

DARK

MATTER

OCTOBER 2016, ISSUE #4  
MAKING KIN PART I

WOMEN WITNESSING

DARK MATTER PUBLISHES WRITING  
AND VISUAL ART CREATED IN RESPONSE  
TO AN AGE OF MASSIVE SPECIES LOSS AND  
ECOLOGICAL DISASTER. IT IS A HOME FOR  
DREAMS, VISIONS, AND COMMUNICATIONS WITH  
THE NONHUMAN WORLD---ESPECIALLY THOSE  
WITH MESSAGES FOR HOW WE MIGHT BEGIN  
TO HEAL OUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE EARTH.

## DARK MATTER: WOMEN WITNESSING #4 MAKING KIN: Part I

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**Patricia Reis**

***After • Word* DINING OUT ON THE GREAT DIVIDE: Donna Haraway, Thomas Thwaites, Frans deWaal, Karen Joy Fowler, Charles Foster and Helen MacDonald.**

Like all defensive wall building, the Great Divide that separates humans from other-than-humans has been long in the making. Built over several millennia and supported by such stony stalwarts as Genesis, the Great Chain of Being, and René Descartes, the wall requires constant shoring up and anxious monitoring. With Darwin's help, parts of the wall came down. Like cows looking for better grass, no one wants to squirm under, wriggle through, or leap over the barrier more than a few errant *homo sapiens*, *sapiens* who write books.

I have recently read six books addressing the subject of humans' relationship to other-than-humans. There is a veritable flood of these books lately, each of them coming at the subject from a different perspective, each concerned, more or less, with issues of human ethics, morality, intelligence, politics, psychology, philosophy, religion and spirituality.

The authors in question are all highly educated, privileged white Western anglophones—three Brits, two Americans, and one Dutchman who lives and works in America. Each of them presses hard against the boundary that separates humans from those other creatures with whom we share the planet. Reading their works, I am reminded of the ancient story about people in the dark (in most of the stories, it is blind men) who touch an elephant to learn its nature; each puts a hand on a different part and describes it, but no one has a complete sense of the whole animal.

Individually, the books are entertaining, fascinating, quirky, sometimes funny, bleak, poignant, chock full of scientific information you would never ordinarily come across. Gathered together, they represent some new imperative, some compelling drive in the human collective that is trying to bend us toward a new consciousness. For these authors, the old religion of human domination is a crumbling wall, and each of them bulldozes a section of the Great Divide hoping to liberate us from the tyranny of our dreadful histories and practices, if not from our very selves as humans. Along with an air of urgency, there is human loneliness, outrage, alienation, grief, desire, humor, and love in these books, along with a hunger for new understanding, if not for reconstructing our human nature, our natureculture as some would say

Everyone needs to eat and food is on everyone's mind these days. Food preferences, something humans share with other-than-humans, is where things get interesting. Donna Haraway is a multispecies feminist theorist. *When Species Meet* is a wide-ranging riff on species-related topics. Like Mary Daly, Haraway wants to forge a new language for our times. Language structures how humans think and what we can think. Haraway's word for our times is not Anthropocene or Capitalcene, but Chthulucene. This epoch, Haraway explains, requires a completely different kind of thinking, new concepts and language, so we can "stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth . . . [in a way that] will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to building more livable futures." Some of the concepts Haraway plays with are: entanglement, messmates at the table, companion-species, becoming-with, co-evolving.

Haraway takes into account all the practices and perversions that occur when species meet. She does not judge anyone's food choices, but she might question a penchant for purity. She is pragmatic, generous, and profoundly inclusive. She has tasted a fresh human placenta and eaten wild boar at a recent faculty barbeque. She's omnivorous in her appetite and thinking, doesn't mind blood

sacrifice, is not cowed by sacred cows, and is a self-confessed expert on indigestion. She says, “There is no way to eat and not to kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence and transcendence or a final peace.”

Haraway’s view is cosmicpolitical, but she is not without a moral compass or deep and passionate sympathies. She is not implying that *any* way of eating and killing is fine. There are consequences, all the way up and all the way down. “Multispecies human and nonhuman ways of living and dying are at stake in practices of eating.” There is no relief, especially in our dietary practices. Indigestion is a chronic ailment all humans must bear.

Thomas Thwaites, author of *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*, is human-weary. He wants out of his *homo sapiens sapiens* life. He thinks too much, and he worries. All humans worry, he notices. “Even the Queen who is born into a life of the utmost privilege and prestige. . . . Yes, even the Queen has worries. To be human is to worry.” (And he is only in his thirties!??) Thwaites is not overly impressed by brains and is quick to point out that human brains have shrunk considerably over time. “That’s the thing about brains—without some embodiment, a connection to the real world, it doesn’t matter how capable your mind is (even if you are René Descartes).” But smart Thwaites is, and savvy, and obviously endearing. He manages to get a very prestigious artist’s grant from the Wellcome Trust in London who think his plan of becoming an elephant a “wonderfully engaging idea.” OK, he had a bit of a track record; he made a toaster from scratch, mining the iron and making the plastic himself. The toaster was later acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum. Even if it was a one-off, it was quite a success.

A toaster is one thing, but an elephant was of a different, rather larger, categorical order. Thwaites began to imagine building an elephant exo-skeleton he could inhabit while he went along eating grass. But after a trip to South Africa

where he encountered elephants in the wild, he was quickly put off by their size and their strength; he figured it would take a diesel-powered bulldozer inside the exoskeleton to even approximate the strength of an elephant. And then there were other more existential problems. Elephants mourned their dead. A friend told him what he needed was the services of a shaman who was familiar with human/animal issues.

When he tells the Scandinavian shaman he consults that he wants to become an elephant, she sets him back on his heels, or should I say hindlegs. An elephant? She says “[that is] idiotic. . . . They are completely alien to the environment you’re connected to.” You are not a bushman in Africa, she reminds him. She sizes him up, then: “Actually, for you, the Goat.” This triggers a flashback to a very early childhood memory where he tried to eat a leafy houseplant by nibbling at it with his teeth. “Annette has gotten it absolutely right,” he thinks. She also gives him an informative discourse on the history and practices of shamanism and suggests he undertake a shamanic journey. Which he does.

Thwaites is not looking to become more conscious, to think more; he wants to not think at all. He is willing to risk his brain to achieve it. As a goat, he does not need language, he can eliminate the vexations of time—past, present, future—he does not need hands with opposable thumbs, all those things that gets humans higher up the species ladder. He charms high-level experts into conspiring with him on the project; he consults a goat expert, a world-class veterinarian, a neurologist, and a builder of prostheses. He learns everything he can about *Capra aegagrus hircus*, even participating in an autopsy. For nourishment, he learns to eat grass, something the human gut cannot process. He constructs an artificial rumen he can spit into, and then later boils the grass mash down to edible sugar components. Eating grass offends no one. He is willing to re-purpose his body at great and possibly mortal risk to his present human incarnation so he can become a goat and cross the Swiss Alps with a herd.

I imagine the primatologist Frans de Waal regarding Thwaites with avuncular amusement, thinking here's a young man who *is* smart enough to know what a goat thinks by actually becoming one. de Waal would appreciate the determination and the semi-scientific pursuit of Thwaites' impossible dream, maybe even recognizing aspects of his younger self.

In *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* de Waal does not mention his personal food preferences, but he does recall some of the most egregious experiments in his field that have to do with food, or better, lack of food. Early behaviorists of the Skinner persuasion used food deprivation, claiming this was the only way to give the experimental apes "purpose in life." de Waal wryly observes, "Obviously, this has less to do with methodology and more to do with ethics." In any case, the Skinner people left when the sympathetic lab staff started feeding the animals at night.

de Waal is like your favorite uncle who shows up at Sunday dinner full of interesting stories about apes and chimps, birds and snakes, humans and others. He has spent forty some years studying apes. He considers the Great Divide to be specious because, after all, by most measures, we *are* beasts. de Waal believes that humans in any other way than language are not unique; we share many traits with animals, but unfortunately we still have a need to insist on being set apart. As an evolutionary cognitive observer, he believes human-animal difference is, as Darwin famously pointed out, one of degree, not kind.

In his professional life, de Waal has been called a lot of names: "naïve, romantic, soft, unscientific, anthropomorphic, anecdotal, or just a sloppy thinker for proposing that primates follow political strategies, reconcile after fights, empathize with others, or understand the world around them." He is no fan of human exceptionalism. Like Haraway, he is an advocate for human empathy as a way to understand other species. True empathy, he says, is not self-focused but other-oriented. "Instead of making humanity the measure of all things, we

need to evaluate other species by what *they* are.” “Animals,” deWaal says, “should be given a chance to express their natural behavior. We are developing a greater interest in their variable lifestyles. Our challenge is to think more like them, so that we open our minds to their specific circumstances and goals and observe and understand them on their own terms.”

Karen Joy Fowler’s novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* could put a twist in the lab coats of de Waal’s cognitive behavioral cohorts. Fowler embeds a great deal of factual information about chimp studies as she delves deeply into the nature of identity, family, attachment, loss, and grief on both sides of the Great Divide. What you might not guess from the title of her book, although it is ironically implied, is the explosive device at the center of her story.

Rosemary and her sister Fern have grown up as siblings from birth to age five. They are in all ways similar, except Fern happens to be a chimpanzee—the boundary between the two sisters so porous that Rosemary acts chimp-like and Fern thinks she is human. Same-same. When Fern eats the only existing photograph of Rosemary’s grandmother, Rosemary says if there had been another she would have eaten it, too. But there are differences. When Rosemary draws pictures of Fern, she chooses a burnt sienna crayon for her eyes. Fern’s drawings never get finished because she eats the crayons. And Rosemary does the very thing that identifies her as a human—non-stop talking.

During their first five years, the sisters were closely observed and documented by Rosemary’s father, an animal behaviorist. When Fern is forcibly removed from the home, it feels like ripping Velcro. Devastating for all—humans, chimps, and this reader. As one might expect, things do not go well for Fern, but Fowler also details the psychological and spiritual crises for the human family. Rosemary’s father attempts to comfort young Rosemary with a sanitized version that Fern is happy with another family, on a farm with other chimps, when in reality she has been put in a chimp “refuge” with other chimps who have not been human-raised.

Rosemary worries that Fern will have to try new foods, something she and Fern heartily dislike. When her father recites a colorful litany of exotic fruits that Fern will be enjoying in her new life, Rosemary repeatedly interrupts, “But can she still eat her favorites. . . ? Apples, bananas, candy.” Underlying the narrative are the ethics, morality, and unexpected consequences of a certain kind of scientific inquiry that involves using animals for human-centered purposes, in this particular case, human-fostered chimpanzees.

When Rosemary researches human-fostered chimps for a college project, she discovers their terrible outcomes. Rosemary also falls in love with a wild and crazy woman named Harlow, surely a cross-species type, her name an obvious nod to Harry Harlow, he of the infamous chimp-terry-cloth mother studies. With the help of Harlow and her brother, Rosemary locates Fern and makes a final visit to the place where Fern now has her existence.

Throughout her novel, Fowler asks similar questions as de Waal—do chimps have empathy, memory, develop attachments, intelligence? And if so, how are they the same or different from us? “Animals,” deWaal says, “should be given a chance to express their natural behavior. We are developing a greater interest in their variable lifestyles. Our challenge is to think more like them, so that we open our minds to their specific circumstances and goals and observe and understand them on their own terms.” Fowler’s novel gives this point emotional poignancy.

Charles Foster not only wants to think more like animals; he wants to physically enter their *umwelt*, the world as experienced by a particular creature, which is why his book is titled *Being a Beast: Adventures Across the Species Divide*. Like Thomas Thwaites, Foster is existentially perplexed. He asks himself the perennial human questions: who or what are we, and what on earth are we doing here? He hopes to find answers, not by observing animals as deWaal does, or by trying to become one, as Thwaites attempts, or having a wild animal live with

his family as in the case of Rosemary and Fern. Instead, Foster decides to live as a badger, along with his cub, his eight-year-old son Tom.

In Wales, Foster's farmer friend digs him a sett, the burrow in which badgers live, on the side of a hill and Foster and his son settle in. Their trials are many, including becoming nocturnal, eating worms, and staying very close to the ground. But there are pleasures to be had, like sleeping in the burrow in a thunderstorm, cradled in the tree roots curled up against each other along with a dislocated mouse who sleeps in the crook of his son's knee.

Foster learns a great deal about being a badger. For instance, earthworms form the major portion (85%) of a badger's diet. Worms, Foster tells us, taste of slime and the land. They are the ultimate local food. But not all earthworms are created equal. Foster has as many descriptives for worms as a wine connoisseur has for wine; depending on their *terroir*, they can taste musty, like leather and stout, like burning rubber and halitosis. He distinguishes between the taste of slime and the worm itself. Few humans can claim such advanced knowledge. Foster's list of comestibles would certainly give anyone's stomach a turn. But Foster is a manimal. Most of what finds out about badger life he likes, or learns to like.

That is not the case when he tries to be an otter. Unlike the sociable, communicative badger, they are not easy to like and Foster has nothing good to say about them. Emulating one is like being trapped in a disastrously bad marriage where the spouses are vicious and hate everything about each other. Still he tries and his efforts are, if not rewarding, revelatory. These animals are not the playful ones found in children's books; solitary, food-driven, with needle teeth, otters are known to rip the testicles off dogs and other intruders.

The title notwithstanding, being a beast is not Foster's aim. He wishes to become better at being a human, a father, a husband, a better friend, better in all his relations. He does not want his kids to live a life in air-conditioned cubicles

under fluorescent lights. He wants for them what he wants for himself, a maximally expanded sensorium. No soccer games or piano recitals for his six “cubs.” He takes them on expeditions to find otter spraint (poop) on muddy riverbanks and then encourages them to make their own. Later they go on a ‘treasure hunt’ to locate and identify the little chocolate frostee-freeze piles. In the acknowledgments, he thanks his “long-suffering wife.” Indeed.

Basically, Foster finds that humans and other creatures are always inscrutable to each other, something he experiences it as an “exhilarating inaccessibility.” He is honest about a number of things. “The universe I occupy is a creature of my head. It is wholly unique to me. The process of intimacy is the process of becoming better at inviting others in to have a look around. The sensation of loneliness is the crushing acknowledgment that however good you get at giving such invitations no one will be able to see very much at all... But we need to keep trying. If we give up with humans, we’re wretched misanthropes. If we give up with the natural world we’re wretched bypass builders, or badger baiters or self-referential urbanites.” Maybe a diet of earthworms helps one to become more philosophical.

Plunged into a state of intense mourning by the sudden death of her beloved father, Helen MacDonald begins a relationship with a fierce goshawk she names Mabel. Helen learned hawks as a child. She is familiar with their aristocratic heritage, the long heraldic tradition and history of falconry; she knows the methodology, the equipment--the leash, the glove, the creance, the hood. When MacDonald chooses Mabel for a companion, she is mostly just focused on her grief and knows she needs to engage with a creature strong and wild enough to keep her from disappearing.

Ever since she was a child, MacDonald tells us, she sought safety in not being seen. She is good at watching, not doing. She understands it isn’t a good trait for a human, but for her goshawk, Mabel, it is the greatest skill in the world. When

she begins her life with Mabel, she locks herself away, leaves her poor friends behind and becomes a hermit, living off frozen pizza. She loses herself in the hawk. "I didn't know who I was but the hawk was vital and present – more real than I was. . . . I had identified with the hawk, taken on her imagined character. I was close to breaking." MacDonald becomes increasingly more feral; Mabel inches toward less fear. MacDonald sits motionless, her mind as empty as an ancient mountain yogi, her heart full of hope. They spend days in her darkened apartment like this.

Over time, MacDonald and Mabel co-evolve; there is an understanding of the inequality in their relationship, there is a great deal of training and practice, there is anxious attachment, but there is also that most important virtue, respect.

MacDonald, like Thwaites and Foster, has existential angst, especially over absence, abandonment, death, and disappearance. She is not training Mabel because she wishes to feel special. She is not puffing her feathers with the long-standing glamour of falconry's history. She has no use for history, no use for time at all. She is training the hawk to make it all disappear. "I felt incomplete unless the hawk was sitting on my hand: we were parts of each other. Grief and the hawk had conspired to this strangeness."

Mabel does not eat worms. If she can't hunt, she will eat a dead, day-old cockerel chick, or a rabbit pulled from Helen MacDonald's fridge. Like Foster, MacDonald and Mabel live with the fact of predation. It is not for the squeamish, or the gentle bird-watcher with binoculars. "It's unusual to see animal death up close. I was responsible for these [deaths] because I had the hawk, but people who eat meat are responsible for the deaths they cause. They just don't see it."

And MacDonald has this to say about hunting with Mabel: "It didn't feel like sport. It was nothing like sport. It was an entirely natural phenomenon, only I was there. I'm probably a bit unfashionable in this regard, but I have this utopian notion that

if you have close personal contact with wild animals you experience that animal with a wonderment and you feel a responsibility and a love for it, which is what drives proper conservation."

To return to Donna Haraway: she is vigorously, humanly engaged and exhilarated by the messy entanglements that arise between species in the ordinary everyday mundane world. She never avoids conflicting opinions and greatly enjoys engaging her messmates, as she calls them. Entangled as we are in a complex web of connectivity, she recommends and embodies a general attitude of courtesy, curiosity and respect.

Haraway encourages us to pay full attention to the vicissitudes of animals' lives; she exhorts us to be grateful for the sacrifices made for the food we eat, include gratitude for the lives of lab animals who have helped in making certain diseases less lethal; keep the vivisectionists in our thoughts; be aware as well of the circumstances of feral and domesticated pets and all wild creatures. Do not back away from their suffering, but use it to inform our human choices, improve their lives and ours, minimize suffering when and how you can. Do not be overly human-cherishing.

Like a good ex-Catholic, she hands out a short list of commandments for everyone to consider before confession: 1) do not be self-certain 2) do not relegate those who eat differently to a subclass of vermin, underprivileged or unenlightened 3) insist on knowing more, including scientifically, and feeling more, including scientifically, about how to eat well—together. She knows that in order to steer clear of moral ambiguity and self-righteousness as humans, we have to cultivate and suffer permanent moral and intellectual indigestion.

Haraway's next book, appropriately entitled *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (September, 2016), grew out of the essay that inspired this issue on "Making Kin." Her work is important for all species, including ours.

Karen Joy Fowler. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014.

Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007

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Charles Foster, *Being a Beast: Adventures Across the Species Divide*. Metropolitan Books, 2016.

Helen MacDonal, *H is for Hawk*. Grove Press, 2016.

Thomas Thwaites, *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2016



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