



Finding Ferality in the Anthropocene: Marie Darrieussecq's "My Mother Told Me Monsters Do Not Exist"

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What will it take to undomesticate the world—to begin to loosen humanity's tight grasp on the planet's spaces, structures, resources, and populations? Marie Darrieussecq's short story "My Mother Told Me Monsters Do Not Exist" describes the intrusion of an unidentifiable creature into a fastidious woman's apartment home, a modest but powerful scene of undomestication. This brief tale illustrates the intertwined forces of domestication and feralization that link humans and animals and proposes interspecies companionship as a lively and productive site of ferality in the regimented unwildness of the Anthropocene.

What will it take to undomesticate the world—to begin to loosen humanity's tight grasp on the planet's spaces, structures, resources, and populations? What would a more feral world look like, and what would it entail for the human race? Modern conservation biology is engaged in projects to "re-wild" key wilderness areas through the restoration of ecosystems, including the reintroduction of species evicted or exterminated from their habitats by human encroachment. In the realm of storytelling and speculation, re-wilding has a much longer history. Fantasies of animals, monsters, aliens, and other creatures running amok prevail in science fiction, speculative fiction, and horror genres. In their various incarnations, for example, from *King Kong* (1933) to *The Birds* (1963) to *Jurassic Park* (1993), rampaging beasts lay waste to human, social, and political orders, overturning (if only temporarily) the anthropocentric hierarchy that cordons off and elevates humanity from the rest of the animal world. The popularity of the trope attests to an ambivalent mixture of horror and delight at the prospect of animals and nonhuman others breaking free of confinement and subordination, interrupting the human-dominated world with explosions of feral freedom, and forcibly reintegrating humankind back into the animal orders civilization strives to transcend.

"My mother told me monsters do not exist. Now I know they do." The epigraph to French writer Marie Darrieussecq's short story "My Mother Told Me Monsters Do Not Exist" (1999) is paraphrased from the opening lines of American science-fiction film *Alien Resurrection* (1997), a point of intertextuality that hints at the kind of ferality under scrutiny in this paper. In *Alien Resurrection* and other films in the *Alien* franchise, a human space crew is hunted by a parasitical alien organism that reproduces by implanting embryos into living human bodies; after gestation, a young alien erupts from its host's chest in a grisly and fatal birth. The world of these films is not a wild space. Most action takes place within tightly crafted structures under human, techno-scientific, or military oversight, places where "monsters" should not exist. Yet the humans are losing control, their normal tools and procedures overwhelmed by the predatory onslaught of a "monster" deemed nonexistent. It is this categorical unexpectedness, the eruption of untamed animality in spaces (and even in bodies) supposed to be securely human-dominated, that I am calling "ferality." Ferality describes animality as resistance to an anthropocentric order, a mode of being that challenges human practices of controlling and confining animals both

physically and epistemologically. It reminds humans that they too are animals, linked to a multitude of other species as predator and prey, cohabitant and competitor.

Alien Resurrection and its monster-movie kin tend to stage spectacular, large-scale battles between the human drive to domesticate the world and the ever-lurking threat of feral violence; however, in these stories, human civilization tends to emerge victorious. "My Mother Told Me Monsters Do Not Exist," from Darrieussecq's 2006 short story collection *Zoo*, takes a very different approach to representing ferality. This brief tale describes an unusual encounter. A woman is shocked to discover an unfamiliar creature inhabiting the tidy space of her urban apartment home, leaving her in a quandary: what is the thing, how should she feel about it, and what should she do with it? In contrast to the film from which it draws its title, the story stages a modest, small-scale, localized site of ferality. Bearing little resemblance to the grand visions of rampaging beasts so often proposed by the science-fiction imaginary, it recounts the simple meeting of a woman and an animal in a domestic setting. Yet despite its limited scope, this story advocates powerfully for the relations of responsibility and care that exist between humans and animals in the world as it exists today—a world in which animality still manages to persist despite all too often being tamed, exploited, and exterminated according to human need. Even the most anthropocentric of spaces contains animal life, though it is often unseen, undervalued, and repressed. In our mundane, everyday encounters with animals, Darrieussecq suggests, we might pursue a kind of "feralization" of the human and thereby re-wild ourselves in modest but significant ways.

Within the age-old processes of domestication that have made certain types of animals common in human societies as companions, workers, food, and resources, one might trace corresponding forces of feralization—that is, the animals' own effects upon their human domesticators. Domestication tends to be considered an entirely one-way process, a program that humans impose onto animals to transform them, over time, from wild beasts to helpful servants. However, this narrative of mastery occludes the ambivalence of interspecies influence, the ways in which domestication involves cooperation, compromise, and adaptation on the part of both humans and animals. Critical animal studies scholars, attentive to animal as well as human agencies, tell the story differently. Vinciane Despret writes of "anthropo-zoo-genesis" as an intimate co-evolution between humans and animals "in a relation of taming, in a relation that changes both identities" (2004, 130). This relation requires both parties to make accommodations, attuning themselves in various ways to the other's needs; in the end, they have "domesticated one another" (130). Donna Haraway conceives of domestication as "an emergent process of co-habiting, involving agencies of many sorts and stories that do not lend themselves [...] to an assured outcome for anybody" (2003, 30). Domestic animals are those who have become intimate, long-term partners with humankind, though on profoundly unequal terms and often under deplorable conditions.

By re-scripting domestication as a partnership, rather than another story of human domination, these scholars insist that animals are actors, not tools—that the world is composed not of human subjects and nonhuman objects but of what Haraway calls "companion species," a rich web of constitutive relations in which "the partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with" (2008, 17). The point of this intervention is not only to rewrite history, but also to urge a new interspecies ethics, to make existing relationships more responsible, equitable, and just—an enormous and multifaceted project. Leaving aside difficult questions about humans and the animals they eat, experiment on, or otherwise use, Darrieussecq's story addresses the relationships between humans and the animals with whom they live. In her shift from viewing her animal neighbour as an alien intruder to embracing it as a



beloved pet, Darrieussecq's narrator begins to illustrate the intertwined forces of domestication and feralization that form interspecies partnerships, as well as the ethical obligations that inhere within them.

The narrator of "My Mother Told Me" is a solitary writer who is up late working on a text in its tedious final editing stage. When she gets up to close a curtain, a mysterious shape falls unexpectedly onto the floor, tumbling into shadow. As the narrator gazes upon the dark spot on her carpet, she cannot quite grasp what she is looking at: the thing's most salient quality is indistinguishability. Trying to process the situation, the narrator generates a list of possible identities for the thing, both living and nonliving, that might explain its disconcerting presence. Her first descriptions are vague: "quelque chose," "une masse," "la forme" (144) ("something," "a mass," "the form"; my translation). As she continues to look, what she sees vacillates between animal and object: it could be "un lapin, ou une poupée de chiffons; peut-être un pigeon" ("a rabbit, or a rag doll; perhaps a pigeon"), or maybe "un gros poulet" ("a fat chicken"), "un ballon de baudruche ou un vêtement décroché d'un cintre" ("a rubber balloon or a piece of clothing fallen off the hanger") or "un corbeau" ("a crow") (144-145). A glimpse of finely chiselled feathers, a wrinkled face and bright red mouth, and a pair of shrivelled simian paws finally establish its animality inconclusively, as its motley features add up to no particular beast. What matters most to the narrator's eyes is that this thing inspires dread. Its strangeness, so out of place, constitutes an intolerable intrusion of the feral into the domestic. Its ferality stems not from any particularly wild behaviour—the thing is silent, still, nonaggressive—but from its total resistance to being understood humanly.

In her seemingly automatic and repeated attempts to identify the creature, the surprised narrator deploys a fundamental strategy of domestication: naming. In the long tradition of human-animal relationships enshrined in the book of Genesis in the Christian Bible, bestowing names upon animals is a human privilege, one of the perks of God-given "dominion" over the beasts: "Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2.18). To name is to assert knowledge, to put in place; naming, in the form of species classification, is part of the apparatus that sorts animals as distinctly other than, and inferior to, humankind. Ursula Le Guin, in her short story "She Unnames Them," imagines the decidedly feral alternate tradition that results when Eve undoes Adam's work of naming, producing a world where humans and animals intermingle without the comfortable boundaries of species classification:

They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to feel or rub or caress another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm,— that attraction was now one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food. (1987, 235)

The narrator of "My Mother Told Me" grasps for names for precisely the reason that Le Guin's Eve casts them aside: names place a barrier between the human self and the animal other. If she could name it, she feels, she could master this disarming situation. If she knew what it was, she would know where it belonged and how to deal with it properly.

Yet the thing bewilders every attempt by the narrator to fit it into a known category. It resists illumination in both a figurative and a literal sense: it cannot be understood because it cannot quite be seen or brought to light. Indeed, it seems to exceed or slip under the visual



register altogether, throwing the narrator's eyes into an anxious frenzy: "Je ne parvenais pas à fixer mon regard à la bonne distance, à décider d'une taille, d'une position, d'une couleur, comme si un quadrillage d'air, un grillage invisible, avait obligé mes yeux à une acrobatie mise au point" (144) ("I couldn't manage to fix my gaze to the right distance, to decide on a size, a position, a color, as if a grid made of air, an invisible mesh, had forced my eyes into an acrobatics of focus"). This invisibility is not only baffling but particularly feral, a sly defense against the human dependence on vision. Of course, humanity has no monopoly on vision, a sensory apparatus that occurs in diverse forms across countless species; plenty of animals, including cats, hawks, and sharks, can see more keenly and extensively than even the sharpest-eyed humans. Yet within many discourses on humanity and its abilities, vision enjoys considerable epistemological privilege; scholars point to a fundamental "ocularcentrism" of the Western philosophical tradition (see Levin 1993) that often runs side by side with anthropocentrism. Cary Wolfe, tracing the emergence of the discourse of species and its corollary, the institution of speciesism, foregrounds Freud's claim in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that the sensory shift from smell to sight helps launch humankind up and out of the realm of animality: vision is linked to uprightness, cleanliness, and contemplative distance, a transcendent sense in contrast to the primitive materiality of smell. Freud is thus characteristic of a critical genealogy in which "the figure of vision is indeed ineluctably tied to the specifically human" (Wolfe 2003, 2-3).

Within this paradigm, visibility is equated to presence, illumination to the acquisition of knowledge. Yet the creature stubbornly refuses to yield to enlightenment: "La chose était noire, c'est ce que je constatai d'abord: vraiment noire même en pleine lumière. Et cette couleur déjà était anormale, comme si la nuit restait accrochée là, en boule sur mon parquet" (145) ("The thing was black, that's what I noticed first of all: truly black even in full light. And that color in itself was abnormal, as if the night had gotten stuck there, in a ball on my floor"). More than a color, the blackness of the creature's body functions as an informational void, sucking up the light that might help the narrator make sense of it. This blackness is literally invisible in her scopical regime, constituting negativity rather than a presence. The narrator's own racial identity is never mentioned, but the difficulty she experiences in looking at black animality implicitly marks her as non-black; it also recalls historical overlaps between discourses of racism and speciesism and echoes the racist ideological legacy that identifies black humans as both foreign and feral. Of course, the animal on her carpet has no inherent relation to human racial categories, yet the binary of lightness and darkness that structures the narrator's visual capacities hints that the creature is a *racial*, as well as species, other. Both as an animal and as a black body, it is fundamentally out of place in the narrator's world.

For this human, naming and looking are twin tactics of domestication, methods of making the animal familiar while at the same time maintaining a comfortable distance from it. Drawing upon these methods, she identifies herself with a decidedly non-feral tradition of interspecies contact in which humans and nonhumans encounter each other not as fellow beings but hierarchically, with humans the knowing, observing subjects and animals the mute, yielding objects. In this Cartesian fantasy, the human looks without being looked at and names without being addressed in order to assimilate the animal into existing frameworks of knowledge and power. However, neither tactic is working: the thing's ferality overwhelms her attempts to make it legible. She cannot just let the creature be because it is too large and too strange to roam her apartment unnoticed. Thus her next domesticating tactic is to bypass knowledge and attempt deportation; if she cannot understand the thing, she can at least exile it from her home. The problem is her extreme reluctance to touch it, to move from the distance of vision to the proximity of physical contact.

Up until this point in her life, the narrator has shied away from touching animals. As she tries to deal with the unknown creature, she recalls three memories of human-animal contact from her past, sketching a traumatic genealogy of her present problem. The conditions of her modern urban existence normalize a general paucity of nonhuman animals; in the space of the city, unregulated interspecies encounters are few. Thus in her memories, animal touch constitutes a feral intrusion into the security and stability of her human-constructed world. Each of the three memories is described as a horrific invasion, overwhelming her senses and squelching bodily boundaries. Two of the three scenes are about insect extermination, a pointed iteration of the paradigm of "immense, systematized violence against animals" that Haraway calls "exterminism." Exterminism renders not only individuals "killable," but whole categories of animals, "because finally they are only something, not somebody" (2008, 79-80). For this narrator, and the many other humans who keep the extermination industry afloat, insects are categorically unfit for the house, "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 36); it is therefore proper and expected to kill those that find their way inside. Yet the violence that the narrator exerts against those improper animals oscillates back towards her. To her dismay, the exterminating touch proves reciprocal, leaving traces on her own body as well as on the insect corpses.

She recalls, for instance, a grotesque night when she discovers her office has been swarmed by insects from the poplar tree outside the open window: "Cette nuit-là je vidai une bombe d'insecticide jusque dans mes draps, si longuement qu'une cloque se forma au bout de mon index. Au matin les insectes jonchaient la moquette, les couvertures, le haut de l'armoire; j'en trouve encore parfois au pli de mes vêtements, et d'autres, momifiés, entre les pages des livres" (147-148) ("That night I emptied a can of insecticide all the way up to my sheets, for so long that a blister formed on the tip of my index finger. In the morning the insects blanketed the carpet, the covers, the top of the armoire; I still find them sometimes in the folds of my clothes, and others, mummified, between the pages of books"). Murderer of a thousand bugs, the narrator focuses the scene instead on her own victimhood. She does not want to kill, for killing requires panicky proximity to the hated insects. It would be better, in her account, for them never to touch her life at all, to stay outside where they belong. The exterminating touch is supposed to put an end to further contact, but it fails; not only the blister on her finger, but also the desiccated insect bodies penetrating her living space forevermore, serve as vestiges of that violent encounter, a return of the ferality she attempts to repress.

She recalls a second scene of failed extermination, when her apartment is overrun by cockroaches seeking shelter during a rainy winter. She vacates the place while it undergoes a full disinfection, but on her return, "j'avais découvert avec horreur que beaucoup d'entre eux, encore vivants, s'étaient réfugiés sous la bonde et s'échappaient sous mes pieds nus" (148) ("I discovered with horror that many of them, still living, had taken refuge under the bathtub plug and escaped under my bare feet"). The cockroaches, emblems of feral resistance to a human-dominated world, refuse to die when they are told to; they are indifferent to her revulsion against their touch. Once again, the power in the situation is all hers—she has the means to order their death—yet their presence reminds her of the precariousness of human-imposed domestic boundaries.

Killing animals, as in the practice of extermination, is supposed to prevent unwanted interspecies encounters. Yet killing is its own form of encounter. The first two memories are about killing by proxy; the third memory, nauseatingly sensual, is about killing without mediation. A kind of primal scene for her lifelong horror of interspecies contact, this childhood memory comes to her mind when she realizes she must touch the thing to get it off her carpet:



Il fallait toucher cette chose; mais pas avec mes doigts, pas avec ma peau. Je courus dans la cuisine chercher le balai. Je me rappelais, petite, dans un champ, avoir marché sur une portée de mulots. Le contact étranger, d'un coup sous la semelle, la différence avec l'herbe, avec le craquement ordinaire des brindilles—et puis comprendre, l'estomac qui se tord: ces os mous, cette chair gélatineuse écrasée sous le pied. Et se souvenir avec une acuité qui le temps n'amortit pas de cette succion molle, de cette crevaision—ce sol visqueux qui se dérobe. En m'empurant ce soir-là de mon balai, je voulais surtout m'éviter de tels retours de mémoire. (146)

(It was necessary to touch this thing; but not with my fingers, not with my skin. I ran to the kitchen to find the broom. I recalled myself, young, in a field, having stepped upon a litter of field mice. The alien contact, all of a sudden under the sole, the difference from the grass, from the ordinary cracking of twigs—and then to understand, the stomach twisting: these soft bones, this gelatinous flesh crushed beneath the foot. And to remember, with an acuity that time had not amortized, this soft sucking, this puncturing—this viscous soil giving way. Grabbing my broom that night, I wanted most of all to avoid such recurrences of memory.)

This passage brings into sharp focus the narrator's particular horror of ferality. Her problem is not so much fear—neither field mice nor insects pose any physical danger to her—as it is a fixation on the sanctity of a distinct human-animal boundary, a gospel of putting things in their proper place. Where humans are, animals must not be. Via the horror of her three animal memories, the narrator reveals her longed-for fantasy of a clean, orderly, human-only world, where animals (if they cannot be exterminated altogether) are obliged to stay outside of human spaces, where a field of grass can be trusted to remain a pastoral footpath rather than a complex ecosystem thrumming with life. Yet the multispecies world is unpredictable: bodies emerge where they are unwanted and boundaries are frequently permeated. Darrieussecq's grotesquely descriptive language emphasizes the potential violence of feral encounters: this narrator has learned early on that contact can be devastating. Crushing the mice, she quite literally violates the limits between bodies and between species: her foot and its victims are forced into a squishy, wet, horribly intimate embrace.

The child's unwitting violence, though it seems to rush one-way from human to animal, turns back upon its source. Even this stomp from above turns out to be a reciprocal touch, a mutual catastrophe: the mice are killed, while the girl is stricken by the sensation that resides in her body and torments her for years to come. In keeping with her other memories, the trauma here revolves around the narrator's own experience of nausea, not the pain of the animals she harms. She does not say that she was sorry to destroy the mice (or the flying insects or the cockroaches). She is sorry that she had to undergo the experience of destruction and that she had to get close enough to them to destroy them. What remains implicit in her self-centered tale is a horrified recognition of death as a universal experience, the great equalizer between human and nonhuman life. In their unmediated and deadly contact, both killer and victims confront the vulnerability they share as fragile, impermanent animal bodies. The implacable biological fact of mortality constitutes, as Jacques Derrida puts it, "the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we [humans] share with animals" (2008, 28). Death, in a sense, summons humans back into the realm of the feral, transforming a person into decaying organic matter; it makes the ideological fiction of a human/animal boundary materially irrelevant. Recoiling from the dead mice and focusing on her own discomfort, the narrator misses a chance for cross-species compassion—that is, for feeling and suffering *with* her victims.



Troubled by her memories as well as her present feral encounter, the narrator sinks into a full night and day of panic, unable to eject the creature from her apartment and at a loss for how to proceed. She pokes at it with a broom, which achieves nothing. She separates herself from it with locked doors barred by heavy furniture. When she timidly re-enters her office and finds it clinging, upside down like a bat, to the curtain, she tries to dump it into a garbage bag, but it is too large. All the while, the creature puts up no resistance; it neither threatens her nor runs away. Yet of all the ways that ferality might manifest, it is this perverse stillness, this obdurate insistence on simply being there, that troubles the narrator the most: "Ce que je craignais d'instinct, ce n'était pas tant qu'elle surgisse, mais de la trouver inerte à nouveau, répugnante, en tas sous un meuble. Et ce qui me dégoûtait surtout, c'était l'idée d'une agonie, le voisinage d'une chose en train de mourir chez moi" (148-149) ("What I instinctively feared was not so much that it might suddenly appear, but that I might again find it inert, repugnant, in a heap under the furniture. And what disgusted me the most was the idea of an agony, the closeness of something dying in my house").

This declaration crystallizes not only the narrator's particular position on human-animal relationships, but a predicament more broadly applicable to the modern world. Generally speaking, for humans in urban and industrialized spaces, animals are not a threat but a nuisance. A few kinds have been assimilated into human life as pets, workers, food, and other kinds of resources; the rest, the ones that manage to live and die outside of human control, often inspire repugnance and disgust. This narrator does not fear an animal attack; rather, what she fears is *voisinage*, a word that generally means proximity, but also refers more specifically to the relationship between neighbours (*voisins*). She cannot tolerate her feral neighbours, be they bugs, mice, or this strange beast; she does not want them either living or dying near her. She would prefer to live in a thoroughly "de-wilded," human-only world, the very state mourned by many environmental and animal scholars and advocates. John Berger, for instance, describes the disappearance of animals as a characteristic loss of modernity: banished from everyday life, animals are corralled into dismal, artificial spaces like zoos where, gawk as they might, humans can never truly encounter them (1980). In modernity, as Akira Lippit puts it, animals "exist in a state of *perpetual vanishing*" (2000, 1; author's emphasis). This vanishing, in the form of mass extinction, is a critical feature of the Anthropocene, a term adopted by scholars across the disciplinary spectrum to designate a new geologic era defined by the largely devastating impact of human civilization on Earth (Oldfield et al. 2014).

Darrieussecq's narrator, it seems, is an enthusiastic citizen of the Anthropocene, not so keen on her nonhuman *voisins*. Yet *voisinage* proves to be the key to her eventual transformation from "exterminist" to willing cohabitant and companion. The particular form of her aversion to other species, moulded by a series of fearful encounters, holds the potential to grow out of its parochial speciesism into something more cosmopolitan—that is, grounded in what Laurie Shannon calls "cosmopolity," "a constitutionalist sense of legitimated capacities, authorities, and rights that set animals within the scope of justice and the span of political imagination" (2013, 3). The narrator does not enjoy hurting animals and has no active desire to exploit them; however, she simply does not know how to coexist with other species without anxiety or trauma. Much of the activism and scholarship aimed at creating a better world for animals dedicates itself to the problem of violence against animals, criticizing the many human practices and beliefs that render animals killable in order to excuse and justify their deaths on a massive scale. This narrator is certainly not pro-animal, but paradoxically, neither is she pro-violence. There remains hope, this story insists, for her to open herself to the ferality of the multi-species world.

The story's turning point arrives when, weary from the last few days of baffling terror, the narrator awakens in the middle of the night to a noise. She goes to the kitchen to find the animal perched on the sink nibbling on a heel of bread. At first, the narrator only cautiously observes the scene, maintaining her characteristic distance. The critical shift occurs with a gesture of unexpected neighbourliness: she suddenly opens the fridge, digs out a scrap of cheese, and tosses it to the creature. Watching it eat this morsel with evident delight, the narrator cannot resist offering another treat, and then another, sharing the contents of her fridge until the creature is sated. Eating, like dying, is a practice shared by living bodies. Unlike the trauma of death, the life-generating joy of eating proves to be the basis by which this narrator can finally relate to the nonhuman animal other; sharing food is the first step to forming community across difference. The animal that until that moment had repelled her is suddenly reconfigured, no longer a pest to be exterminated but a guest to be accommodated.

With this hospitable act, the narrator launches into a new phase of her troubled relationship to animals. Toward the beast that she tried first to classify, then to dispose of, she now adopts an enthusiastic practice of care. Noticing its droppings clogging her sink, she expresses no disgust, as might be expected from her former squeamishness, but decides to head to the pet shop to purchase a litter box and other supplies. In contrast to her previous anxiety to determine the creature's species, she now invokes species classifications with a knowing degree of irony: "Je dis que c'était pour un écureuil, un écureuil de belle taille, un gros écureuil, donc, d'Amazonie. Un konga, dit le vendeur. C'est ça, confirmai-je. Il me jaugea avec respect, l'air de considérer la bête" (153) ("I said that it was for a squirrel, a good-sized squirrel, a large squirrel, like, from the Amazon. A konga, the vendor said. That's it, I confirmed. He gauged me with respect, with the air of judging the beast"). The black, winged, wrinkly creature she is trying to care for bears little resemblance to a squirrel. Yet the distance between the living animal and the category "squirrel" serves to highlight the absurdity of the taxonomic system, which reduces animals to types rather than beings in and of themselves. Her story of an Amazonian squirrel is a subterfuge, a strategic negotiation of the categories humans have created to restrict and manage animal life. "Squirrel" (or "konga," a seemingly made-up species) is a way for her to get what she needs for a critter-guest who exceeds and confounds all typology.

At the story's end, the narrator declares, "je la prénommait: Clémence. C'était une fille, de toute évidence, et elle forcissait de jour en jour" (153) ("I named her: Clemence. She was a girl, to all evidence, and she grew stronger from day to day"). In several respects, this laconic final paragraph seems to indicate a revolution in the narrator's animal ethics, a renunciation of the violent tactics of domestication that characterized her past in favour of a feral future of interspecies companionship. The first striking detail is the presence of a name—not the reductive category of a species, but a singular name that sidesteps existing categories of animality. Throughout the story, this species-defying creature has only been named by its absence of a name. The narrator refers to it most often as a thing (*une chose*), a noun that designates as little specificity and as much disgust as possible. The new nomination "Clémence" signifies a specific and affectionate recognition of the individual animal—not her type, but herself, a fellow being and co-habitant. This name is also an ethical imperative to practice clemency (*clémence*) in one's relations with other beings. With the name she gives her new companion, the narrator tacitly promises to change her exterminist ways, to practice mercy toward animals and forgo her habitual violence. True clemency will, of course, take work; it will require more of her than the maintenance of this single relationship. At the same time, the narrator's growing affection for Clémence constitutes a significant first step. If she can learn to live with and even love this

strange creature, perhaps she can learn to live with and respect the feral diversity of the living world that flourishes both beyond and within human-dominated spaces.

Significant, too, is the narrator's recognition of Clémence as female. The name finally confirms what the story has hinted throughout: there is something peculiarly feminine about this beastie, and perhaps about ferality itself. From the moment the animal first appears, Darrieussecq exploits the gendering of nouns in the French language to communicate its femininity: it is *la chose*, *la forme*, *la bête*, *la bestiole* (the thing, the form, the beast, the beastie). Thus, according to the rules of grammar, the creature is an *elle*, gendered feminine, all along. Yet in a language with grammatical gender, *elle* can mean "it" (referring to an object) as well as "she" (referring to a female being). Only the final lines of the story resolve this ambiguity. The *elle* of "Elle forcissait de jour en jour" serves to personalize Clémence, declaring her a feminine being and not just an object gendered feminine.

The importance of femininity here extends beyond Clémence as a gendered individual. A given animal may be female or not, but there is something about animality, as Carol Adams and other feminist animal scholars have argued, that aligns it with femininity in the patriarchal imagination. The dizzying array of popular and discursive links between women and animals, traced in the foundational feminist-vegetarian text *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), underscore their common position as the consumable objects of mankind, facilitating multiple and related forms of exploitation such as the sexual abuse of women and the mass slaughter of food animals (Adams 1990). Derrida, in an extended meditation on the figures of the beast (in French, *la bête*, grammatically gendered feminine) and the sovereign (*le souverain*, gendered masculine) in Western philosophical and literary traditions, notes "the sexual difference marked at least by French grammar (*la... le*) which seemed by chance [...] to confirm that the beast was often the living thing to be subjected, dominated, domesticated, mastered, like, by a not insignificant analogy, the woman, the slave, or the child" (2009, 66). Recognizing this longstanding association of the feral and the feminine can serve as the basis for a productive alliance. Rather than denying their shared status as other to (and less than) the masculine human subject, women and animals might exploit it, turning their unruly ferality toward resisting the cultural norms of taming that are as patriarchal as they are anthropocentric. That strategy guides Le Guin's vision of post-Edenic re-wilding in "She Unnames Them": Eve, after unnamming all the animals, gives back her own name to Adam so she may slip anonymously into a fellowship of creatures ruled by no husband, father, or god.

The narrator of "My Mother Told Me" experiences firsthand both the positive and negative cultural associations of the feral and the feminine. As a young woman, apparently single and living alone, she is painfully aware of herself as an object of the male gaze, particularly the gaze of her neighbour, who often watches her from across the street that separates their apartment windows. The neighbour's unabashed stare is echoed later by the appraising regard of the man at the pet shop, who looks at the narrator with "l'air de considerer la bête" (153) ("the air of judging the beast"). Both men look at her not as a person but as a spectacle to be gawked at and judged. Despite her historical antipathy toward animals—indeed, her squeamishness about mice and bugs might be read as stereotypically feminine—the narrator at least partly recognizes the ways in which she, as a woman, is subject to "animalization" by the men in her life. There are moments, too, where she seems to animalize herself with the metaphors she uses to describe bodily experiences. To describe stretching after a long period hunched at her desk, she writes, "les muscles bougeaient le long de ma colonne, chauffaient sous ma peau comme des lézards" (143) ("the muscles moved along my spine, warming under my skin like lizards"). Later, to describe the pain that results from frantically pushing a heavy chest of drawers (to barricade her

door against the creature), she writes that "une serre d'aigle me poignait dans le dos, enfonçait ses griffes jusque dans mon ventre" (147) ("an eagle's talon was piercing me in the back, sinking its claws right into my stomach"). The animality of these lines might be dismissed as mere metaphor, the fanciful musings of a character who is, after all, a writer; yet for a woman so preoccupied with keeping the nonhuman world out of her home and her life, the lyrical turns of phrases that locate animals in her own body, if only rhetorically, seem to give voice to an animality of the human, the ferality that she would suppress in herself just as she would suppress it elsewhere.

At the end of the story, Clémence and the woman appear as intimate allies: two feminine beings living in close quarters, fostering each other's continued vitality. Whereas the narrator once lived in dread and panic at the thought of an animal intruder in her midst, she now thrives in the company of a creature she has adopted as a friend, one who, she notes, grows stronger every day. The terse description of their life together suggests a picture of lively feminine ferality, a complete reversal of the narrator's former disdain and disgust for animal being. Yet from another perspective, the story's ending describes no revolution, merely more of the same—that is, another dull iteration of the human domestication of the animal. In accommodating the creature, buying it food and litter, and, most especially, giving it a name, the narrator might be accused of assimilating a wild and unknown beast into the safe and familiar domain of a pet, of imposing a human agenda onto a nonhuman who might prefer to live according to its own plan. What use, after all, does Clémence have for her new name? Might she not, like the cats in Le Guin's story, already have one of "those self-given, unspoken, ineffably personal names" (234) that is beyond human comprehension? The widespread human practice of naming animal familiars speaks on the one hand to the intimacy and care involved in those relationships, but on the other hand to human hubris—the assumption that only a human can bestow a name—and to an attitude of possession—the pet "owner's" urge to name the pet because it belongs to them. Individual animal names, after all, might not be so different from species names. Both types of naming ultimately function as tools of domestication, managing and familiarizing a wild thing. One might ask, moreover, why the narrator, the one who wields the power to write the story of this encounter, names Clémence but chooses to herself remain nameless. Anonymity holds a kind of privilege; to remain anonymous is to resist being fully identified by a penetrating gaze, like the gaze of the neighbour that the narrator finds so irksome. The narrator retains this privilege for herself but withholds it from the animal. The name, from this point of view, serves as capstone for the narrator's program of laying the animal bare, identifying it, assimilating it to known categories.

Thus the beast, named and tamed, becomes a pet. Yet must a "pet" be an animal stripped of its ferality? In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write with disdain of the "Oedipal animal," the antithesis to their radical theoretical model of "becoming-animal." Their target is less the animal itself and more the human-imposed process of Oedipalization that renders feral beasts into "individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own family history, 'my' cat, 'my' dog" (1987, 240). Deleuze and Guattari privilege the wildness of animality—the swarming, snarling, inassimilable other—as a mode of extreme opposition to oppressive social orders. However, their utter dismissal of "petness," and of the people involved in pet relationships (particularly the "elderly woman who honors and cherishes" her little cat or dog (1987, 244)), has been roundly criticized by Haraway, among others. Committed to building liveable interspecies relationships on the ground, Haraway is impatient with the sublime, free-flowing abstractions of "becoming-animal," which she calls "a



symptomatic morass for how not to take earthly animals—wild or domestic—seriously [...] No reading strategies can mute the scorn for the homely and the ordinary in this book” (2008, 29).

Haraway makes her intervention into an anthropocentric world order in the space of the homely, the ordinary, and the mundane. The goal is not a sweeping vision of “becoming-animal,” but rather the development of more attentive, responsible, and ongoing relationships between humans and their fellow Earth-dwellers. Meaningful worldly change can and must be achieved through these specific, context-driven practices of interspecies work, play, nurturing, and even killing. In “My Mother Told Me,” Darrieussecq narrates one such site of change. A woman acquires a new pet and quietly, modestly, the world is changed. One human sets aside a history of violence and learns to care for another living being while one animal carves out a home within the human architecture of the city; both learn to thrive in each other’s company. This mutual thriving depends, it is true, upon a certain domestication of the animal; yet it also depends on a certain feralization of the human. In this story, the human does much more to adapt herself to the animal than vice versa. For the first time, she learns to consider an animal’s experience of being in the world. “Depuis combien de temps nichait-elle là?” she wonders at the end, “[p]eut-être y avait-elle éclos, oeuf, ver, chrysalide, engraisant, hibernant, muant, minuscule peut-être, discrète, propre?” (153) (“How long had she nested there? Could it be that she had hatched there, egg, worm, chrysalis, growing fatter, hibernating, moulting, perhaps minuscule, discreet, tidy?”). Her home, she realizes, can be a viable habitat for a strange creature; where once she opted to exterminate, she now takes steps to accommodate, outfitting her home for Clémence’s needs and reorienting her own philosophy toward interspecies companionship and mutual growth. To repeat Despret’s words, they have “domesticated one another” (2004, 130).

Without context, the epigraph to this story, “My mother told me monsters do not exist. Now I know they do,” is ambiguous: is it good or bad that monsters exist despite motherly reassurances? In *Alien Resurrection*, the film that yields the quote, the existence of monsters is a deadly disaster for humankind. Placed with Darrieussecq’s story, in contrast, the epigraph yields hope for those who long for feral encounters to disrupt the grids of a largely human-dominated world. The Anthropocene threatens us with the prospect that monsters do not exist, that animality has been classified, corralled, and tamed; those who pay attention to the beasts in their midst know better. For living with animals—be they familiar, such as dogs and cats, or monstrous and alien, such as Clémence—means opening one’s home, routines, and body to ferality, carving out space for the unexpected in the everyday patterns of life in the Anthropocene. It is undeniable that humans have in large part built this world and sculpted it to their interests; but to acknowledge that should not be to reify it. Nonhuman actors of all sorts are still our neighbours; whether friendly, hostile, or indifferent, they continue to exert their own forms of agency on the world and on us. Darrieussecq reminds readers to take note of the micro-sites of ferality that exist in even the most regimented of human spaces, to see interspecies companionship as an opportunity for re-wilding on a small scale. For humans living in the “unwildness” of the Anthropocene, such mundane yet marvellous partnerships are the chances we get to build a more hospitable world.



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