This handout contains a couple of the longer extracts from Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021) that we might consider during the session.

**Becoming Nightbitch**

*[The following is comprised of excerpts from the passage (pp. 69-76) describing the night of the mother’s first transformation into a dog and the following morning when her son makes a gruesome discovery on the front porch.]*

That evening, as she began a letter to Wanda White, she earnestly believed that Whtie was her only hope, though of precisely what, she did not know. She had convinced herself, at least a bit, that the *Field Guide* had magical properties, that it was in conversation with her thoughts, that she had a psychic bond with White. She realized there was no rhyme or reason to these conclusions. But still.

WW –

I’ve recently come across your book *A Field Guid to Magical Women* and the research you’ve done around the world. I have so many questions, but I’d like to begin by asking – if I may humbly take up just a few minutes of your time – whether your research is, well, ‘true’ in a scientific and rational sense, or whether you’re instead *performing* scholarship so as to make larger points about, say, the limits of knowing and the failure of science to fully describe the world?

…

As soon as she hit SEND, her entire body went limp, so limp she found it hard even to get herself up the stairs to the bedroom to tip into bed beside the boy. So relieved was the mother that she was very nearly asleep before she reached the bed, now in a state of sublime relaxation, the likes of which she hadn’t experienced in years.

 Imagine, then, what force of nature or god or magic it must have taken to exhume her from the delicious depths of sleep to which she had descended. Imagine the power it must have required to pull a mother from her first restful night in years – entire body slack and dead, breathing slowed to nearly not even there, her dreams as real as life itself. She moaned as she was achingly pulled from the molasses of sleep to the *clickety-clack* of her blood and a stomach sick with adrenaline.

 Outside her bedroom window, things scratched and snarled, huffed through wet snouts, gurgled and tongued. She sensed bodies moving in a frenzy, among and over one another, impatient, anxious, on edge, and waiting.

…

She peered out the high window and in the light of the full moon saw them.

 Dogs. So many dogs. Fifteen? Twenty? She scratched the course hair that now covered the back of her neck and her shoulders, then bared her teeth. She could hear every sound, smell every smell. She slowly opened the side door and stood behind the screen, looking out into the night. The mother smelled her before she saw her, the strawberries and soap of the retriever, and there, at the top of the steps, she sat. Beside her, the pudgy basset hound, with her pretty eyelashes, and the collie, her body tensed with energy even in the middle of the night.

…

They had come for her, as she had both feared and hoped they would. They wanted her to join them, to take her … . [W]hat she was seeing simply could not be real, had to be a waking dream, some sort of hypnopompic hallucination brought on by stress and exhaustion. She shook her head back and forth violently and then shimmied all the way down to her tail, as if she’d just emerged from a pool and was throwing off droplets of water.

 Beneath her sweatpants, her tail twitched instinctively. She suddenly had independent control of each of her ears, which she moved back and forth to listen to each and every breath and whine and gulp of the dogs.

 This is not real, she thought as she ventured out onto the porch, then down the steps, propelled by a guttural longing, the polyphony of night-noise, so many luxuriant smells. What’s to lose? It’s just make-believe – a thing she often told her son – just a game.

…

 [O]nce in the driveway, [she] saw that the dogs filled the pavement and spilled out into the street, then back into the pools of shadow darkening her neighbors’ lawns.

 The retriever took her hand as she had yesterday, and led her through the sea of animals, each one of them as alert and still as the night around them.

 In the middle of the driveway, in the middle of the dogs, she was not afraid. She waited. They waited. …

 [T]he retriever took the cuff of the mother’s sweatpants in her mouth and began to pull down on the material.

 Hey, stop, she said, laughing at first and then stopping, because the retriever did not let go, would not let go, and the collie started in on the other leg, pulling at the fabric … .

 The collie grabbed higher up on one leg, and then a busy shepherd with different-colored eyes started on the other. A muscular black Lab hopped up on its back legs and nipped at the hem of her T-shirt, its teeth ripping holes as the Lab came back down to the ground, mouth still closed hard on the fabric.

…

It was over as abruptly as it had started, not a paw on her. She panted on the ground in the fetal position, naked. Her ears twitched, and she could hear only the gentle breath of dogs all around and smell their exertion.

 She raised her head. The dogs paced about her, whined and pawed the ground, side-eyed her, stopped and stared, fur raised along their spine ridges. She curled her fingers against the pavement of the driveway, showed her teeth. Her eyes lit with fire, and she could feel the hair on her head growing, her mane expanding into a monstrous spectacle. The muscles in her haunches rolled. One thought came and then left as quickly: *you are an animal*.

 She didn’t want to think, only to act. Only to survive. She snarled, then lunged blindly into the throng of bodies surrounding her, teeth searching for flesh. She was hair and blood and bone. She was instinct and anger. She knew nothing but the weight of her body and the pull of the earth against it, the particular wetness of the night air, the bats that flew through her periphery, every moment of the paws and legs and heads around her. She searched the night with her mouth, wanting to sink her teeth into anything. She closed her eyes and became pure movement, pure darkness, a twitch and surge, the animal’s first dream.

…

*[The next morning:]* She grabbed the boy and threw him into the air again and again, until he was breathless with laughter. She buried her wet nose into his neck, nuzzling him, and he screamed with delight and tugged on her ears, freshly fuzzed. She took his arm gently between her teeth and he screamed again and ran from the room. She pounced from the bed and followed him, on all fours, to his bedroom. Her hair was long, longer than it had ever been, and streamed down her back, over her haunches, the ends tickling the backs of her legs. They played until they both couldn’t play anymore, and the room was ravaged, train tracks scattered, stacks of books now toppled, the bedsheets in a pile on the floor.

…

She rose and took a steak from the fridge. She cut off two very tiny pieces from the slab of meat, then threw the rest in the skillet.

 Shall we try this? she asked the boy, taking him the bits of raw meat. Should we be doggies? she asked. He nodded and smiled, his mouth full of food. They each took one of the small red pellets of meat and put them in their mouths, chewed. She growled and ticked him, and he laughed.

 We’re wild animals! she said, and the boy said, Go outside!, and she agreed.

 The boy ran to the door while she finished cooking the steak and then put it on a plate. As she turned from the counter, plate in hand, the boy bounded back into the kitchen and shouted, Look!

 He held up a dead mouse, and she screamed and then laughed.

 Where did you find that? She asked. Yucky!

 No yucky, he said. Come, Mama.

 She followed him, and he stuck out his fat little finger, eyes wide, and watched her to see how she would react to the pile – a literal pile – of mice and squirrels and rabbits and even a flaccid raccoon which had been left just outside the door, on the porch.

 She gasped.

 An offering. A sign. A welcome.

**Magical realism: the WereMothers of Siberia**

*[The following are extracts from the novel (pp. 173-76) in which Wanda White describes an encounter with Siberian WereMothers in her book,* A Field Guide to Magical Women *(a fictional academic work invented by Yoder).]*

Even greater proof of the magical woman’s fierce devotion to the furtherance of her species, we find the WereMothers of Siberia … a particularly evasive species. It is unclear where they originated or how they mother cubs without males nearby. (It should be noted that males perhaps do not even exist, for there has been no empirical confirmation of their habitation in Siberia. It should also be noted that males perhaps do not even exist, for there has been no empirical confirmation of their habituation in Siberia. It should also be noted, males are not necessary, since the WereMothers appear to be self-fertilizing. More on this later in the text.) Yet there have been sporadic sightings of this truly regal species.

 The Siberian WereMothers are one of the few species I’ve had the pleasure of seeing firsthand. On a personal excursion for reasons unrelated to research, I found myself in the furthest reaches of the region in the deepest part of winter. Daytime lasted but a mere six hours, and though my provisions were well stocked, I still feared for my safety and warmth.

 A Soviet military helicopter had dropped me near the center of the Eastern Siberia taiga … .

Once in the larch forest, I hiked through the shallow snow covering the permafrost with a forty-pound pack. … I was prepared to spend three weeks in this terrain. However, that first night, I was overcome by an intense fear I had never before experienced. I would categorize this as a sort of psychic malaise, irrational and disorienting.

I found myself wandering through the snow in my sock feet and many thermal layers in the early-morning moonlight. I was both sweating and hypothermic. I was unaware of who I was and why I was in such a locale. As you might surmise, this was rather out of character for me, a person who considers herself to be highly rational and levelheaded.

 Ahead, in a moonlit clearing, what appeared to be two heavily furred women beckoned me. They appeared to be pregnant, with distended torsos, and gathered around them were anywhere from twenty to forty cubs in all phases of maturation. The WereMothers walked on all fours, though they had opposable thumbs on their front ‘paws,’ if I could even call them that. Rather, they appeared to be modified hands, incredibly similar to those of Homo sapiens. Their faces I found to be quite beautiful, a mix of human and canine features, with a protruding snout and large, soulful eyes. Though I cannot be entirely certain of the accuracy of my memory at this particular moment, I recall that these creatures told me of their origins in Pripyat, Ukraine, some forty years earlier and three thousand miles to the west, though they did not speak in the customary way. Rather, it seemed they used some sort of telepathy to dispatch this information directly into my mind.

…

In the cave, in the firelight, I was better able to study the WereMothers, even in my much-depleted state. Their pelts were truly glorious, as thick as bear fur and sparkling with hairs that appeared to be made of pure silver. One WereMother wrapped me in a thick flannel tick stuffed with down. Where such a linen had been procured was mysterious, but I could not and did not question its warmth and comfort.

…

Did I imagine the smell of freshly baked bread? Might I have hallucinated the lullabies I heard that evening as I drifted in and out of sleep? The WereMothers were the gentlest of creatures, though their large canine teeth were terrifying. I had no doubt they were masterful hunters and protectors of their young. I also wondered, had I been a man, what fate I might have met that night, wandering crazed in the forest. Perhaps – ironically – my womanhood was what saved me that day, rather than dooming me.

 I spent the remainder of my trip with the WereMothers. …

 Just a year ago, I returned to this region in search of the WereMothers and, though I am certain my geographical calculations were correct, was not able to find a single trace of their existence.