

"Staying Autistic, Staying Feral" (49-52)

by Amy Gaeta

becoming–Feral
a book of beasts

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Felis **CAT** *catus*

Staying Autistic, Staying Feral

MULTISPECIES LONGINGS

As a kid, crowded playgrounds and loud train cars gave me headaches. I would cover my ears and create stories in my head, quietly repeat favorite words, or glide my lucky ribbon over my upper lip. As an adult, I learned this is called “stimming,” a way that autistics express excessive energy and keep calm.

I can't sit still, drive, ride a bike, make small talk, or stop interrupting you. I can't not tell you that my favorite marsupial, the Virginia Opossum, is one of the most immunologically evolved species. There are over 30 known species of opossums in South America, and some haven't been spotted in over a century, well 122 years to be exact, and there's even a semi-amphibious one—as I said, I can't stop.

Human friends are rare for me. Most of my childhood and early teen years were spent in dark corners of my house reading old novels with my animal plushies. I named every single one, all 174, and organized them by color on some make-shift shelves. I spoke in code with my dogs Heidi and Skippy and identified with various creatures of Greek mythology and sci-fi tv shows. My dad would yell, “where are your friends?” Dad, they were all around me.

As a kid, I would “walk” up the stairs on all fours. Putting my hands on the step in front of me and pushing off so that my legs would swing, I'd leap onto the next step. I called it my *cat pounce*. My sister taught me human walking. Ugh. Sometimes, when I'm alone, I cat pounce up the stairs with glee and comfort.

Some neurotypical people got mad when Kathy Hoopman published *All Cats Are on the Autistic Spectrum* in 2020.¹ But, sitting here with my cat as I type this essay, I feel connected. When loud ambulances go by, they hide under the bed. Itchy fabrics make them scream. They eat the same food at the same time each

day. Just like me. Cats are sometimes called cold and unloving, akin to so-called robotic autistics. Far from mechanical, autistics feel too much of everyone and everything around us.

To survive this hyper-sensory life, cats and autistics both uniquely self-domesticate. Cats see humans as resources for security and food, and thus somewhat comply with human sociality. Autistics' version of this is called "masking," adapting to a social environment by copying other people's behaviors. Masking is painful, emotionally and mentally, as we repress our instincts, preferences, and very identities. After socializing, I put a cold towel over my face and lay in the dark until my senses stop burning.

FAILED DOMESTICATION

In comparison to neurotypical brains, autistic brains are inconsistent, even contradictory. My brain lets me win awards, organize big events, but not ride a bike or know when it's inappropriate to joke. Scientists don't really get autistic brains either; they just think they do. In both science and the media, autism has long prompted comparisons to numerous nonhuman figures—aliens, primates, forever-children, puzzles, and "poor shames." These labels are usually centered around

the image of autism in Western medicine: an irrational and innocent white non-verbal boy. This dominant image of autism suppresses the fact that autism is a spectrum; autistics express their neurodivergent differences in an endless variety of ways with some commonalities. Some autistics are not even granted visibility, especially trans autistics and autistics of color who face higher risks of exclusion and abuse.

Beyond the obvious limits of this image, it is used to position "human" as a necessary, more desirable status to hold. A recent neuroscience study² described autistics' brains as a "failed domestication of the human brain." In turn, medicine continues to strive to domesticate these young white autistic boys to save them from a nonhuman existence. As medicine has failed to explain us and "correction" therapies have failed to "fix" us, we have become neuroscience's fetish and white colonizers' greatest fear—humans that cannot be explained nor controlled. By failing to be properly domesticated, the autistic subject threatens the cherished "human" of Enlightenment science: the nondisabled autonomous rational white man.

Rather than see "failed domestication" as an insult or problem, I propose autistics claim and celebrate it: do our *cat pounces*, hide from fluorescent lights, and repeat our favorite words until our lips

get dry. Human domestication is a civilizing process per a white colonialist criterion of “good behavior” and “proper social cues” that, by design, condition people into various social categories and norms. Refusing domestication may be dangerous, but it offers alternative ways of sensing, doing, being, and being together.

“DON’T BE THAT”

This neurotypical-centric world treats us as “broken humans,” ignoring sources and sites of autistic joy, like my collection of small glass froggi figurines or memorizing the transit maps of other countries. Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is the most commonly prescribed dosage of human to “domesticate” autistics. ABA is flaunted as the best way to help autistics acclimate to normative social behaviors. Beginning as a psychological approach to domesticate farm animals, ABA aims to correct “bad behaviors” through external behavioral modification, thereby excluding any consideration of emotions, thoughts, and more.

Early ABA therapy “methods” included slapping, electric shock, and shouting at autistics for behaviors such as repeating words or movements. There are frequent tales of teachers forcing “untamed”

autistic students into dark closets or parents buying small electric shock sensors to zap their child for “misbehavior.” My old boss threatened to dock my pay if I didn’t stop wearing sunglasses indoors on the job. ABA wants to eliminate autistics, remove our comfort objects, force us to speak, punish us for meltdowns, and reward us for acting domesticated. It goes:

Don't touch that now
Don't say that to them
Don't look away from me
Don't sit that way
Don't breathe like that
Don't cry right now
Don't scream over it
Don't think so irrationally
Don't be afraid
Don't repeat that word again
Don't ...

Swaths of criticism from autistics, advocates, and researchers show that ABA can cause long-term psychological and social damage.³ In the 1970s, it was even used in gay conversion therapy, which has caused far more outrage than using ABA to convert autistics to “proper-functioning humans.” For us autistics, it’s dehumanizing to become human.

If I became a *proper* human, I'd see myself as an "owner" of my cat, who would be just some animal I claimed "mine." Perhaps because they *self-domesticate*, cats never quite fully domesticate. Cats don't serve; they adapt and create their own ways of living alongside humans, never letting humans assimilate them. I sometimes wonder if my cat loses as much of themselves as I do when I need to mask and play domesticated for the humans. If being human means your parents pay thousands to "fix" you through years of therapy, restricting your favorite things, and medical experimentation, then I'll stay feral.

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→ & p.54

Clay Pigeon Passenger Pigeons, 2016
Salvaged clay pigeons, glue
Approximately 3"x6" each

Lorna Stevens
Visual Artist
—San Francisco, California, USA

BARNACLE

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BOVINE

1. Yamini Narayanan, "Cow Protection as 'Casteised Speciesism': Sacralisation, Commercialisation and Politicisation," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 331–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1419794>.
2. A. Parikh and Clara Miller, "When Sacred Cows Become Tools of the State," *Edge Effects*, November 3, 2020, <http://edgeeffects.net/beef-testing-beef-ban/>.
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5. Parikh and Miller, "Holy Cow!"
6. See Narayanan, "Cow Protection as 'Casteised Speciesism'" for Hindutva speciesism within bovines in India.
7. Narayanan, "Cow Protection as 'Casteised Speciesism'."

CAT (STAYING AUTISTIC, STAYING FERAL)

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