

Scapegoats and Feral Cats

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Working on the wheatbins at Mingenew, in the northern wheatbelt of Western Australia, in the early 80s, I witnessed the systematic slaughter of feral cats by high-powered guns. At an age where I'd grown out of the need to prove my passionate interaction with nature through 'the hunt', I found my sanity gradually decaying as my colleagues – aged nineteen through to their mid-twenties, spent their evenings down at the local tip, shooting feral cats and their offspring. At first I went along to be part vicariously of a social happening, an institutionalised element of a rural coming of age. But growing increasingly appalled by the slaughter, I retreated into myself and began the evolution towards a decision that would leave me vegan for life. In the red light of an 'outback' sunset, I still see D. jumping up and down on an old car bonnet, driving the cats out into the open, and 'blowing them away' with his pump-action shotgun. I see my co-sampler with his high-powered rifle, picking others off as they broke away. These people were military in their operation. It made for good stories at the pub, and was met with approval from all there. Cats were vermin and deserved shooting. Furthermore, they deserved to suffer. Half dead, swung around by their tails and flung into the rubbish piles. Kittens massacred by 12-gauge shot. Descriptions of dismemberment accompanied beers. I had to get out.

As a child I'd help set traps to catch 'the tiger', the biggest feral cat in the district. Something just too big to be left alone. A chook killer, a house-cat killer. And those native animals it preyed on. Not to mention the rabbits, which weren't such a loss and were regular gun-fodder anyway – or so we said. Seeing that creature stiff and dead with its front paw chewed off in the frozen dawn was an earlier step in my evolution towards disgust. At the same time the crops were being planted, and the kangaroos further out being shot. People were clearing bush, and the salt was rising.

Native species were vanishing rapidly – because of the cats and foxes and other introduced predators, we were told, and reasoned. To kill a cat or a fox was to save the environment. I saw a documentary recently where blokes in an outback town allowed themselves to be filmed shooting cats. The documentary maker got off on the combination of blood lust and environmentalism. Here boys could be boys and do the right thing. Gender is an interesting factor here. The documentary maker was a woman who seemed to be getting some kind of sexual thrill out of the whole thing, while retaining an ironic distance. I've seen it many times. The boys being boys and the girls getting a bit messy and having a shot. No gender revolution there though, just patriarchy giving a little taste, under 'controlled' circumstances, bonding the woman to the bloke through a blood pact in which the bloke is the lead hunter. Rather like an initiation into a fraternity, with the cat as an enemy that needs to be eradicated. A neutral focus for blood lust, or for blood and lust. Drunkenness and sex follow. In Bridgetown I once heard two German girls say how they don't have room for this in Germany anymore, but 'down here you can get blood on you and have sex without complications'. Work that one out. It's a horror film.

The killing of feral cats is condoned by most who love nature. Leading environmentalists will turn from animal lovers to animal haters on this issue. Cats are evil. If we don't remove the feral cat from native Australian bushland, they'll say, there'll be no native species left. It doesn't belong, it has destroyed the balance. As have land clearing, the car, mining companies, other introduced species, spray, and so on. The problem is human – especially the use of European farming methods, intensive agriculture, the culture of profit. Removing the cat won't stop the disappearance of native species, it will just delay things. The cat is a scapegoat. The subtext of non-indigeneity is placed under pressure in a landscape devastated by colonisation. Selective indigeneity – remove lands from the original inhabitants, but be selective regarding which species can colonise. There's a racist subtext at work here. The cat becomes equated with unwanted migrant populations, and jokes about non-Anglo cultures eating cats abound. The cat symbolises the persistent vileness of the white Australia policy – it is the enemy of 'homogeneous' Anglo-Celtic Australia. There's more at stake here than simply ridding Australia of an unwanted killer of native species.

Some of the most vehement conversations I've had with fellow Australians have been over the feral cat 'situation'. Recently I had such a conversation with an eminent zoologist, a scientist I greatly respect, in a car driving out to Yorkrakine Rock in the central wheatbelt of Western Australia. The zoologist was talking about the crimes of the cat, and pointing out how whole populations of small native animals had been wiped out in her areas of study. These zones had been entirely changed by the presence of the cat and the fox. A whole new spatiality had to be developed to take their impact into consideration. She believed they should be ruthlessly and systematically eradicated. I can say quite honestly that her angle was a genuine one. There was no subtext at work that I could detect, just a genuine concern for the wellbeing of increasingly rare and

endangered native species. In the same conversation she lamented that in her early writings she had not been more sensitive to the needs and concerns of Aborigines, that their environments had been destroyed in the same way – both by ‘settlers’ and by the animals they introduced. She created a moral and ethical connection. I pointed out the removing the cat did not correct the crimes of the state, and that the crimes would persist. The removal of cats is not land rights. But her point was a sincere one. She asked my opinion.

The feral cat, I said, is a scapegoat. It has been used to carry the sins of the invaders. In a sense, it’s a weapon in the transformation of a space into something suitable for occupation. It has been used to erase identity. That’s on the philosophical level. In reality it symbolises the inability of the invader to control his/her environment, to consolidate the conquest effectively. Out of control, it shows the destruction such ‘settlement’ has brought to the land. It is a symbol of failure. To appease the conscience, this stain on the hand must be removed – but no amount of ‘out, out’ will eradicate the crime because the destruction is all around us. And when that spot is gone the other spots will shine all the more obviously. The road at this point has been widened. Genetically modified crops are being tested. The delicate native ecosystem is being undermined in yet more deceptive ways.

As a vegan I don’t believe in the killing or use of any animals. Obviously, if my child were at risk I would defend it, so there are extreme circumstances where I could see myself potentially ‘hurting’ something. But I avoid placing those I love in such situations. I feel we should behave responsibly in nature. I would not shoot a cat these days, and haven’t since my teenage years when, quite frankly, I didn’t know better and had read *Lord of the Flies* too many times and watched too many war films. I would not poison a cat. I don’t condone others doing it. Why? The death of any creature is equivalent to the death of another. A life for a life doesn’t add up for me. And fundamentally, because it doesn’t stop the problem. Returning land to bushland, cessation of the farming of hooved animals which chop and destroy the topsoil, the end to chemical abuse, the abandonment of genetic modification, the winding down of polluting industries – these are all part of what’s necessary. Do those things and get back to me. Otherwise, it’s not even worth broaching as a subject. It’s just not enough in itself. It is an excuse.

And so my argument went. My zoologist friend thought this over-the-top, illogical, impractical, and unsustainable. I pointed out that my rhetoric was intended to highlight inconsistencies in the anti-cat position. Of course it is deplorable to see native species demolished, to let the cat roam and destroy, but let’s look at the cause as well as the effect. The imbalance is created in a variety of ways, not just one. We agreed to differ and went on to talk about saving sections of the forest by buying up those small bits still in private hands and setting them aside for posterity – a life’s savings, spent saving a few hectares. A start. I admire her efforts greatly.

The story doesn’t finish there though. There’s a sting in this tale of feral cats.

I haven't been able to speak openly about this till now, for reasons that will become clear. When we arrived at a farm belonging to the zoologist's brother, we broke off in various directions and explored the area surrounding the house and sheds. I went straight for the rubbish tip, with its old sunshine harvesters and corrupted disk ploughs. These are the new wildlife zones – among the middens the spiders and snakes and insects create new territories. Then I heard the sound of feral kittens – suddenly, the spitting and hissing I know so well from childhood out on my uncle's farm, the sound coming from deep under the tank-stand, or in the old shed. Careful not to draw the attention of the others, I traced the sound to a large eucalypt hollowed at the base. Two kittens – scrawny, crazy-haired, were fighting. I crouched. In the half-light I could see the litter. They quietened down. The eyes shone. I moved away. I mentioned it to a fellow poet who'd accompanied us, knowing I could trust him not to mention it. 'If they find out, these kittens will be killed.' Driving home, I wanted to mention the beauty of these animals, of the situation – of the spatiality and environment of the rubbish heap – but kept quiet. The zoologist would have felt an obligation to the native wildlife to contact her brother. He would have found them in minutes – farmers know about things like this! So I avoided the scenario, the battle of consciences. I even avoided finishing a poem about it later in case the cats were still there. Months have passed and the kittens will have developed into fully-grown 'killing machines'. They are relatively safe now.

I pray for the native animals. I am on their side as well. But this is the order of things there now, and these cats have probably had a presence for dozens and dozens of generations. They are almost part of the place. Subtexts here too. That doesn't mean the territory shouldn't be reclaimed. But to kill the cats and leave the farm would be hypocritical – one brings the other. They are part of the same destructive machine. We should think about what it is we are worried about. What it is we have unleashed.

One of the most distressing aspects of the feral cat situation is the vanity of domestic cat owners. The desire to fetishise their animals, to own a pet as part of their home entertainment system. Cats are abandoned regularly, and it's not unusual for the very people who spend their time shooting cats to keep a pet cat at home. Such hypocrisy speaks for itself. A bell on the collar of a pet cat can save many native birds in the back garden. People keeping cats on the outskirts of the city, where the cats make regular forays into the fragments of remaining bushland, compound the problem. There's a lot to be said for common sense in this. The nature of the cat is not a sin in itself. Its very efficiency at hunting is its downfall. I find it disturbing to see so-called nature shows showing the big cats – the lion, tiger, leopard, panther, puma, lynx and so on – hunting and predating, as no more than sideshows for people's suppressed or not-so-suppressed bloodlust. People admire the exotic killer, yet condemn the ordinary feral cat. The answer to the 'problem' is not as simple as 'eradication'. For something closer to the truth we should look much closer to home – that is, within ourselves.