

Thinking Wildly with Chihuahuas

ABSTRACT

In *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), Jack Halberstam claims that in the post-natural zombie economy, the pet, as opposed to cattle, for example, occupies a high position in the hierarchy of liveliness. Since the pet is also somatically present in human homes and heavily emotionally invested in by humans, it appears to be potentially productive to focus on this category in a discussion about intimacy and sexuality between human and non-human bodies. The topic is addressed with reference to depictions of eroticized women–dog relationships in Swedish cultural representations from the late nineteenth century onwards, primarily in literature but also with some examples from film and art. Against the historical background of legislation concerning ‘unnatural fornication’, gay rights, and animal rights, the dog–woman relationship comes across as a trope which to a large extent corresponds to the concept of “wildness” presented by Halberstam in *Wild Things* but with some important differences. These observations suggest that it makes sense to refrain from valuing specific relationships and species and, rather than working with pre-set categories of the domesticated, the tame, and the wild, we should acknowledge their varying potential at different times and in different places to provide insights about the relationship between the human, the non-human, sex, and death.

Keywords: Pets, bestiality, dogs, Swedish literature

THESE ARE MY chihuahuas.

They are called Bosse and Phoebe and they are old and toothless and they bark a lot. I organize my life around them and their needs, which means four walks per day, frequent cuddling, and, over time, increasing numbers of expensive visits to the vet.

In return I expect obedience, affection, and com-



Bild av författaren.

radeship. In other words, we are totally stuck in the zombified, mutually disciplining, and co-dependent relationship that Jack Halberstam identifies as the very core of pet-keeping in *Wild Things* (2020, 119, 149–155).

Halberstam is merciless in their criticism of the uselessness and stupidity of both pets and owners. The pet, they claim, holds in place “the inertia of pet owning and the zombified relations between animals and humans”, and in a sense, “all pets are dead pets – ex-animals, prosthetic extensions of the human who owns them, stuffed toys wedged up against stuffed humans” (2020, 116). Simultaneously, Halberstam admits that in the post-natural zombie economy there is a difference between pets, who occupy a high position in the hierarchy of liveliness, and cattle, for example, which are referred to as “living dead” (2020, 119). Thus, not all domesticated animals are zombified in the same way, so the relationship between animals and the term “wildness” – which is central in Halberstam’s establishment of an “epistemology of the ferox” – might differ between species. Since pets are also to a unique extent present in human homes and emotionally invested in by humans, it appears to be potentially productive to focus on this category in a discussion about the relationship between the human, the non-human, gender, sexuality, bodies, intimacy, violence and death. How would such an analysis relate to Halberstam’s lines of thought in *Wild Things*? In what follows, I

discuss this topic with reference to representations of eroticized women–dog relationships in Sweden from the late nineteenth century onwards, primarily in literature but also with some examples from film and art.

Woman–dog relationships as a metaphor for lesbianism

In Swedish author August Strindberg's novel *A Madman's Manifesto* (1887–1888), the narrative focuses on the turbulent and passionate marriage between Axel and Maria. One reason why they argue is Maria's King Charles spaniel. At one point, Axel jealously depicts how he is excluded from the female community in the kitchen, where Maria and her girlfriends lock themselves up to bathe the dog. Moreover, Axel finds it increasingly difficult to visit Maria's bedroom in the evenings because the dog is lying in the doorway, blocking his path. This problem can be seen as a premonition of how the events in the novel will develop. Increasingly, Maria engages in erotic relationships with women, and at the end of the novel she leaves Axel to live with her beloved Miss David. Strindberg uses a similar trope in the novel *Black Banners* (1904), in which Hanna Paj – who is described as a “woman-lover” – reflects over her lack of love for animals (in this case a dog) as a shortcoming in relation to other “modern” women (165).

The trope of the single woman with a dog potentially being a lesbian is also employed by other Swedish male authors at the turn of the twentieth century, for example Algot Sandberg in *Vampyrer* [Vampyres] (1918).¹ The first story in this collection features Eleonore as its main character, a single woman with a big white dog, Cléo. The lesbian theme is established as Eleonore gradually increases her control over and eventually seduces a young girl. Towards the end of the story, Cléo appears to be engaged as Eleonore's helper in a lesbian rape (62).

In these examples, there is a clear connection between non-normative sexual practices, specifically lesbianism, and the keeping of pets, specifically dogs. The historical context is that during the nineteenth century the Western habit of pet-keeping left the previously exclusive aristocratic context and, with the emergence of a wealthy urban middle class, became a public concern (Thomas 1983, 242–287). Modern pet-keeping came to

be inextricably bound to women and the feminine, and animal welfare was an intensively debated topic in the women liberation's movement which developed at the end of the nineteenth century (Donovan 1990). However, this was also the time period when a modern view of sexuality developed, during which the Christian concept of "sodomy" was gradually replaced by the medical categories "homosexual" and "heterosexual" (Foucault 1976). This process is often seen as a prerequisite for the gay liberation movement, and together with the connection to female emancipation, the pet, parallel to being conceptualized as a 'natural' part of a heterosexual nuclear family, came to be discursively connected to alternative family formations and non-normative desires (Garber 1996, 122–124).

The legislative context during this period of time is also relevant. When Sweden implemented a new penal code in 1864, bestiality was referred to in the same section as same-sex sexual acts, the punishment for it up to two years of hard labour. Out of the 1561 persons prosecuted for "unnatural fornication" between 1880 and 1950, only 14 involved women, and none of the alleged offences were bestiality. However, according to a survey conducted at the turn of the twenty-first century, rumours seem to have been circulating about women engaging in sexual behaviours with dogs (Rydström 2001, 1–9, 302–305). Even though the penal code regarding bestiality and same-sex sexual acts was abolished in 1944, the discursive connection between close dog–human relationships and lesbianism seems to have remained well into contemporary times, thus creating what Halberstam has called a "shadow formation" (2020, 15) in various cultural expressions. Indeed, similar tropes to those I found in Swedish literature at the end of the nineteenth century can be seen in other examples from Western literature later on. Strindberg's novels thus stand out as pioneering Nordic examples of Alice A. Kuzniar's assertion that "dog love and same-sex love are indeed intertwined in various twentieth-century literary works" (2008, 206).

Typically, the connection between dog love and same-sex love is established through metaphorical readings, according to which a depiction of a woman–dog relationship is understood as 'really' being about lesbianism. This would change by the end of the twentieth century,

though, when the progress of gay rights made it largely unnecessary to represent human same-sex love through a metaphor. Paradoxically, this development subjected the trope of the woman living alone with a beloved dog to even more suspicion than before. As homosexuality was “judged as the only option left to those regarded as heterosexually mal-adjusted” (Kuzniar 2008, 206–209) in twentieth-century society, what would readers make of the stories in which “writers articulated a love for their pets that exceeds their intimacy with any other human being”? (Halberstam 2020, 16) If the dog–woman trope is *not* a metaphor for closet lesbianism, how can it be understood?

In order to discuss this question, we need to consider changes in attitude and legislation regarding sexual practices in Sweden during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gradually, as a result of modernization processes, sodomy was seen as a less serious offense than previously. When the penal code regarding both bestiality and same-sex sexual acts was abolished in 1944, it marked the completion of what Rydström defined as a major shift in Swedish society: from a paradigm of rural penetrative sodomy to one of urban masturbatory homosexuality. After this, homosexuality as a medical and political category slowly stabilized, and since the late 1980s Sweden has seen a steady increase in legal rights concerning and positive attitudes towards same-sex relationships (Rydström 2002, 1–9).

The concept of bestiality took a different path and gradually disappeared from both the medical and the legislative discourses. Genital contact between a human and an animal came to be seen as a rare form of animal abuse rather than as sex, but only if it could be proved that the animal had been physically hurt (Bolliger & Goetschel 2005, 27–45). The practice itself did not seem to disappear, although its setting changed. During the course of the twentieth century, a large part of the everyday interaction between humans and animals moved from stables and barns in the countryside to urban homes, which were increasingly filled with pets (Thomas 1983, 242–287). After the 1944 abolishment of the penal code regarding bestiality, the connection between women, dogs, and non-normative sexuality that was introduced by Strindberg in

the nineteenth century is reproduced, as I will now move on to discuss, in different Swedish cultural expressions that have varying relationships to questions regarding wildness and zombification.

Pornography and sexual liberation

One of the most debated cultural representations of woman–dog sexual activity in Sweden during the latter part of the twentieth century is from 1964, when Lars Görling's (1931–1966) novel *491* (1962) was adapted to the movie screen by film director Vilgot Sjöman (1924–2006). The story centres around six juvenile delinquents who wander around the area of Stockholm that had a high crime rate at the time, Klara-kvarteren, and it features many of the things that were considered disturbing in the 1960s – theft, violence, foul language, substance abuse, sexual abuse, prostitution, rape, and homosexuality – and a scene in which a dog is encouraged or forced to rape a young woman.

The dog is owned by one of the boys and it is called Ray. The rape happens when the young prostituted girl, Steva, who is clearly on the verge of a mental breakdown, is extremely drunk and demands that all of the six boys fuck her. After they have taken off her clothes, someone makes a suggestion:

- Might as well let Ray have a go at her!
- When she [Steva] didn't react we shouted:
- Ray, come here Ray! Come on, old man! Jump on her and get yourself some ass!
- I guess he's never screwed a girl before. He doesn't know what to do. We'll have to show him first!
- We've got to get him excited! Get his prick up, come on!
- How do I do it?
- Same as always!
- Hey, he's getting a hard-on!
- Let's try it now! Turn her around and make her kneel!
- Come on Ray! Jump up here, that's it, there!
- It doesn't work, we'll have to help him put it in!

- You think that'll do it? Let me have a look!
- Hold her tight now!
- Don't have to. She's holding still alright.

His forepaws gripped around the waist while he pushed his haunches toward her and jerked back and forth quickly. His hindlegs were jerking constantly about, and the corners of his mouth were pulled back and down. I don't think it took longer than thirty seconds. (Görling 1966, 276–277)

When *491* was published and adapted to film, both Görling and Sjöman emphasized the religious symbolism in the narrative. However, the film instigated a harsh discussion about censorship and artistic freedom, and when it was finally shown in Swedish cinemas it was a cut version that did not include the rape/bestiality scene. The full version of the film was not broadcast on Swedish Television until 1979 (Lennerhed 2016).

As previous research notes, the scene with the dog in *491* is on the border between pornography and fiction (Larsson 2007, 102–103). This corresponds to the fact that the constant presence of pets in modern urban homes paired with a strong social taboo regarding the act of human–animal sex and a lack of jurisdiction concerning this act generated a large production of animal pornography from around the 1960s onwards (Grebowicz 2010). The scene in *491* seems to point to the double abuse of women and animals in this industry, since Ray is physically forced to engage sexually with the intoxicated Steva. In order to prevent the use of animals in pornography and to safeguard humans, Sweden recriminalized sex with animals in 2014, in line with many other European countries and in many places in the US (Garrard 2017, 211–212).

Görling's book is interesting because it contains one of the most elaborated representations of the sexualized dog–woman trope in Swedish literature, something that is expanded on in the film adaptation. However, it is certainly misogynistic rather than queer. During the 1960s, some female artists presented a radically different picture, though. This was the decade of the sexual liberation movement, something that

made it possible for authors like Annakarin Svedberg (1934–) to gain attention. The novel *Vingklippta* [Clipped Wings] (1962), published the same year as *491*, depicts a group of young people in Stockholm in the 1960s from the perspective of an unidentified first-person narrator who describes her bohemian life among friends and lovers (see Björklund 2014, 57–105). She has erotic relationships with both men and women, and she also engages in orgies. At one point when she is involved in a threesome at someone else's place, the household dog suddenly enters the room: "Then the dog came and nibbled and licked and wanted to join and get in between my legs, but I shouted: 'Get off dog! I have not come to the animals yet!'" (Svedberg 1962, 57).²

This utterance, although only a minor detail in this novel, implies that the next step in the sexual revolution may involve interspecies sexual engagements, in particular with dogs, who are present in the urban home. The possibility of cross-species sexual relations suggests a way out of the main character's struggle with questions about sexual identity and orientation and thus corresponds to the concept of "wildness" in that it stands apart from the tidy homo/hetero binary that has been used to explain and understand the organization of bodies since the turn of the twentieth century (Halberstam 2020, 14).

Another artistic expression from this period that it is relevant to consider in this context is Marie-Louise Ekman's large painting *Livet och döden* [Life and Death] (1971). The painting is made up of small, separate pictures that are ordered in roughly horizontal lines, which almost makes it seem like a comic strip. It tells the story of a man who is run down by a car and has to be surgically stitched to another man in order to survive. The two of them live together for some time, but when this other man dies, the only hope the first man has if he is to live is to have himself and the dead man stitched to a puppy and a monkey. When all four of them are hit by a car, only the puppy survives. He is taken care of by an elderly lady whose daughter kisses him and has penetrative sex with him. At the very end of the painting there is an image of the daughter walking the dog on a leash, and her stomach clearly shows that she is pregnant.



Del av målningen Livet och döden, Marie-Louise Ekman.

Ekman is known for often using fable-like tropes in her artistry and for addressing questions of gender equality (Hansen & Lind 2013). The fact that the man in this story is so impotent and dependent and that his traditional role in a procreational family is eventually replaced by a dog carries a feminist message, of course. However, against the historical background of discourses regarding women–dog sexual relations in Sweden, it is also apparent that the story reproduces a modern paradigm of intimacy between a woman and a dog that is made possible by the urban institution of the pet. Just as in Svedberg’s novel, this constellation appears to be a rather happy possibility – far from the shame and abuse that characterizes this trope in Görling’s novel.

Women and dogs at the turn of the twenty-first century

Although pornography and sexual liberation were two aspects of the woman/dog trope in the 1960s, it gained yet another meaning in the decades around the turn of the twenty-first century. In Elsie Johansson’s novel *Kvinnan som mötte en hund* [The Woman Who Met a Dog] (1984),³ the main character is a single, white, middle-class, middle-aged woman who has had a very inhibiting upbringing. Consequently, she has never had any emotional or physical intimate relationships. This woman does not experience love, affection, or bodily intimacy until she meets a large dog of unclear breed, Mr Mac. She thus fits neatly into the stereotype of the lonely woman who uses a pet as a replacement for a human rela-

tionship.⁴ As Marjorie Garber points out, the logic that humans living intimately with animals rather than humans can use them as substitutes can be found all the way back to the writings of Plutarch, especially in relation to women (1996, 122–125).

The main character in Johansson's story clearly fulfils this stereotype, but it contrasts strongly with the one in Pija Lindenbaum's novel *Plats* [Sit/Place] (2013).⁵ Although its main character is strikingly similar – white, middle-aged, middle-class, and female – she is different in that she already appears to have 'everything' at the beginning of the novel: a husband, a career, friends, children, and a lovely house. When she abandons all this to go and live in a rented flat with a puppy, living with the pet comes across as a better option than staying in her home with her family.

This situation, in which the female literary character chooses the dog rather than traditional family life, is different from that in Johansson's narrative, in which the main character is single. However, one similarity in the two novels is that in both of them the dog is not used as a substitute for just anything, but, more specifically, for a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a man. Thus, it takes the role of a human partner rather than a child, and thereby feeds into the fear of being replaced by a pet dog that is expressed by the male character in the Strindberg novel discussed previously. In both Johansson's and Lindenbaum's stories, some sort of sexual act takes place between the human and the dog: a massage of the genital area, oral sex, and/or intercourse.

The following excerpt describes the sexual act that takes place in Johansson's novel *The Woman Who Met a Dog*. It happens as the main character, Vera, and the dog, Mr Mac, cuddle in bed before going to sleep:

She presses him to her. She hugs him hard, she glides her lips over his ears, they are like the softest pads of the finest silk. [...] He sighs with pleasure. He is warm against her stomach through the thin nightgown. [...] Now she rocks her body sideways, her head hangs, saliva flows and fills her month and she has a tingling sensation in her teeth. Her hand

slides backwards. She feels the rougher hair on his stump of a tail, the muscles on his hind leg and the warm cavity between the belly and the thigh. On the inside the skin is hairless and very, very smooth. There are hot streams running through her groin. He spreads a little and the right hand grasps his testicles, the fingers spread, stretch and contract, the palm of the hand massages with gentle movements. Deep in her womb there is a pecking nest. A swollenness. An ache.

Then the broadaxe falls. [...]

Dear Lord in heaven! What am I up to? What am I doing? (Johansson 1984, 64–65)⁶

In *The Woman Who Met a Dog*, the sexual aspects of the dog–human relationship are introduced gradually and, I would say, to the main character’s surprise. She is increasingly overwhelmed and seduced by that which, to use Halberstam’s vocabulary, could be conceptualized as the pet’s high position in the hierarchy of liveliness in the post-natural zombie economy (2020, 119): its somatic presence, its affection, and its explicit and shameless sexuality. In Lindenbaum’s novel *Sit/Place*, on the other hand, the main character is clearly on the path to suicide, and having sex with a dog comes across as part of a project to burn all bridges and leave everything behind:

He [the dog] is breathing calmly in his place beside me under the cover.

The fur is like a radiator against my naked body.

I can feel his anticipation as I loosen the lid.

Now I spread my legs and apply the honey.

Warm breaths from his nose as he finds his way along my thighs.

His tongue softly and roughly licking my sex.

Then I turn around to stand on all fours. (Lindenbaum 2013, 87)⁷

There is a similarity here with Görling’s novel, in which the bestial rape happens towards the end of the story and thus seems to be the climax of a long path downwards for the characters involved – a sort of journey through hell. In Lindenbaum’s story, however, the sexual act with a dog

is not forced upon the main character, but is planned and initiated by the woman herself.

These examples show the consequences of the historical development which Halberstam refers to as “the transformation of animals from sexual partners to pets” (2020, 16). In a modern urban pet-related discourse, “sexual partner” and “pet” are mutually exclusive categories, and acts and desires that threaten that organization have a disruptive potential that often comes with disastrous consequences.

Dogs and the construction of the modern Western citizen

Whether or not an interspecies sexual act is unplanned, as in Johansson’s story, or planned, as in Lindenbaum’s, it is clear that engaging sexually with dogs is a risky business. In both of these narratives, there is violence and either the animal or the human dies. And in Görling’s novel, the book ends immediately after the bestial rape when one of the boys dies by suicide by jumping out of a window, and the connection to death is thus also established here. In this regard, the material that I am studying here corresponds to Halberstam’s definition of “wildness” as a close connection between sex and death (2020, 12). The historical context is interesting: in accordance with the Swedish laws of 1442, 1608, and 1735, the punishment for the crime of bestiality was often death, for both the human and the animal (Liliequist 1993, 393–394). In Görling’s, Johansson’s, and Lindenbaum’s stories, it seems as if the death penalty for human–animal sex is still being executed; Johansson’s narratives even have an explicit reference to a broad axe that falls after the scene involving interspecies intimacy. This reproduction of legislation that was valid several hundred years ago makes these narratives come across as anachronistic in one sense, like relics from the past – indeed, the ways in which the dog is used as a repository for shame are reminiscent of the arguments in Sigmund Freud’s 1929 publication *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961, 99–100, n. 1).

The history of human–animal sex in Sweden has been thoroughly investigated by Jens Rydström and Jonas Liliequist, who both claim that the typical situation in bestiality cases in pre-modern as well as mod-

ern times was a young farmhand in the countryside having sex with a cow or a heifer (Liliequist 1993, 394; Rydström 2001, 60). The literary narratives that I discuss here suggest that in modern urban society, this practice has transferred to white middle-class women having sex with pet dogs in their homes. The distinction between the two is represented in a Swedish short story published at the turn of the twenty-first century, Lars Jakobsson's "Samboskap" [Co-livestock]⁸ (2004). Here, a world is depicted in which differences between humans and animals are not recognized, not even when it comes to marriage and sex, something that has both tragic and comic effects. What is relevant in this story in relation to the discussion in this article is that the narrator is male and married to a cow. His neighbour is also male and is sexually attracted to horses. The only female literary character that appears, briefly, is the girlfriend of a dog who works as a doctor. The story is absurd, of course, but I still find it interesting in relation to the historical context sketched out above: the male humans are coupled with (female connoted) farm animals, and the female with a (male connoted) dog.

As opposed to the narratives by Johansson and Lindenbaum, Jakobsson's story seems to correspond to attempts made towards the end of the twentieth century to challenge the anthropocentric paradigm of bestiality. In the 1980s, Hani Miletski coined the terms "zoosexuality" and "zoophilia" to signify sexual orientation towards animals (Bakke 2010, 224). Although these terms flourishes in some internet communities, they never gained public, legal, or political recognition. Other challenges to the bestiality paradigm are inspired by queer theory, which in the field of human-animal studies has increasingly focused on a wider spectrum of norms regarding intimacy, cohabitation, co-living, pleasure, and emotionality (Dell'Aversano 2009; McHugh 2009; Despret 2012; Rudy 2012).

However, in Jakobsson's story, the outcome of reformulating the anthropocentric paradigm is not a happy world of species equality, but rather one in which humans feel lonely and un-fulfilled and non-human animals are mistreated and fail to live up to the expectations. In Johansson's and Lindenbaum's stories, the anthropocentric paradigm

of bestiality is unchallenged. The sexual activity is not discovered by anyone else, but that does not seem to matter – these women are beside themselves with a shame so strong it requires severe punishment and, as Amelie Björck notes, leads towards a dissolution of the self (2023, 216). There is almost a resonance with Greek tragedy here: it does not matter if no one knows about the flaws in one's moral status, because this destiny has been given by the gods and constitutes damnation in itself. Just like King Oedipus, with his particular fate, the characters in Görling's, Johansson's and Lindenbaum's stories move towards their own destruction, and the woman–dog intimacy is an important step in that process.

This development resonates with Halberstam's conceptualization of "wildness" as something that "threatens to destroy us metaphysically even before we meet our inevitable end" (2020, 12). It can also be understood alongside Monica Bakke's claim that in contemporary Western society, "[e]rotic bliss as the tabooed aspect of human-animal pleasure [...] is noncultural, unspeakable, and potentially even lethal to the anthropocentric Subject" (2009, 222). If sexual encounters between human and non-human bodies can have such a strong disruptive force, *not* having sex with animals is posited at the centre of the construction of the modern, Western, human subject.

The conditions that I have identified as structuring cultural representations of dog–woman sex after 1944 – a strong social taboo; a lack of jurisdiction; the rise of human–animal sex as a pornographic genre; relationships with dogs as women's alternative to traditional ways of living; and the increase in humans and non-humans co-living in urban homes – seem to have created a discursive void, a space of silence, in Swedish society at the turn of the twenty-first century. Men having sex with cows in the countryside before 1944 was to a certain extent a shared event, something one communicated about with other men (Liliequist 1993, 410–419; Rydström 2001, 77, 215–216). In stark contrast to this, the women in Johansson's and Lindenbaum's stories are horribly lonely regarding their experiences and never dream of telling a soul. This silence corresponds to Halberstam's definition of "wildness" as forms of desire that are not captured well in the medical, social, political, and

legislative discourses of the time (2020, 13). The eroticized pet–human relationship is indeed, as Carmen Dell Aver’Sano has claimed (2010), “the love whose name cannot be spoken” in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Pets and wildness

Let me conclude by reconnecting to the beginning of this article and relating my findings about pets in this article to Halberstam’s lines of thoughts in *Wild Things*. Wildness is defined as a close connection between sex and death, or sex as death. It is forms of desire that lie beyond the consensus terms used in contemporary society. Moreover, “the wild” stands apart from the tidy homo/hetero binary that has been used to explain and understand the organization of bodies since the turn of the twentieth century, and it is potentially destructive for the human subject (2020, 12–14).

I think I have shown that this definition fits quite neatly with the cultural representations that I discuss in this article. However, this result in itself differs from Halberstam’s lines of thought, since the pet should not, per definition, be the focus in an analysis centring on the term “wildness”. Moreover, my investigation calls for a slightly different scope of attention: for example, in relation to Halberstam’s claim that there has been a historical development of animals from sexual partners to pets (2020, 16). This divide seems to be one of degree rather than kind: the pet is a potential sexual partner, the sexual partner potentially a pet. Whenever there is any slippage between these seemingly separate categories (and there is), there are unpredictable and potentially destructive consequences. Thus, in some cases, as Björck has noted before me in another study about literature, the zombification that Halberstam ascribes to the pet–human relationship just does not seem to be there (2023, 215).

The pet thus both aligns with and differs from the concept of “wildness”, and this could be a result of the perceived high level of liveliness that Halberstam points out; it is “warm, real, and alive” (2020, 119). These results raise questions, however, about the extent to which it is constructive to differentiate between different kinds of animals in the way that Halberstam does, as, roughly speaking, wild animals, cattle,

and pets. Perhaps the degree of liveliness in each context would be a more relevant principle to navigate with? Halberstam seems to presuppose a static divide between wild animals, who are always per definition wild; cattle, who are always already dead; and pets, that are stuffed toys that humans fill with artificial life. Indeed, the different values that are accorded to different categories of animals in this reasoning are reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), where they use what they see as a dichotomy between the domesticated dog and the unruly wolf pack to make visible the difference between (boring and conventional) Freud and their own (bold and inventive) perspective (1987, 26–38).⁹

The divide between different kinds of animals that Halberstam makes is largely based on the role that certain species play within a capitalist logic. The relationship between pet and human is one of mutual disciplining and a development of co-dependency, Halberstam claims, and it is, moreover, deeply entangled with capitalism, the meat industry, and a history of slavery (2020, 119, 122). Instead, Halberstam thinks that we should focus on the wild animal which, in opposition to the pet, is “indifferent to human effort, human kindness, and human love” (2020, 148). The insight that pet-keeping is an institution permeated by asymmetrical power relations and capitalism is not a new one but, rather, one that has been recognized in the field of human–animal studies at least since the publication of Yi-Fu Tuan's *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (1984; see also Nast 2006 and Redmalm 2020). The question is to what extent the wild animal differs in this regard? Is it even possible to make clear-cut distinctions between wild, domesticated, and tamed animals today?

There are not a lot of places left in the world where animals live in the wild without any dependence on humans, and certainly none in which humans and animals can be said to be equal or exist independent of capitalist structures. A good example is found in Morten Tønnessen's discussion of what he calls the “modern fairytales of wildness” in the article “Is a Wolf Wild as Long as It Does not *Know* that It Is Being Thoroughly Managed?” (2010). The current situation of the Scandinavian wolf, Tønnessen writes, involves a strange paradox: “The future of

the wolf, a master of seclusion, apparently depends on its being managed by conservationists to an extent that makes the very notion of ‘wild wolves’ appear dubious” (1). If the wolf can only be wild as long as humans support and organize its wildness, then how wild is it? This is a relevant discussion which makes visible the complexity in the dream of “the wild”, the self-sufficient, that which is untouched by and indifferent to the human. What happens to the concept of “wildness” if there are no “wild animals” left – only zombies?

Throughout *Wild Things*, there is a tense relationship between that which is conceptualized as tamed on the one hand and wildness on the other. It runs from beginning to end and makes the pet come across as the wild animal’s “Other”: the evil twin, the shadow, the doppelganger. We long for the wild and authentic, but the dog stands in the way of the wilderness, modified, stupefied, brushed, perfumed and trained. Having developed in a co-evolutionary way with humans, it has a provocative submissiveness in its eyes that activates all our contempt for weakness and dependency. However, embracing that which is vulnerable and needy appears to be considerably more disruptive to capitalist values than the independent and self-sufficient ideal in the idea about the “wild”. Also, if the wild *is* truly wild, how can it be presumed to only appear in certain times, places and bodies?

In European and American households, pets are steadily increasing in number, and they also tend to get older. In 2021, approximately 34% of Swedish households had a pet (skk.se), and in 2022 it was clear that the numbers increased during the pandemic (tt.se). The numbers are even higher in other places in Europe and in the US, and the pet–human relationship is by far the most common, intense, long-term, personal, and intimate contact that many people in today’s society have with a non-human animal. Thus, it makes sense to refrain from valuing the pet–human relationship and to simply define pet-keeping as happening and pets as present: in the city, in human homes, in beds, and in hearts. Indeed, the subversive potential inherent in the combination of a high degree of liveliness, the somatic presence of pets in human homes, and the strong emotional connection between humans and pets can never be

fulfilled by animals far away and untouchable, existing at a safe distance and possible to project all sorts of ideas onto.

I look at Bosse and Phoebe. There is no way of knowing what are my own ideas about them, and what they “are” in themselves. The question seems irrelevant: what matters is what we become in relationship to one another. I remain humble to that which according to Halberstam’s vocabulary can be seen as their high degree of liveliness, which means that they often clearly divert from my own priorities and instead orient themselves according to the logic of another world, with other hierarchies, needs, desires, and agendas. Thus, as Rebekah Fox claims, the pet is as a kind of liminal creature with the possibility to occupy, challenge and overturn cultural categories (Fox 2006, 526–528). This is certainly true regarding gender and sexuality. “To introduce an animal to the city is to introduce perversion”, Vinciane Despret writes (2012, 211), and I think this resonates quite neatly with that which I have pointed out as the disruptive force of the pet in relation to questions regarding the domesticated and the wild, human/nonhuman intimacies, pleasure, bodies, violence and death.

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NOTES

1. This book has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine.
2. This translation is mine. Original: “Sen kom hunden och nafsade och slickade och

ville vara med och in mellan benen på mig, men jag hojtade ‘Bort hund! Jag har inte hunnit till djuren ännu!’”

3. This book has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine.
4. Another Swedish literary narrative which seems to reproduce this stereotype is Gabriella Håkansson's short story “Övergångsålder” [Age of Transition] (2003). Here, the main character is a white, middle-class, middle-aged, single woman who buys a kitten explicitly in order to have someone to live with and to grow old with. Sexual contact and death also happen in this narrative, which is discussed in detail by Lönngren (2020). This short story has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine. It is included in the collection of stories *Perversioner: 12 berättelser om avvikelser* [Perversions: 12 Stories about Aberrations].
5. This book has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine. In Swedish, the title can mean both “sit” and “place”, something that I have tried to capture in the translation “Sit/Place”.
6. This translation is mine. Original: “Hon trycker honom intill sig. Hon kramar honom hårt, hon glider med läpparna över hans öron, de är som mjukaste lappar av det finaste silke. [...] Han suckar av välbehag. Han är varm mot hennes mage genom tunna linnet. [...] Nu vaggar hon med kroppen långsamt i sidled, huvudet hänger, ögonen är slutna, saliven rinner till och fyller hennes mun och i tänderna har hon en pirrande känsla. Handen glider bakåt. Hon känner svansstumpens strävarer hår, bakbenets muskler och den varma hålan mellan buk och lår. På insidan är huden hårlös och mycket, mycket len. Det går heta strålar genom hennes ljumskar. Han breddar en aning och högerhanden sluter sig kring hans testiklar, fingrarna glesar, sträcks ut och dras ihop, handflatan masserar med varsamma rörelser. Djupt i sköten har hon ett pickande rede. En svullenhet. En värk. Då faller bilen. [...] -Herre Gud i himmelen! Vad håller jag på med? Vad är det jag gör?”
7. This translation is mine. Original:
 “Han andas lugnt på sin plats bredvid mig under täcket.
 Pälsen som ett element vid min nakna hud.
 Jag kan känna hans förväntan när jag skruvar av locket.
 Nu särar jag på benen och stryker ut honungen.
 Varma pustar från hans nos när han letar sig fram efter mina lår.
 Hans tunga som mjukt och strävt slickar mitt kön.
 Sen vänder jag mig om och ställer mig på alla fyra.”
8. This has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine. In Swedish, it consists of a wordplay between “sambo” (“co-living”) and “boskap” (“livestock”) that I have tried to capture in the translation “Co-livestock”. It is included in the collection of short stories *Berättelser om djur och andra* [Narratives about Animals and Others]. Jakobsson's story is discussed by Lönngren (2020).
9. Donna Haraway has discussed (and criticized) Deleuze and Guattari's view on

non-human animals in *When Species Meet* (2008, 27–35). She has also addressed the question about pets in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), and she is one of the scholars that Halberstam (2020) most strongly argues against, for example on pages 119 and 160.