers (Farmer 2005), this does not detract from my main interest, which is in how the animals are themselves represented: what they are ‘in themselves’ constitutes the locus of their being chosen as symbol. In this poem, these creatures are independent, threatening, darkly mysterious, their secretive resourcefulness resisting description; language itself seems sucked into that “all-absorbing mud” and “entropy.” No communality seems possible here, even if the buffalo seem to possess a creative energy possibly analogous to the poet’s own.

In the case of a similar mammal, in “Rhinoceros,” antagonism with humanity is more overt: rhinos,

Armageddon in their shoulders, slip out of sight,
sun at the meridian, and we are afraid to move
during the interregnum of the afternoon
lest we encounter their colossal shadows,
centres of gravity that flatten the grass

and range with unimaginable violence
over the countryside we have rashly entered.

(39)

If rhinos and buffalo share the characteristic of being able both to threaten through sheer size and aggression, and to subtly vanish despite their bulk, it seems in “Rhinoceros” that it is the human passage that has left the greater trail of destruction and dross. In the final section, the sympathy seems decidedly with the rhino:

We do not mind where we go, provided we do not meet them,
the missing people who occupied this savannah.
Trespassing in their pillaged territory
we might find the rhinoceros, we might hear him
stamping the earth to tears.

(39)

While the speaker here feels himself to be a rash and threatened trespasser on the rhino’s (and, almost coevally, indigenous peoples’) autonomous world, he at least attempts to be respectful – unlike the humans depicted in “Leopard.” In this poem, while the cat’s coat seems alive with “malignant fire,” it may also in its “boundless extravagance” be, Farmer muses,

. . . an expression of surprise uttered
by a wild beast dreaming
of himself, attracting
hunters and tourists
to break open his brilliant shell
and complain at the waste of leopard skins
scattered across a floor of grass and trees.

(29-30)

As it is in other poems, the selfish destructiveness of hunters and tourists is derided: they misconstrue an extraordinary extravagance on the part of evolutionary processes, the coat’s quality of “unnecessary adornment, / a protest by the bush / in its own favour” (29). This draws closer to the opposite movement in Farmer’s poems, the intimation that animals *can* in some sense speak to us, even protest (I will look at this in the next section). Yet the alienness remains palpable, as it does in this section of “Game Trails”:

I think the springbuck is a terrible mask
worn by a young child who keeps
himself to himself. His horns pierce us

with memories of the past, his eyes
 confide their immobile landscapes,
 and his long muzzle draws us
 into his rank bower.
 We touch the mask, pick it up in our hands
 and even hang it on the wall.
 But still there is a smell, a smell comes to us
 in looking at it.

(24)

This links together several themes touched on already: the animal as living repository of our memories of our own origins, memory which “draws us in” to its metaphorical “rank bower”; and our own helplessly ignorant predatory nature, unable to progress beyond the materiality of dead possessiveness – yet haunted by a “smell” of something ineffably out of reach, masked.

But to return to the megafauna, in particular to the elephant. Farmer includes in his collection two poems about the elephant, arguably in recent times the most humanised of all African mammals apart from the great apes. A sympathy with the animal comes through more strongly than in the previous poems. In “Dreaming of Elephants,” he refers to the hoary “elephant graveyard” legend and the ever-imminent demise of the elephant at human hands, and he depicts their ecology and behaviour finely even as he re-mythologises it. In the opening section, he reverses the northward colonial thrust associated with Cecil John Rhodes, the archetypal rash trespasser: herds of elephants move “southward, always southward, / as if it were there they were going to make their last stand.” (Again, the obvious political reading of this as representing the retreat of white Rhodesians – white elephants? – southwards is of narrower interest to me than the pre-symbolic depiction of the elephants themselves.) In the second section, he captures the essential dilemma of the ‘animal other’: we are caught between imagining their lives and the scientific or rationalist impulse to ‘believe’ only in material realities.

None of us have found it yet. The fabulous rumours,
 a cemetery of tusks, a mighty stockade of bones,
 how could we discount these things,
 but how believe in them?
 The elephants were like a people who could not perish
 in the normal way, but must save up for it,
 save themselves for that last expansive gesture.

(17)

Farmer's diction has the weightiness of the elephants themselves, headed for a "destiny" which seems on the one hand tragic and inevitable, but on the other heroically and supremely private. In their sheer bulk, stateliness, silence, elephants embody as no other creature – apart from the whale, perhaps – the quintessential mysteriousness of the other, even as they are "like a people." At the same time, they are positively destructive: stripping trees, eroding river banks, shoving "crocodile and impala, predator and prey, out of the way." Hence it is "no joke" to be in their path, but also no joke to *imagine* "the fiesta of the dead," of the "last gathering," sacrosanct in its privacy. In their enormous progress, the elephants seem to be outside both the normal processes of nature and the capacity of the imagination:

The destiny of elephants, their project,
is in their tyrannical mass, and they take it
secretly, as if this is something which occurred
only to the greatest. And perhaps it is.
Perhaps that is why it is hard to resist dreaming
about the fate of the elephants,
and braving that danger.

(17-18)

Even as they march to their apparently unavoidable end, elephants preserve that essential mysteriousness, that "unconscious nobility" which, Farmer seems to indicate, poetic imagining must probe but finally be baffled by. And the bafflement must be accepted, even embodied.

Just what the "danger" of such imagining is may emerge more clearly from the title poem, "Absence of Elephants." The danger is not so much in the imagining *per se* – imagining is surely essential, however intrusive – but that the poems may replace the elephants. In an essential way, however, poems begin within the elephants, and the elephants' absence would be to leave only verbal husks. The poem, which begins sardonically but works its way into a rich sadness, deserves quoting in full.

Poems about elephants are better than elephants.
Survival, what's that? The uprooting of trees, who cares?
The slow, residual thickening of the forest floor
with the accumulated detritus of elephants,
the harried, panicky ants staring at logs in their path,
the abrupt awakening of owls by crashing tusks,
the collaboration upsetting the repose of the river,
are only the outward and visible signs of the poem.

The poem in the elephant is the breath of the elephant.
 Do elephants breathe? We never think of it like that,
 of the imperceptible suspiration of lesser beings.
 The elephants march through stanzas, cantos, epics.
 They dash their feet against the glossy, black boards
 of continental circuses. "Ah!" the crowd cries.
 They take their place in the stone carvings of St Jerome,
 and breathe a soft undertone to the sighs of worshippers.
 The elephant is minister to the soul's grandeur.

Poetry is no more than the breath of elephants.
 In the invisible decline of elephants, the shuddering heap
 from which I turn in embarrassment, the empty waterhole
 which has sent all the animals stamping through
 the cracked, black clay, the dry air falls like a mantle,
 a perfect fury, driving the beasts to madness.
 The absence of elephants is the death of my words.
 Ghostly and grey, in a mute caravan, roll clouds,
 caverns of darkness, the excrescences of the poem.

(34-5)

"The elephant is minister to the soul's grandeur" – what a wonderful line, enacting a mutual ennoblement. The absence of elephants implies – or would ultimately entail – the absence of poets, Farmer says. We are, that is to say, dependent on other, as well as our own, animality, even in our cultural modalities. The kind of communion envisaged here, then, is of a strange, tangential, contingent, unequal sort. It is neither idealised nor romantic, but one riven by awareness that language fails at the surface of the other's skin. It is not so much that Nature begins where language ends, so much as that whatever it is we can conceive of Nature also ends where language ends: beyond that is only the unspeakable, "caverns of darkness." *We* are the outsiders.

And yet, and yet – can imagining really not take us further? Is it not possible as Farmer muses in "Wolves, San Francisco" to find a wolf "between the corn flake boxes, behind / the gleaming chrome faucets," though to find one would mean "to assume / secretive grey furs, / to walk through a hill and come out / wearing the pines on your back" (44)? All right, materially speaking, obviously not: but can the imagination fulfil somehow this animal longing in us, without becoming merely the lifeless and exploitative "stone carving" of the symbol, like the symbol of the unicorn or of the wolf on the coat-of-arms of a country that eradicated real wolves centuries before? Can animals authentically speak to us, or through us?

III

In two imaginary dialogues, Farmer explores such a possibility and its limits, venturing into what might be seen as somewhat strained fantasies. The first is “Man on Sable, Sable on Man” (8-9), which is less a dialogue than a Yeatsian oscillation of competing and mutually exclusive assertions. The Man seems to want to deny mundane animality, “animals simply eating grass / like sheep or cows.” He expected “something better from poetry / and heraldry,” which is to say, a “nature” somehow congruent with decontextualised pre-imaginings. It is precisely as a result of such narrow prejudicial depiction, Farmer implies, that Man regards sable as a “mistake, / a genetic sport.” For such a narrow mind, the sables’ origin inevitably remains obscure, as is their destination: like so many of Farmer’s animals, they seem “impalpable as a cross / between shadows and trees,” and they flee “into the night.” More, “disappearance is their nature. Time / is extinguished in that black coat.” The implication is, however, that such disappearance is a function not only of some intrinsic quality, but also of the limits on language and on the human imagination itself.

The “Sable” presents the corollary to this imaginative narrowness: Man is in fact doing little more than “foraging / in his billfold” and flinging “covetous glances at the wild, free life / of the hippy herd”; he is little more than “a spoiled child yearning / after capital without labour, a schemer / scheming for a perpetual tax shelter” If this anthropomorphised sable seems to be undermining Farmer’s apparent longing in other poems for an unimpeded, pre- or post-linguistic animality, it also has the final word. In the last section, the sable pulls Man back into the biological ecosystem from which he cannot be riven:

man is a biological construct,
 a random-access, data-driven,
 post-historic instrument. He thinks
 he knows what he is, sable
 know better: that shadow
 coming this way, partly falling
 across the grass, partly
 across rocks and trees,
 two bright points in the head
 opening and closing rapidly,
 darkness inside that globe,
 darkness and longing

The closing lines are an appeal to man to abandon his “data-driven” mentation, become embodied in nature; the final “we” might be Man and Sable together, eating together:

Leave him behind. Stretch legs.
The grass is waiting.
Light shucks itself in great clumps
on the ground. We take it in.

(9)

This is the imaginal equivalent of assuming the wolf’s grey mantle, or of becoming Bushman – a physical impossibility, maybe, yet an imaginary foray that must be made. To imagine so fully is inevitably to respect. Farmer makes this effort again in “Wild Dog Speaks to Man,” a poem which trenchantly castigates humanity for its impositions, both material and verbal:

Czar, who gave you authority
over me?
Your title is ancestral,
running all the way
to Sumeria, and yet
I do not want your writ
to run through me.
I do not want to be owned
by the fine print,
magnified, compulsive,
in the valley of the shadow.

Yet (rather like Douglas Livingstone’s elephant who must in the end turn grumpily to Man) it is humanity who can save – and save through words:

You must bear witness
that I drink from poisoned wells,
that I pick up blankets drenched
in cholera,
that I sign treaties
all the time.

In paralleling humans’ destruction of other humans with its own destruction, this vociferous Wild Dog – spokesdog for both wild animals and indigenous peoples – proposes that there is sufficient common ground for a more far-reaching ‘commensality.’ That common ground, as we have already seen in

several poems, lies in the sane, normal, even banal activities of foraging and breeding – in short, in being left alone:

I don't need you. The blood stock
 is sufficient to raise more
 dependants, slaves, citizens,
 without a Controller of Customs
 managing me
 from his longhouse in the grass.
 I ask you to pick up
 someone else's babies
 and set them on thrones.
 My place is here,
 paws of light flicking through
 the grasslands,
 blades of light licking
 the frozen heads of my enemies.

(40)

This is full of resonant ironies. The Wild Dog asserts its self-sufficiency – the capacity of the natural world to continue unmanaged by man, neither poisoned nor celebrated, merely belonging in its ecological niche. Yet in the current situation, the wild dog has become dependent on human whims; and the poem, even as it intends to breach the human-animal barrier, reiterates it. Even as the poem pretends to speak in the Wild Dog's 'voice,' the dog's own society is depicted in obviously human terminologies. The implication is that any fashion in which we speak of (and speak for) an animal society is bound to be metaphoric, at once aiming to puncture the invisible membrane between minds while inevitably reinscribing it. The poem then – to echo Farmer's own formulation, quoted earlier – does not speak the landscape of the animal mind *itself* into being, but rather is what it points to: it is the necessity for a new imagined community embodied.

Farmer makes no bones about the extreme difficulty of constructing such a community.

From the dark mouth of the earth,
 syllables of an intelligible tongue,
 they emerge, but I hardly know
 how to listen to such speech.

(“White Ants” 42)

It may not be our human form of speech, our mode of communication, yet, Farmer wants to say, even wild dogs and white ants can and do communicate

– and who is to say they do not *want* to? Who are we to assert that we need not listen, merely because we cannot understand it all? By writing out a respectful imagining of the ‘animal mind,’ whatever that might be, we are inscribing not just their, but our own “unconscious nobility,” granting them as well as ourselves the “free play” that is the essence of respect. Even as we think, and think we know what the other thinks, and so develop community, we are animal, and that has to be part of our community, too. We cannot, and do not have to, actually conflate beings – humans with wolves or elephants – much as we might desire to, even feel a need to. In a certain sense, by writing poems in the first place, Farmer is celebrating our difference, too. “Nobody loves fences as I do,” he states in the final poem of *Absence of Elephants*, partly because a fence defines and locates him in his *oikos*, but also because it shows him where to strike through: something in it convinces him that he has “a role: it is to strain at / the limits, finding / the midpoint between posts / where I can slip through” (“Fences” 46). In slipping through into the ‘other mind,’ of course the terms of our entry are largely assumption, all too often assumption laden with prejudice and irreverence. Yet, at more than one level, “We are all termites” (42). At the fenceline of that recognition, even the poet has to absent himself, and fall silent.

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