

# BEING a BEAST

CHARLES FOSTER

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# Author's Note

I want to know what it is like to be a wild thing.

It may be possible to know. Neuroscience helps; so does a bit of philosophy and a lot of the poetry of John Clare. But most of all it involves inching dangerously down the evolutionary tree and into a hole in a Welsh hillside, and under the rocks in a Devon river, and learning about weightlessness, the shape of the wind, boredom, mulch in the nose and the shudder and crack of dying things.

Nature writing has generally been about humans striding colonially around, describing what they see from six feet above the ground, or about humans pretending that animals wear clothes. This book is an attempt to see the world from the height of naked Welsh badgers, London foxes, Exmoor otters, Oxford swifts and Scottish and West Country red deer; to learn what it is like to shuffle or swoop through a landscape that is mainly olfactory or auditory rather than visual. It's a sort of literary shamanism, and it has been fantastic fun.

When we walk into a wood, we share its sensory outputs (light, colour, smell, sound and so on) with all the other creatures there. But would any of them recognise our description of the wood? Every organism creates a different world in its brain. It lives in that world. We are surrounded by millions of different worlds. Exploring them is a thrilling neuroscientific and literary challenge.

There has been a good deal of neuroscientific progress: we know, or can guess intelligently from work on parallel species, what goes on in a badger's nose and the olfactory areas of its brain as the badger shuffles through the wood. But the literary adventure has barely begun. It is one thing to describe which areas of a badger's brain light up on a functional MRI scanner as it sniffs a slug. It is quite another to paint a picture of the whole wood as it appears to the badger.

Two sins have beset traditional nature writing: anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. The anthropocentrists describe the natural world as it appears to humans. Since they are writing books for humans, that's perhaps commercially shrewd. But it is rather dull. The anthropomorphists assume that animals are like humans: they dress them in actual (Beatrix Potter et al.) or metaphorical (Henry Williamson et al.) clothes and give them human sense receptors and cognition.

I have tried to avoid both of those sins, and of course I have failed.

I describe the landscape as perceived by a badger, a fox, an otter, a red deer and a common swift. I use two methods. First, I immerse myself in the relevant physiological literature and discover what is known from the laboratory about the way these animals function. Second, I immerse myself in their world. When I'm being a badger, I live in a hole and eat earthworms. When I'm being an otter, I try to catch fish with my teeth.

The challenge in relating the physiology is to avoid being boring and inaccessible. The challenge in saying what it's like to eat earthworms is to avoid being whimsically ridiculous.

Their sensory receptors give animals a hugely bigger palette of colours with which to paint the land than that possessed by any human artist. The intimacy with which animals relate to the land gives them an authority in their painting far greater than can be assumed even by a farmer whose ancestors have turned over every clod since the Neolithic.

This book is structured around the four ancient elements of the world, each of which has a representative animal: earth (badger, which tunnels into the earth, and red deer, which canters over it), fire (urban fox: bright lights), water (otter) and air (common swift: the ultimate air dweller, which sleeps on the wing, spiralling up with the thermals at night, and rarely lands). The idea is that when you get the four elements mixed up properly, something alchemical happens.

Chapter 1 is a look at the problems with my approach. It tries to deal pre-emptively with some of them. If you've got no problem, skip it and go straight down the badger sett in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 is about badgers. It is set in the Black Mountains of Wales, where I've spent many weeks, in several seasons. I've spent about six weeks underground, some of it in Wales and some elsewhere, over many years. The chapter is a collage, pieced together from all of those times. It deals with a period of a few weeks, and a subsequent return.

It's a long chapter. It introduces many themes and some further scientific ideas which are relevant to subsequent chapters – for instance, the notion of a landscape constructed from olfactory rather than visual information. Other chapters are shorter than they'd otherwise be because of the length of this one.

Chapter 3 is about otters. They're long-distance wanderers. 'Local' for them is far bigger than for the other mammals examined in this book. They undulate along the wrinkles in the land, and to know their journeys is to know how the earth has crumpled. They live immersed in dilute solutions of the world itself. But then so do we, although we don't usually think of it like that. Their and our ancestors came out of the water, and otters went back. The return wasn't complete. This makes them more accessible to me than a fish.

The chapter is set on Exmoor, where I spend much of the

year. It ranges widely, as the otters do, but is based around the East Lyn river and the Badgworthy Water, the streams that course into them from the high moor, and the north Devon coast into which the river disgorges.

Chapter 4 is a look at urban man through the nose, ears and eyes of a fox.

The chapter is set in the East End of London, where I lived for many years. During that time I prowled the streets at night in search of the fox families.

In Chapter 5 I am back on Exmoor and up in the Western Highlands of Scotland among red deer.

We see them from our cars and think that we know them better than the crawling, burrowing things. Our mythology both confirms and denies this conceit. Horned gods high-step through our subconscious. They are big and visible, but they are still gods, and they slip off if we catch their eye.

I've spent a lot of my life trying to kill deer. This chapter is another sort of hunt – an attempt to wriggle inside the head rather than within 200 yards of the heart.

Chapter 6 is about common swifts, and is set in the air between Oxford and central Africa.

Swifts are air animals like nothing else is. They are as weightless as microscopic jellyfish.

I have been obsessed with swifts since I was a young child. A nesting pair scratches three feet above my head when I'm writing in my study in Oxford. The summer screaming parties down our street are at exactly my eye level. I've followed swifts across Europe and into west Africa.

The chapter opens with a set of 'facts' which many will understandably regard as controversial and tendentious. Yes, I know that the evidence for many of these assertions is bitterly contested. But bear with me, and let's see how we go.

By setting myself the subject of swifts I was setting myself up to fail. It was rather stupid. No words can come close to

them. That's some mitigation for the approach I've taken in that chapter.

In the Epilogue I look back at my journeys through the five universes. Were they fool's errands? Was I describing anything other than the inside of my own head?

I'd hoped to write a book that had little or nothing of me in it. The hope was naive. It has turned out to be (too much) a book about my own rewilding, my own acknowledgement of my previously unrecognised wildness, and my own lament at the loss of my wildness. I'm sorry.

*Oxford, October 2015*



# Becoming a Beast

I am a human. At least in the sense that both of my parents were human.

This has certain consequences. I cannot, for instance, make children with a fox. I have to come to terms with that.

But species boundaries are, if not illusory, certainly vague and sometimes porous. Ask any evolutionary biologist or shaman.

It is a mere 30 million years – the blink of a lightly lidded eye on an earth whose life has been evolving for 3.4 thousand million years – since badgers and I shared a common ancestor. Go back just 40 million years before that, and I share my entire family album not only with badgers but with herring gulls.

All the animals in this book are pretty close family. That's the fact. If it doesn't seem like that, our feelings are biologically illiterate. They need re-education.

There are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. If you insist on seeing them as blandly historical, they are wholly incompatible with each other. In the first, man was created last. In the second, he was created first. But both tell us enlightening things about our family relations with the animals.

In the first Genesis account, man was created, along with all

the terrestrial animals, on the sixth day. That's an intimate sort of shared ancestry. We have the same birthday.

In the second Genesis account, the animals were created specifically to provide companionship for Adam. It was not good for him to be alone. But God's strategy failed: the animals didn't provide company that was quite good enough, and so Eve was created as well. Adam was happy to see her. 'At last!', he exclaims. It is an exclamation that we've all either uttered or hope one day to utter. There is a loneliness that a cat cannot assuage. But that doesn't mean that God's plan completely misfired – that animals are utterly hopeless companions. We know that's not true. The market for dog biscuits is vast.

Adam named all the mammals and the birds – so forging a connection with them which went to the root of what both they and he were. His very first words were the names.\* We are shaped by the things we say and the labels we give. So Adam was shaped by his interaction with the animals. That interaction and that shaping are simple historical facts. We've grown up as a species with animals as our nursery teachers. They taught us to walk, steadying us, hand in hoof, as we tottered. And the names – which implied control – shaped the animals too. That shaping also is an obvious and often (at least for the animals) disastrous fact. We share with the animals not only genetic ancestry and an enormous proportion of DNA, but history. We've all been to the same school. It's perhaps not surprising that we know some of the same languages.

A man who talks to his dog is acknowledging the porosity

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\* Although the first *recorded* words of Adam are in Genesis 2:23, Genesis 2:19–20 says, 'Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field ...'

of the boundary between species. He's taken the first and most important step towards becoming a shaman.

Until the very recent past, humans weren't satisfied with being Dr Dolittles. Yes, they spoke to the animals; yes, the animals spoke back. But that wasn't enough. It didn't sufficiently reflect the intimacy of the relationship. And it wasn't sufficiently useful. Sometimes the animals wouldn't give away the dangerous, valuable secrets, such as where the herd would go if the rains didn't come, or why the birds had deserted the mudflats at the north end of the lake. To get that sort of information you had to insist ecstatically on the reality of shared ancestry. You had to dance to the drum around a fire until you were so dehydrated that blood spouted out of your ruptured nasal capillaries, or stand in an icy river and chant until you could feel your soul rising like vomit into your mouth, or eat fly agaric mushrooms and watch yourself floating into the forest canopy. Then you could pass through the thin membrane that separates this world from others, and your species from other species. As you pushed through, in an epiphanic labour, the membrane enveloped you, like the amniotic sac in which you emerged from your human mother. From it you emerged as a wolf or a wildebeest.

These transformations are the subject of some of the earliest human art. In the Upper Palaeolithic, when human consciousness seems to have ignited for the first time in the neuronal brushwood left by evolution, men crept into the cold wombs of caves and drew on the walls pictures of therianthropes – animal-human hybrids: men with the heads and hoofs of beasts; beasts with the hands and spears of men.

Religion remained a therianthropic business even in the urbanised, systematised schemes of Egypt and Greece. The Greek gods were forever transmuting themselves into animals to spy on the mortals; Egyptian religious art is a collage of human and animal body parts. And in Hinduism, of course,

the tradition continues. An icon of the elephant-headed god Ganesha is looking at me as I write this. For millions, the only gods worth worshipping are amphibious ones – gods who can shuttle between worlds. And the worlds are represented by human and animal forms. There seems to be an ancient and earnest need to unite the human and animal worlds.

Children, who have lost less than adults, know this need. They dress up as dogs. They have their faces painted so that they look like tigers. They take teddy bears to bed and want to keep hamsters in their bedrooms. Before they go to bed they make their parents read to them about animals who dress and talk like humans. Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddleduck are the new shamanic therianthropes.

I was no different. I desperately wanted to be closer to animals. Part of this was the conviction that they knew something I didn't and which I, for unexamined reasons, needed to know.

There was a blackbird in our garden whose yellow-and-black eye looked *knowing*. It maddened me. He flaunted his knowledge, and hence my ignorance. The winking of that eye was like a glimpse of a pirate's crumpled treasure map. I could see that there was a cross on it, which marked the spot; I could see that what was buried was dazzling and would transform my life if I found it. But I couldn't for the life of me make out where the cross was.

I tried everything I, and everyone I met, could think of. I was a blackbird bore. I sat for hours in the local library, reading every paragraph that mentioned blackbirds and making notes in a school exercise book. I mapped the nests in the area (mostly in suburban privet) and visited them every day, carrying round a stool to stand on. I described minutely in a pillaged hard-back accounts book what was going on. I had a drawer in my bedroom full of blackbird egg fragments. I sniffed them in the morning to try to enter the head of a nestling so that I might

grow up that day to be more like a blackbird, and in the evening in the hope that I might be born in my dreams as a blackbird. I had several dried blackbird tongues, wrenched with forceps from road casualties, lying on beds of cotton wool in Swan Vestas matchboxes. Taxidermy was my other ruling passion: blackbirds with outstretched wings circled above my bed, suspended from the ceiling on lengths of thread; deeply distorted blackbirds squinted down from plywood perches. I had a blackbird brain in formalin by my bedside. I turned the pot round and round in my hand, trying to think myself inside the brain, and often went to sleep still holding it.

It didn't work. The blackbird remained as elusive as ever. Its abiding mysteriousness is one of the greatest bequests of my childhood. If I had thought for a moment that I had understood, it would have been a catastrophe. I might have ended up as an oilman, a banker or a pimp. An early conviction of mastery or comprehension turns people into monsters. Those mysterious blackbirds continue to rein in my ego and convince me of the exhilarating inaccessibility of all creatures, including, perhaps particularly, humans.

But that doesn't mean that we can't do better than I did with the blackbirds. We can.

I don't for a moment deny the reality of true shamanic transformation. Indeed, I have experienced it: I have a tale about a carrion crow, which is for another time. But it is arduous and, for me, too downright scary for regular use. And it's too weird for its results to be convincing to most. There are plenty of reasons to read a book about being a badger written by someone who has taken hallucinogens in his living room and believed he's become a badger, but a desire for knowledge about badgers or broadleaved woodland probably isn't among them.

The same is true for the quasi-shamanism of J. A. Baker, whose canonical book, *The Peregrine*, might be thought to do for one species what I'm trying to do here for five. He pursued