

# THE FERALTERN

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It's uncomfortable to try to think through the feral from a working class perspective, for the working class is so often portrayed as being more than a bit feral. To be working class is to be of the body, to be paid for physical labor, a body moving materials through space, a body whose worth is based on its strength and endurance. In movies, working class characters are all combustible energy, cops and waitresses and factory workers who cuss and shout and don't take shit from nobody, characters who aren't particularly kinky in bed because they don't aestheticize sex—they are grunting, sweating bodies who fuck with abandon. And afterwards they say something like, "Dat wuz good."

Now that I've spent 30 years thriving among the bourgeois avant garde, I still can feel like a wolf in sheep's clothing, or worse, a wolf in a dress. Maybe what I feel is more like a sheep in a dress—so domesticated and controlled that somebody can post a YouTube video of a bunny herding me around and nobody has any problems believing it. I've developed a myth of my working class past. In this myth when I arrived in San Francisco in 1978, a working class girl with a master's degree, I lived in a sort of feral paradise free of pretense, an Eden in which I was totally comfortable with my lower class social codes, where vulgarity, loudness, sincerity, and unmediated feelings were the norm. And then once I found the experimental writing community, I was captured, as if by a cult, whooshed into a van and reprogrammed as middle class. I'm always passive in this fantasy, and the experimental writing community is made up of these theory-spouting fascists imposing the unnatural onto me. This myth is a lie for I was as much a freak in

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the working class as I am in the middle class. I hated being working class, hated being raised in an environment where I lived and breathed vulgarity from the moment I was born, where my father and brother would have farting contests at the dinner table. My childhood was brutal and racist and horribly demeaning to women, and I longed to get away from there, to find a childhood where I spent my time learning ancient Greek and training my mind, not quite getting that type of girlhood in any period or place in history was rarer than a white buffalo.

Before I got involved with the experimental queers, I was getting shit for writing explicitly about sex—getting shit in bourgeois California terms means subtle disdain and not being invited to things, reading your latest poem to your women’s writing group and having it suggested you go into therapy. It’s nothing like the shit my father gave to the neighbor lady who was watching him in a way he interpreted as disapproving, and across two lawns he shouted, “Take a picture next time you stupid bitch.”

Soon after I moved to San Francisco I read about Diane di Prima’s *Loba* poems in *Poetry Flash*. As I remember di Prima explaining it in the *Flash* so many years ago, the Loba is the spirit of the wolf goddess that, without warning, colonizes her poetry. Throughout the book, a lifetime project, di Prima draws on goddess myths from a wide variety of cultures and ages, weaving a web of avatars for this feral female spirit. Here’s an example (from “Some Shapes of the Loba”):

she is the wind you never leave behind  
black cat you killed in empty lot, she is  
smell of the summer weeds, the one who lurks  
in open childhood closets, she coughs  
in the next room, hoots, nests in your hair  
she is incubus  
face at the window  
she is  
harpy on your fire-escape, marble figurine  
carved in the mantelpiece.  
She is cornucopia  
that wails in the night, deathgrip  
you cannot cut away, black limpid eyes  
of mad girls singing carols behind mesh, she is  
the hiss in your goodbyes.  
Black grain in green jade, sound  
from the silent koto, she is  
tapestry burned  
in your brain, the fiery cloak  
of feathers carries you  
off hills  
when you run flaming  
down  
to the black sea

The Loba is a slippery figure at once frightening and pathetic, an object both of desire and horror. I read lots of poetry back then, I was consumed with poetry, but *Loba* was more than a book of poems; I read it as a manual on how to be human—for accepting those feral parts is the only way to be truly human. I'd read all this feminist stuff, but I'd never seen the feral so validated before. The Loba became an important prototype for Mina in my first novel *The Letters of Mina Harker*, in which I create my own ravenous, fucked up goddess. Because of di Prima I dared to go beyond the mechanics of sexual writing and to whirl myself down into the primal—and this call to the primal has continued up through my cut up projects, in the original *Cunt Ups* and the new, hot-off-the-presses, *Cunt Norton*. Like di Prima, in developing Mina I buried myself in Goddess World History. These wild mythic energies validated my own cravings to be wild, uncontrollable, uncontained, to be as fucking powerful and scary as your worst nightmare, to shit on the social control that I felt coming at me from all directions.

Until I received the latest edition, which Diane sent to me, signed, via her then assistant the poet Sara Larsen, I hadn't read *Loba* for 20 years. But one image has stayed vivid with me since the late 70s (from "Three More Sketches of the Loba"):

she strides in blue jeans to the corner  
bar; she dances  
w/ the old women, the men  
light up, they order wine,  
sawdust is flying under her feet  
her sneakers, thudding soft  
her wispy hair falls sometimes  
into her face  
were it not for the ring of fur  
around her ankles  
just over her bobby socks  
there's no one wd  
ever guess her name....

That ring of fur around her ankles made me swoon. It spoke to my efforts to adapt to middle class life, my constant sense of failure, the horror of a kind of repressed judgment I could feel coming from others. The fur said to me that not only was it impossible to pass for what you aren't, there's a beauty, a power in that failure. The fur pushed my wimpiness into rage.

The Loba is acutely aware of her difference (from “Some Shapes of the Loba”):

white bitch  
at an open pit  
howling after the  
slow-moving dead  
they move  
thru the jointed door  
they spit  
white phantom beans  
on the dirty straw  
she seeks to blend  
to melt her glowing  
substance into wraith-life  
seeks to move  
smoothly enough to be invisible  
but they  
smell the elf-light of her  
hope, they elude, she is  
dirty white dog at your door

The Loba is awesome with suffering. In her bitch guise she is abject, disenfranchised, marginalized. The Loba is young and old simultaneously, ravenously sexual, with long swinging tits. Sometimes she’s a terrifying, death-hungry Kali figure. Other times, like a young superhero, she doesn’t want to own her power. She is mother and sister and murderer. Her spirit resounds in Helen of Troy, the feminist, feraltern heroine of Sara Larsen’s *Merry Hell*, an ongoing epic of the Paris Commune and the Occupy movements of today. Larsen’s Helen taps into a primal sensuality inaccessible to a Cartesian mindset:

vibrating open  
  
these Trojans and Acheans will never  
  
under stand  
  
pink undulation heart sky the gong of  
  
heart  
  
open like a heat wave

This openness is so vast and amorphous, it attains the transhuman, a sublime that offers both glory and horror:

on the beach conchshells endless strikes of light ening patrimony's digging out of  
eye

to approach fear you must go upside-down sail underside rounded earth whe re

ocean surges space

where my bureaucratic purchase of a \$4 latte drops out

i see the hemoglobin of my dead comrades soft as watermelon

i see my grandmother unseize all ropes linked

Aphrodite's seafoam wave washes up the corpse and decay

"i see the hemoglobin of my dead comrades soft as watermelon." The carnage is lovely in the brutal depths of Aphrodite/grandmother for her ceaseless flashing and pulsing eradicate the blindness that capitalism has forced upon us. The goddess opens our vision as well as our sensuality. Diane di Prima (quoting Ovid): *Her power is to open what / is shut / Shut what is open.* The patriarchy never sees her coming for the Loba's intrusions are always unexpected.

A couple of weeks ago, in San Francisco, I was walking through a side street in the Castro, staring vacantly—and then, suddenly, right beside me, shooting into focus, was this bearded homeless guy with a blanket over his shoulders, leaning on an overloaded shopping cart. He looked ancient and ragged, like someone you'd stumble upon in the woods in a fairy tale—the original brutal ones, not the cleaned up versions—he caught my eye and nodded and I nodded back, automatically, and I recognized him as a homeless guy I wrote about in *Mina*:

[T]he man who talks to his right hand outside Harvest Natural Foods *thumb pressed to ear, middle fingers clenched, pinkie angled like a mouthpiece in front of his chatting lips* as I step off the curb he grumbles "Hold on a moment," puts down his "receiver" and stares up at me, "Yes?" I shrug, "I'm s-sorry"—he rolls his eyes then leans back against his sleeping bag and continues his conversation with whomever it is at the other end of his fist—I can tell he's dishing me—he waves a cigarette in his free hand for emphasis. The following week he's writing in a composition book its cardboard cover speckled black and white like insect droppings—"Yes?"—carefully he draws each letter in blue ballpoint cramming the lines together in humps and valleys across the page, the text is a frothy mass, an undulating blue wave of signs *his perpendiculars have been shattered* some days it's not about English at all—he yells through the receiver in an unearthly tongue sputtering with fricatives—or he slouches on the concrete, silent, his eyes cast down, gently holding his hand to his cheek as if to say, "Oh my."

He used to hang out around the corner, on Market near Noe. Our nodding was like this mutual recognition—more than *yes, I've seen you before*—more of a *yes,*

*we both exist*. It felt like a blessing. With this person who had infiltrated my writing I could be seen exactly as I was, without pretense. There is no bullshit in the gaze of the Loba. “How to reach that point of tenderness,” I wrote of the encounter in my journal. “The bearded homeless guy was an invitation to the associative, the nonrational, the silver lunula I bought on Etsy gleaming in the bright, bright sun.”

#### Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented on the panel “‘Mother, all I did was want to kill, but just look at what I broke’: Fierce, Feral, & Feminine Writing,” moderated by Megan Kaminski, at the 2013 &Now Festival of New Writing: Off the Road, September 26, 2013, Boulder, CO.

Dodie Bellamy’s latest book is *Cunt Norton*, from Les Figues Press. Her chapbook *Barf Manifesto* was named best book of 2009 under 30 pages by *Time Out New York*. Other books include *the buddhist*, *Academonia*, *Pink Steam*, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, and *Cunt-Ups*, which won the 2002 Firecracker Alternative Book Award for poetry. She lives in San Francisco.