Foreword

Companion Species, Mis-recognition, and Queer Worlding

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The root meanings of ‘companion’ bring us to eat together, to breaking bread, to a classical meal *cum panis*. ‘To companion’ ties us together in eating and pleasure, in sex and camaraderie. To companion is to consort. Comrades are political companions, *copains* of the street. Companions tie knots of many kinds outside compulsory heterosexual joints and their issue. All of the orifices of materiality are open to companions. Companions are in company; they accompany each other in their finitude and thickness. But no one should forget that ‘the company’ is also a popular name for the CIA, not to mention the moniker for the key unit of capitalist economic organisation. A company is even a (low) order of angels and, of course, a military unit. So, our classical meal *cum panis* provokes salutary indigestion as well as inescapable assimilation.

‘Species’ is no less promiscuous, but in the visual more than the gustatory register. Rooted in ‘specere’, ‘to look’ and ‘to behold’, species takes us to the image impressed on a wax tablet, to the idea impressed on a receptive mind, and to the sovereign stamped on metal coins. Referring both to the relentlessly ‘specific’ or particular and to a class of individuals with the same characteristics, species contains its own opposite in the most promising – or special – way. Species means radical difference as well as logical, classificatory kind. Debates about whether species are earthly organic entities or taxonomic conveniences are co-extensive with the discourse we call ‘biology’. The ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species; all those lateral gene exchangers like bacteria have never made very good species. And yet, no species is ever One; to be a species is to be constitutively a crowd, in symbiogenetic naturecultures, with no stopping point. Living piles turtles on turtles, all the way down. Species is about the dance linking kin and kind. The dance is full of syncopation and oddly jointed moves, as well as sinuous curves – snake curves that tell their own tales.
The word ‘species’ structures conservation and environmental discourses, with their ‘endangered species’ that function simultaneously to locate value and to evoke death and extinction in ways familiar in colonial representations of the always vanishing indigene. The discursive tie between the colonised, the enslaved, the non-citizen and the animal – all reduced to type, all others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution – is at the heart of racism and, lethally, flourishes in the entrails of humanism. Woven into that tie in all the categories is ‘woman’s’ putative self-defining responsibility to ‘the species’, as this singular and typological female is reduced to her reproductive function. Gestation, where what kin and kind need is perhaps indigestion, *cum panis*. Fecund, woman lies outside the bright territory of man even as she is his conduit. That African-American men in the United States get labelled an ‘endangered species’ makes palpable the ongoing animalisation that fuels liberal and conservative racialisation alike. Species reeks of race and sex; and where and when species meet, that heritage must be untied and better knots of companion species attempted within and across differences.

Raised a Roman Catholic, I grew up knowing that the Real Presence was present under both ‘species’, the visible form of the bread and the wine. Sign and flesh, sight and food, never came apart for me again after seeing and eating that hearty meal. Secular semiotics never nourished as well or caused as much indigestion. That fact made me ready to learn that species is related to spice. A kind of atom or molecule, species is also a composition used in embalming. ‘The species’ often means the human race, unless one is attuned to science fiction, where species abound. It would be a mistake to assume much about species in advance of encounter. And any encounter worth its salt turns on responsive mis-recognition.

So, like all the important words, both ‘companion’ and ‘species’ are internally full of their multiples, even of their supposed opposites, but especially of their tripping, tropic lust for tying cat’s-cradle knots of bodies and meanings. But the terms are not just overflowing; they also link and tie. They offer attachment sites for building flourishing, finite ways of living and dying for the bumptious crowd that we terrans all are, in all our off-category kin and kind. That is why I propose the term ‘companion species’ instead of human/nonhuman or humanism and its various prefixes. Queering has the job of undoing ‘normal’ categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation. That is crucial work and play. But perhaps companion species can remind us that terran critters have never been one – or two. Tubes, membranes, orifices, organs, extensions, probes, docking sites: these are the stuff of being in material semiotic intra-action. There is no ontological starting or stopping point, neither order nor disorder, boundaries nor boundary violations. That is not a recipe...
for free-fall in abstract space, but for coming to know our obligations to each other in all their impossibility and necessity, across species and in communion. Companion species are about patterning, consequences, and the possibility of response. Living and dying on earth is tangled turtles all the way down.

I close in good company with tales of species mis-recognition and the invitation to queer, off-category, sf worlding that might better sustain terran critters’ co-flourishing. Sf is speculative fabulation, just the kind of thinking necessary to companion species. And so, I end with Ursula LeGuin’s paired stories in *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*, ‘The Wife’s Story’ and ‘Mazes’ (1988). Both stories turn on consequential and sustained mis-recognition. Both face the killing consequences of what LeGuin’s worried shewolf character in ‘The Wife’s Story’ calls ‘the man thing’s’ inability to come to grips with its all-too-normal category error, the error that denies multi-species entanglements all the way down.

In ‘The Wife’s Story’, a good husband, a good father, someone who seemed able to play and nurture, turns out to become human at the turn of the moon, dangerously and murderously human, human in the sense of not knowing its kin, human in the sense of immune from the duty to care. The lupine wife and mother smells the awful difference and knows the terrible fate in store for her canine youngsters if she does not act. She sees the betrayal in its eyes, just for a second:

That’s what I can’t forget. The look in his eyes looking at his own child … He stood up then on two legs. I saw him, I had to see him, my own dear love, turned into the hateful one … I was trembling and shaking with a growl that burst out into a crazy, awful howling. A grief howl and a terror howl and a calling howl. And the others heard it, even sleeping, and woke up … I was last, because love still bound the anger and the fear in me. I was running when I saw them pull it down. [69–71]

The asymmetrical and doubled misrecognitions and betrayals in the plot seem pretty clear to me. The one who would be normal, in a category of his own, upright and single, ended badly. Still, the righteous killing leaves a very bad taste and a very bad smell for those remaining; the pack cannot rid themselves of the taint of their necessary murder. Companion species worlds are not flourishing here; there is no saving indigestion among those who eat and are eaten together, but only an awful severing of distinct kinds.

‘Mazes’ tells the story of an off-terran critter trapped in a bizarre experimental apparatus by the alien, the one from Earth. The alien seems utterly unable to recognise the presence of the trapped one. Assuming no one is at home in the categorically Other, the alien looks only for reaction, not response. The alien is unintentionally but relentlessly cruel, seeking information and data when what
is on offer is communication and entanglement. The maze itself, which at first seemed to the trapped one to be an invitation to intelligent exchange, turns out to be another deadly one-way test. All the gorgeous mathematical functions that the trapped one performed in the futile hope that the alien could learn to read went unsolved. The entrapped one tried a ‘kind of simple version of the Ungated Affirmation, quite adequate for the reassuring, outreaching statement I wanted to make’ (63). That failed. Then the trapped one tried the Eighth Maluvian, which could ‘survive the crudest performance in the poorest maze … I myself was carried away by the power of the motions and forgot that I was a prisoner, forgot the alien eyes watching me’ (63). To no avail. Uncomprehending, the alien failed miserably, condemning the prisoner to knob-pushing and maze-running labours until the end: ‘And now I have to die. No doubt it will come in to watch me die; but it will not understand the dance I dance in dying’ (66). The risk of recognition-in-difference was refused. For the terran alien, the off-category remained illegible and companion species stayed out-of-bounds of the uniquely human.

LeGuin tells a story about her two stories that gets to the heart of the matter for companion species. She writes that readers constantly make the same category mistake, the mistake that keeps such readers firmly and normally human, outside the pile of turtles:

... what they [the two tales] have in common, it seems to me, is that they are both about betrayals. They are simple but drastic reversals of the conventional, the expected. So strong is the sway of the expected that I have learned to explain before I read to an audience that ‘The Wife’s Story’ is not about werewolves, and that ‘Mazes’ is not about rats. [61]

The direction of mis-recognition is what is at stake here. Queer re-worlding depends on reorienting the human and its posts to the never-finished meal of companion species, complete with all the acidic consequences for all the diners.

Reference


"The Wife's Story" and "Mazes"

"Mazes" is a quite old story, and "The Wife's Story" a more recent one, what they have in common, it seems to me, is that they are both betrayals. They are simple but drastic reversals of the conventional, the expected. So strong is the sway of the expected that I have learned to explain before I read them to an audience that "The Wife's Story" is not about werewolves, and that "Mazes" is not about rats. Perhaps what confuses people in 'Mazes' is that the character called 'the alien' is from what we call 'the earth,' and the other one isn't. The source of the resistance to the reversal in "The Wife's Story" may lie somewhat deeper.

Mazes

I have tried hard to use my wits and keep up my courage, but I know now that I will not be able to withstand the torture any longer. My perceptions of time are confused, but I think it has been several days since I realized I could no longer keep my emotions under aesthetic control, and now the physical breakdown is also nearly complete. I cannot accomplish any of the greater motions. I cannot speak. Breathing, in this heavy foreign air, grows more difficult. When the paralysis reaches my chest I shall die: probably tonight.

The alien's cruelty is refined, yet irrational. If it intended all along to starve me, why not simply withhold food? But instead of that it gave me plenty of food, mountains of food, all the greenbuds leaves I could possibly want. Only they were not fresh. They had been picked; they were dead; the element that makes them digestible to us was gone, and one might as well eat gravel. Yet there they were, with all the scent and shape of greenbuds, irresistible to my craving appetite. Not at first, of course. I told myself, I am not a child, to eat picked leaves! But the belly gets the better of the mind. After a while it seemed better to be chewing something anything, that might still the pain and craving in the gut. So I ate, and ate, and starved. It is a relief, now, to be so weak I cannot eat.

The same elaborately perverse cruelty marks all its behavior. And the worst thing of all is just the one I welcomed with such relief and delight at first: the maze. I was badly disoriented at first, after the trapping, being handled by a giant, being dropped into a prison; and this place around the prison is disorienting, spatially disquieting, the strange, smooth, curved wall-ceiling is of an alien substance and its lines are meaningless to me. So when I was taken up and put down, amidst all this strangeness, in a maze, a recognizable, even familiar maze, it was a moment of strength and hope after great distress. It seemed pretty clear that I had been put in the maze as a kind of test or investigation, that a first approach toward communication was being attempted. I tried to cooperate in every way. But it was not possible to believe for very long that the creature's purpose was to achieve communication.

It is intelligent, highly intelligent, that is clear from a thousand evidences. We are both intelligent creatures, we are both maze-builders: surely it would be quite easy to learn to talk together! If that were what the alien wanted. But it is not. I do not know what kind of mazes it builds for itself. The ones it made for me were instruments of torture.
The mazes were, as I said, of basically familiar types, though the walls were of that foreign material much colder and smoother than packed clay. The alien left a pile of picked leaves in one extremity of each maze, I do not know why; it may be a ritual or superstition. The first maze it put me in was babyishly short and simple. Nothing expressive or even interesting could be worked out from it. The second, however, was a kind of simple version of the Ungated Affirmation, quite adequate for the reassuring, outreaching statement I wanted to make. And the last, the long maze, with seven corridors and nineteen connections, lent itself surprisingly well to the Maluvian mode, and indeed to almost all the New Expressionist techniques. Adaptations had to be made to the alien spatial understanding, but a certain quality of creativitv arose precisely from the adaptations. I worked hard at the problem of that maze, planning all night long, re-imagining the lines and spaces, the feints and pauses, the erratic, unfamiliar, and yet beautiful course of the True Run. Next day when I was placed in the long maze and the alien began to observe, I performed the Eighth Maluvian in its entirety.

It was not a polished performance. I was nervous, and the spatio-temporal parameters were only approximate. But the Eighth Maluvian survives the crudest performance in the poorest maze. The evolutions in the ninth concatenation, where the “cloud” theme recurs so strangely transposed into the ancient spiraling motif, are indestructibly beautiful. I have seen them performed by a very old person, so old and stiff-jointed that he could only suggest the movements, hint at them, a shadow-gesture, a dim reflection of the themes, and all who watched were inexpressibly moved. There is no nobler statement of our being. Performing, I myself was carried away by the power of the motions and forgot that I was a prisoner, forgot the alien eyes watching me; I transcended the errors of the maze and my own weakness, and danced the Eighth Maluvian as I have never danced it before.

When it was done, the alien picked me up and set me down in the first maze—the short one, the maze for little children who have not yet learned how to talk.

Was the humiliation deliberate? Now that it is all past, I see that there is no way to know. But it remains very hard to ascribe its behavior to ignorance.

After all, it is not blind. It has eyes, recognizable eyes. They are enough like our eyes that it must see somewhat as we do. It has a mouth, four legs, can move bipedally, has grasping hands, etc.; for all its gigantism and strange looks, it seems less fundamentally different from us, physically, than a fish. And yet, fish school and dance, in their own stupid way, communicate! The alien has never once attempted to talk with me. It has been with me, watched me, touched me, handled me, for days: but all its motions have been purposeful, not communicative. It is evidently a solitary creature, totally self-absorbed.

This would go far to explain its cruelty.

I noticed early that from time to time it would move its curious horizontal mouth in a series of fairly delicate, repetitive gestures, a little like someone eating. At first I thought it was jeering at me; then I wondered if it was trying to urge me to eat the indigestible fodder; then I wondered if it could be communicating *labially*. It seemed a limited and unhandy language for one so well provided with hands, feet, limbs, flexible spine, and all; but that would be like the creature’s perversity, I thought. I studied its lip-motions and tried hard to imitate them. It did not respond. It stared at me briefly and then went away.

In fact, the only indubitable *response* I ever got from it was on a pitifully low level of interpersonal aesthetics. It was tormenting me with knob-pushing, as it did once a day. I had endured this grotesque routine pretty patiently...
for the first several days. If I pushed one knob I got a nasty sensation in my feet, if I pushed a second I got a nasty pellet of dried-up food, if I pushed a third I got nothing whatever. Obviously, to demonstrate my intelligence I was to push the third knob. But it appeared that my intelligence irritated my captor, because it removed the neutral knob after the second day. I could not imagine what it was trying to establish or accomplish, except the fact that I was its prisoner and a great deal smaller than it. When I tried to leave the knobs, it forced me physically to return. I must sit there pushing knobs for it, receiving punishment from one and mockery from the other. The deliberate outrageousness of the situation, the insufferable heaviness and thickness of this air, the feeling of being forever watched yet never understood, all combined to drive me into a condition for which we have no description at all. The nearest thing I can suggest is the last interlude of the Ten Gate Dream, when all the feintways are closed and the dance narrows in and in until it bursts terribly into the vertical. I cannot say what I felt, but it was a little like that. If I got my feet stung once more, or got pelted once more with a lump of rotten food, I would go vertical forever. I took the knobs off the wall (they came off with a sharp tug, like flowerbuds), laid them in the middle of the floor, and defecated on them.

The alien took me up at once and returned to my prison. It had got the message, and had acted on it. But how unbelievably primitive the message had had to be! And the next day, it put me back in the knob room, and there were the knobs as good as new, and I was to choose alternate punishments for its amusement. Until then I had told myself that the creature was alien, therefore incomprehensible and incomprehending, perhaps not intelligent in the same manner as we, and so on. But since then I have known that, though all that may remain true, it is also unmistakably and grossly cruel.

When it put me into the baby maze yesterday, I could not move. The power of speech was all but gone (I am dancing this, of course, in my mind, “the best maze is the mind,” the old proverb goes) and I simply crouched there, silent. After a while it took me out again, gently enough.

There is the ultimate perversity of its behavior: it has never once touched me cruelly.

It set me down in the prison, locked the gate, and filled up the trough with inedible food. Then it stood two-legged, looking at me for a while.

Its face is very mobile, but if it speaks with its face I cannot understand it, that is too foreign a language. And its body is always covered with bulky, binding mats, like an old widower who has taken the Vow of Silence. But I had become accustomed to its great size, and to the angular character of its limb-positions, which at first had seemed to be saying a steady stream of incoherent and mispronounced phrases, a horrible nonsense-dance like the motions of an imbecile, until I realized that they were strictly purposive movements. Now I saw something a little beyond that, in its position. There were no words, yet there was communication. I saw, as it stood watching me, a clear signification of angry sadness—as clear as the Semblant Stance. There was the same lax immobility, the bentness, the assertion of defeat. Never a word came clear, and yet it told me that it was filled with resentment, pity, impatience, and frustration. It told me it was sick of torturing me, and wanted me to help it. I am sure I understood it. I tried to answer. I tried to say, “What is it you want of me? Only tell me what it is you want.” But I was too weak to speak clearly, and it did not understand. It has never understood.

And now I have to die. No doubt it will come in to watch me die; but it will not understand the dance I dance in dying.

(1971)
The Wife's Story

HE WAS A GOOD HUSBAND, a good father. I don't understand it. I don't believe in it. I don't believe that it happened. I saw it happen but it isn't true. It can't be. He was always gentle. If you'd have seen him playing with the children, anybody who saw him with the children would have known that there wasn't any bad in him, not one mean bone. When I first met him he was still living with his mother over near Spring Lake, and I used to see them together, the mother and the sons, and think that any young fellow that was that nice with his family must be one worth knowing. Then one time when I was walking in the woods I met him by himself coming back from a hunting trip. He hadn't got any game at all, not so much as a field mouse, but he wasn't cast down about it. He was just larking along enjoying the morning air. That's one of the things I first loved about him. He didn't take things hard, he didn't grouch and whine when things didn't go his way. So we got to talking that day. And I guess things moved right along after that, because pretty soon he was over here pretty near all the time. And my sister said—see, my parents had moved out the year before and gone South, leaving us the place—my sister said, kind of teasing but serious, "Well! If he's going to be here every day and half the night, I guess there isn't room for me!" And she moved out—just down the way. We've always been real close, her and me. That's the sort of thing doesn't ever change. I couldn't ever have got through this bad time without my sis.

Well, so he came to live here. And all I can say is, it was the happy year of my life. He was just purely good to me. A hard worker and never lazy, and so big and fine-looking. Everybody looked up to him, you know, young as he was. Lodge Meeting nights, more and more often they had him to lead the singing. He had such a beautiful voice, and he'd lead off strong, and the others following and joining in, high voices and low. It brings the shivers on me now to think of it, hearing it, nights when I'd stayed home from meeting when the children was babies—the singing coming up through the trees there, and the moonlight, summer nights, the full moon shining. I'll never hear anything so beautiful. I'll never know a joy like that again.

It was the moon, that's what they say. It's the moon's fault, and the blood. It was in his father's blood. I never knew his father, and now I wonder what became of him. He was from up Whitewater way, and had no kin around here. I always thought he went back there, but now I don't know. There was some talk about him, tales, that come out after what happened to my husband. It's something runs in the blood, they say, and it may never come out, but if it does, it's the change of the moon that does it. Always it happens in the dark of the moon. When everybody's home asleep. Something comes over the one that's got the curse in his blood, they say, and he gets up because he can't sleep, and goes out into the glaring sun, and goes off all alone—drawn to find those like him. And it may be so, because my husband would do that. I'd half rouse and say, "Where you going to?" and he'd say, "Oh, hunting be back this evening," and it wasn't like him, even his voice was different. But I'd be so sleepy, and not wanting to wake the kids, and he was so good and responsible, it was no call of mine to go asking "Why?" and "Where?" and all like that.

So it happened that way maybe three times or four. He'd come back late, and worn out, and pretty near cross for one so sweet-tempered—not wanting to talk about it. I figured everybody got to bust out now and then, and nagging never
helped anything. But it did begin to worry me. No so much that he went, but that he come back so tired and strange. Even, he smelled strange. It made my hair stand up on end. I could not endure it and I said, “What is that—those smells on you? All over you!” And he said, “I don’t know,” real short, and made like he was sleeping. But he went down when he thought I wasn’t noticing, and washed and washed himself. But those smells stayed in his hair, and in our bed, for days.

And then the awful thing. I don’t find it easy to tell about this. I want to cry when I have to bring it to my mind. Our youngest, the little one, my baby, she turned from her father. Just overnight. He come in and she got scared-looking stiff, with her eyes wide, and then she begun to cry and try to hide behind me. She didn’t yet talk plain but she was saying over and over, “Make it go away! Make it go away!”

The look in his eyes, just for one moment, when he heard that. That’s what I don’t want ever to remember. That’s what I can’t forget. The look in his eyes looking at his own child.

I said to the child, “Shame on you, what’s got into you?”—scolding, but keeping her right up close to me at the same time, because I was frightened too. Frightened to shaking.

He looked away then and said something like, “Guess she just woke up dreaming,” and passed it off that way. Or tried to. And so did I. And I got real mad with my baby when she kept on acting crazy scared of her own dad. But she couldn’t help it and I couldn’t change it.

He kept away that whole day. Because he knew, I guess. It was just beginning dark of the moon.

It was hot and close inside, and dark, and we’d all been asleep some while, when something woke me up. He wasn’t there beside me. I heard a little stir in the passage, when I listened. So I got up, because I could bear it no longer. I went out into the passage, and it was light there, hard sunlight coming in from the door. And I saw him standing just outside, in the tall grass by the entrance. His head was hanging. Presently he sat down, like he felt weary, and looked down at his feet. I held still, inside, and watched—I didn’t know what for.

And I saw what he saw. I saw the changing. In his feet, it was, first. They got long, each foot got longer, stretching out, the toes stretching out and the foot getting long, and fleshy, and white. And no hair on them.

The hair begun to come away all over his body. It was like his hair fried away in the sunlight and was gone. He was white all over, then, like a worm’s skin. And he turned his face. It was changing while I looked. It got flatter and flatter, the mouth flat and wide, and the teeth grinning flat and dull, and the nose just a knob of flesh with nostril holes, and the ears gone, and the eyes gone blue—blue, with white rims around the blue—staring at me out of that flat, soft, white face.

He stood up then on two legs.

I saw him, I had to see him, my own dear love, turned into the hateful one.

I couldn’t move, but as I crouched there in the passage staring out into the day I was trembling and shaking with a growl that burst out into a crazy, awful howling. A grief howl and a terror howl and a calling howl. And the others heard it, even sleeping, and woke up.

It stared and peered, that thing my husband had turned into, and shoved its face up to the entrance of our house. I was still bound by mortal fear, but behind me the children had waked up, and the baby was whimpering. The mother anger come into me then, and I snarled and crept forward.

The man thing looked around. It had no gun, like the ones from the man places do. But it picked up a heavy
The Wife's Story

fallen tree-branch in its long white foot, and shoved the end of that down into our house, at me. I snapped the end of it in my teeth and started to force my way out, because I knew the man would kill our children if it could. But my sister was already coming. I saw her running at the man with her head low and her mane high and her eyes yellow as the winter sun. It turned on her and raised up that branch to hit her. But I come out of the doorway, mad with the mother anger, and the others all were coming answering my call, the whole pack gathering, there in that blind glare and heat of the sun at noon.

The man looked round at us and yelled out loud, and brandished the branch it held. Then it broke and ran, heading for the cleared fields and plowlands, down the mountainside. It ran, on two legs, leaping and weaving, and we followed it.

I was last, because love still bound the anger and the fear in me. I was running when I saw them pull it down. My sister's teeth were in its throat. I got there and it was dead. The others were drawing back from the kill, because of the taste of the blood, and the smell. The younger ones were cowering and some crying, and my sister rubbed her mouth against her forelegs over and over to get rid of the taste. I went up close because I thought if the thing was dead the spell, the curse must be done, and my husband could come back—alive, or even dead, if I could only see him, my true love, in his true form, beautiful. But only the dead man lay there white and bloody. We drew back and back from it, and turned and ran, back up into the hills, back to the woods of the shadows and the twilight and the blessed dark.

(1979)