A Compendium of Beasts – A PK Project

A bestiary of the weird and the wonderful, the real and imagined.

Edited by Martha Landman
A Compendium of Beasts – A PK project

A bestiary of the weird and the wonderful the real and imagined.

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At the zoo’s elephant parade

I reached out, touched the baby
as she passed, felt bristles on her back
with awe, then shame. I wish I’d stood aside,
respectful of her need for space,

to graze savannah with her clan,
rumble throaty greetings
when absent aunts return
and twine their trunks in hers,
enjoy the out-of-reach marula fruits
her mother plucks, walk ancient pathways,
mile on mile, no fence in sight,
learn where the best waterholes are found,

when new life swells the herd, to trumpet
and flap her ears with joy, to mourn the dead,
cover their bodies with grass and leaves,
to never feel a human hand upon her skin.
Bob Cooper

Near B20 3SU each Thursday night

it’s rarely glimpsed when an indifference
to well fed people behind lit windows
is where its green eyes gleam unseen.
It slinks so quickly along driveway’s walls
to snuffle along the edges of wheelie bin lids,
then expertly paw them open for food,
leaving a splay of takeaway cartons,
ripped polythene bags, chicken bones,
before, when late-night dog-walkers pass,
step around such pavement scatterings,
they notice the fading reek of fox.
the sloth

with long long fingers
and a big cheery smile
he’s climbing a tree
but he’ll take quite a while
he’s slow and careful
but speed is not
something to bother him
because he’s a sloth

sloths are thought to be
very very slow
but really that depends
on how fast you go
but he smiles and smiles
as he climbs with ease
and he’ll hang on tight
if he doesn’t sneeze

with long long fingers
and a big cheery smile
he’s climbing a tree
but he’ll take quite a while
he’s slow and careful
but speed is not
something to bother him
because he’s a sloth
cattle in Cumbria 2001

a ditch full of dead cows
a bulldozer herds more of the dead
turns them over and over
as they roll to their last resting place
leaving the grass torn from the soil
in a bow wave

already on the next farm
another ditch carved out
injections prepared
while here petrol is poured
and the workmen wait
to backfill the burnt black scar

in the next field a cow
lifts its head  sniffs the air
then puts its head down
to rip a mouthful
of grass  her jaw
slowly moving as she eats
Presence

Ice cracks beneath our boots
as we trace new tracks through the yard.
The farmer scuffs some scat away.
‘Fallow deer,’ he grunts, voice winter-gruff,
and pulls his cap lower.

I wonder at the creature, no longer here
yet held in freeze frame by the storm,
her presence as real
as footprints in the snow:

a chestnut doe
with milk-warm breath
black border round her tail.

Gunshots cut across the scene -
her cue to appear -
she veers towards the tree line
where pines reach into red,
leaves me skinned and hanging by a nail.
James Bell

this equine eye*

I have seen this equine eye before
look out over the Steppes
  or Mongolian grasslands
as it travelled in a herd
  or was ridden by man –
be pack animal or food

I have seen this eye share
the conflict of humanity down the ages
  at Little Bighorn or Waterloo
in a decisive cavalry charge
  break the will of infantry
while never passing judgement

I have seen this equine eye before
its orb take in all it sees
  holds depths never penetrated
with wisdom older than man
  sadness and light of another world
that we cannot – will not command

it is a positive eye
  its negative would look different
mist into a shaded greyness
fade in the passage of time –
this equine eye is a positive eye
invisible at the gallop

Dressage Horse

pampered into a kind of perfection
where control’s disguised, invisible
he tiptoes into a silence
at the middle of things

here he and his rider
are alone where intimacy
supersedes the slavery of beast to human
in this quiet centre he dances
his creation dances
this version of all horses’ lives dances
the freedom that lives beyond restraint
passes understanding
The pig was meant to be a mini

For three years that monster grew in the backyard, thick leathery skin, a convenient bin for leftover food, the grass patch inside his fence a muddy mess. His oi-oi-oi became the morning alarm, his aroma the smell of farm.

Disaster struck — the pet got ill, bizarre dance between pig and vet to get the injection done: he ran off with the needle in his bum, syringe in the doctor’s hand.

When it was time for emigration the white boar needed to be rehomed. His pink eyes hooded with canvas sack to get him on the farmer’s truck. He screamed blue murder for an hour.

I often wonder about his lot when I trot off to the morning tram the smell of bacon in the air.
after the age of wolves

the sound of footsteps is leaves -
collide in the wind force - just
right for a penumbra in daylight

morning light within a wish to continue
as the sound of footsteps change tempo -
you start as wood shifts - as if

moved by flesh and blood - its four
legs and fur body with jaws ready
to pounce - smile at ancient fear -

the present day stripped in an instant
makes you clutch a branch as cudgel
right size and weight for the hand

sharp end with penetration potential
leaned ready by the barrow in which
you collect hazel for a later winter

for a later telling of a summer tale
when days among trees are shorter
and leaves have fallen to cold reality
Jan Harris

Lampyris Noctiluca Douter

You hesitate between asleep and awake
where glow worms feed on the dreams
you thought you controlled.

Larvae burrow in the folds of your sheets –
there is no place to turn for misnamed worms
which cast doubt as easily as skins.

You pluck them from the bed,
though their rubbery form disgusts you,
and their light
is the light
of beneath-the-duvet texts
your partner sends at dawn and then denies.

The males take flight to mate
and the waver of wings against your face
is the nightmare where you scream yourself awake . . .

on the pillow, a firefly waits.
Daddy Longlegs in the attic

loose-limbed puppet,
crashes against the Velux
as if knocking on a door.

Hair-thin legs on stilts
write in italics;
wings diaphanous oars.

It dips where moss
blooms in a corner.
A spider’s noose,

nest of sticky filaments,
sheer as gossamer stockings,
stops its marionette dance.

A pounce. A stab.
A broken doll,
shrink-wrapped in silk.
Trapdoor Spider

Nature in stature is set to dissent
A web that will ebb at the final descent
Skies full of flies, corners adorned
spiderlings hatch in numbers

These are the arachnids we assume
as they’re found in our room
Interest intersects
with insects

II

My goodness mygalomorphs
construct a trapdoor
of soil, vegetation and silk
unlike others of their ilk
they dwell underground

III

Pour forth from the earth
almost undetectable
unless their door is open
Annest Gwilym

Last night I became an Emperor Moth

I rode through the liquid night,
as a melon-slice moon crested a bank of cloud.
Part of the hush and curve of the universe;
Pleiades above me a diamond cluster ring.
Clothed in starlight, wings powdered,
furry belly glossy and plump.

Left the moor for a jaunt to the seaside,
over towns with flickering lights and strange smells.
Saw the sea corrugated by waves,
tang of salt quickening my senses.
Shimmied and played chase with the ladies,
rested with them on Marram Grass.

Birdsong ushered in the return of the sun;
drowsy, went home to sleep in the heather.
There to wait for my lover; my musk strong,
it will draw him from miles. He will come,
wings taut with blood. Antennae fresh as ferns.
Owl eyes pulsing with life like coals.
Salute the Australian bush fly

When the Outback summer arrives
the earth warm with sun and cow dung
the parched land lays quiet in the breeze,
travellers quickly learn the Aussie wave:
a windmill-like salute to the black pilgrims
hitching a ride on back and arms.
Protein-hungry, no interest
in your perfume or aftershave,
they scavenge secretions
in skin, saliva, tears.
Has the same God who made men made flies?
you wonder as one crawls up your nose.
Nightingale

I recognised you from your song
long before I saw you hidden in your apple tree.
You released a cycle of clicks, twangs, bell-notes,
chuckles and sobs each day. No mate flew to your trembling
throat. On the sixth day I saw you flit from branch
to branch in the shadow of leaves.

You chorister-alchemist: your gold
is quick-silvery sound – your name –
our way of transmutation –
of speaking in tongues.
Cockatoos

Then –
named for a clown, he perched –
though no-one knew his sex for certain –
on a stand by the saloon bar door.
Fed peanuts by regulars, he peeled
and nibbled fastidiously, till a child
or dog came near, and then he reared
his crest and screamed. Once,
when a particular horror rattled his perch,
I had to rescue him from the hydrangea bush.
‘Cockatoo in a basket - £75 o.n.o’
the menu offered. There were no takers,
and after Bill sold up and left, he disappeared.

Now –
we have them in the eucalyptus
at the verandah’s end. Their crests flare
in the morning sun as they claim the day with gold.
Disputes of property settled, they launch off the hill
and head out over the river, Australia wide and old.
Sun flashes off their wings,
white against the pale blue infant sky,
farther and farther off till all they are
is occasional flicks of disappearing light.
Lesley Burt

Killing time on a Bali beach

Hands cup each cockerel’s glossy breast, 
caress fleshy red combs, scaly legs, 
green tail feathers, then loosen hold –

the birds glare, thrust necks and claws, 
owners restrain, tease once more, re-cage, 
nudge into shade until sunset;

the cockerels scratch through wicker floors – 
around them, dull brown sparrows bathe 
in flurries of hot sand.
they gather

sixteen swallows gather today
string out along the telephone line
wait for the call to return
travel south to Africa
already know the flight path
you wonder how they can do it
why they even want to bother
how evolution played this trick
when many do not survive
regardless of some inbuilt natural radar -
hope they have not gone tomorrow
as insect life that flies and bites
really annoys - is still abundant here
more than enough for sixteen swallows
who chatter with the voices of thousands
then plunge and twist in air currents
as if through torrents of water
excited even in direct sun heat -
hope only to count them again tomorrow
before the annual draw to leave
Pinning myth down

A shaped-bill - be it sword or sickle's made
to fit a flower, to suck its nectar dry.
I scour the mist nets I had placed at dawn
to strip the myth right down to certainty.

I know old Oscar isn't going to call,
a thick-boned man in cheap Hawaiian shirts
with morals just as low. He smoked a pipe,
and stank of rain-damp wood, low-cost desire.

Be it specimens boxed up or hoards of notes,
optimists observe not kill, he thought,
took pencilled sketches, feathers, height and weight.
It was the map of nesting sites I prized.

To trap, to pin the wings, to stop the heart.
requires a beast who will not break a bone.
Predictably, he didn't check the brakes;
his yellow scooter wrapped around a tree.

Ornithologists observe, jot notes, and wait.
Like the hummingbird, I see the world unseen,
appraise each fragile frame, affix a price.
I pull the wire back and seize what's mine.
Bob Cooper

Corvus Libertate And Such Grave Concerns

Shake your wings
crow of liberty.

Stop scratching
on my coffin's lid.

It's sealed up, I'm colourless
and want to sleep forever.

You're an utterly ugly bird,
gawky, blackly bedraggled,

vivid-eyed, repeatedly bowing
as your hard beak's knocking

but shake your wings
crow of liberty,

don't use my coffin for your nest,
don't feed my flesh to your young.
Lesley Burt

The subtle beast

The serpent slides in, platinum-bright, 
flickers its tongue, whispers promises:  
diamond stars and daylight’s golden gleam:  
yours when you gaze beyond the garden.

Flickers its tongue, whispers promises,  
coils its length around a tree and squeezes:  
yours when you gaze beyond the garden –  
know the blaze that places you in shadow.

It coils its length around a tree and squeezes. 
The people cut the trees, burn them to ash, 
know the blaze that places them in shadow; 
dance round their bonfire, choking in its smoke.

The people cut the trees, burn them to ash,  
diamond stars and daylight’s golden gleam  
hidden by their bonfire’s choking smoke. 
The serpent slides in, platinum-bright.
Black Tiger Snake

No matter how you tell yourself
they mean no harm -
no matter how you're used
to seeing them on TV -
no matter how the voice of reason
whispers in your ear . . .

. . . when you nearly step on one,
and when it rustles partly out of sight,
and when your heart still thumps
a hundred beats or more,

your education makes no difference:
it's early man against
the venom of the universe;
and when you've calmed yourself
a bit,
back in the car,
you realise how, far away,
the rest of civilised Australia
fails to recognise
your ongoing survival.
Martha Landman

A serpent brought to life

is power in my brother’s hand.
His sisters and the womenfolk
squeal like pigs at the slaughterhouse
as he chases them on the farm.
My hysterical recoil at his snake in my bed
(the forked tongue venomless,
it’s the cold rubbery feel that most appals),
shouldn’t thrill him so.
I mean, I walked around with a bigger
one in a shop last year —
unattached to the rubber beast,
curled up, thick, brown, with red eyes.
On Saturday afternoon father forces:
“stop the drama, touch the thing, it’s not real!”
A serpent brought to life when mother
 tells the shopkeeper at the till:
“those eyes look so alive”.
James Bell

**a tall tale**

haggis is the Scottish word for hermaphrodite
a little irreverent for the funeral I suppose
Rabbie would have wanted you all to know -
they are born with four big feet and three toes

a little irreverent for the funeral I suppose
you need to know what’s on the plate before you
they are born with four big feet and three toes
run in between the heather and the scree

you need to know what’s on the plate before you
these were shot fresh in the glen this morning
run in between the heather and the scree
just put buck shot to the side if you will please

these were shot fresh in the glen this morning
ham it up something dreadful in their death throes
just put buck shot to the side if you will please
we like to recycle limited resources these days

ham it up something dreadful in their death throes
Rabbie would have wanted you all to know -
we like to recycle limited resources these days
haggis is the Scottish word for hermaphrodite
Nerval's lobster*

Le rêve est une seconde vie -
Gérard de Nerval

they are peaceful and serious creatures
who know the secrets of the sea -
do not bark or gobble up privacy like dogs

why laugh when I take mine for a walk
on the end of a long blue ribbon - it rains
so Thibault enjoys the stroll more than me

has climbed out of the black lagoon
of our primordial selves and will sink
back to where it came without any thoughts

where a calm descends upon animal nature
in the abyss beneath the sea and ceases from
its heavy form in air inside its hard crust

it is a short walk in my short life
of dream more than wakefulness that yields
to the unconscious and the irrational

* The French Romantic poet Nerval told his friend
Gautier that he took his pet lobster, Thibault, for a
walk on a leash made of blue ribbon in the jardins
of the Palais-Royal. Some have seen this as a hoax,
as lobsters walk poorly on dry land as not built for
this unless scuttling sideways. However, Nerval was
highly into symbolism and a surrealist before his
time, so the walk has some credibility.
black dog

the uncertainty of knowing when it comes
a vacuity with its wild interpretation
distended by delusory jaws to the throat
no question there is a correlation to night
and day with a depart on this and that
life sits in the nature of heaven and earth

who wants to know what happens on earth
try to understand how the beast comes
in such a case where nature appears as that
lame sting of fortune - defies interpretation
with the swift eclipse from day to night
all thought goes at the pull of a gagging throat

all breath is lost in the roar from the throat
then falls like a dead bird to hit the earth
a vacancy of uncurtained eyes watch into night
normal becomes normal when day comes
the dog’s art of forgetfulness chips at interpretation
another will say how can you possibly be that

words I know and fear will lead straight into that
idiomatic namelessness - slips easily down the throat
in the same way it apes the dog leash of interpretation -
nasturtiums leap orange and green from the earth
watch to see if anything else in such abundance comes
like the ministering of conclusions before inevitable night

it comes easy this dull expectation of night
this dull expectation of this and this and that
does the black dog on any real music that tries to come
no song can rise from a dead bird's throat
inside another of those dark places of the earth
leaves only my words set down open to interpretation

leaves only my words set down as open to interpretation
it comes easy this dull expectation of night
inside another of those dark places of the earth
this dull expectation of this and this and that
no song can rise from a dead bird's throat
does the dog on any real music that tries to come

comes like the thief sent for interpretation
meets in the throat as dust into night
and that only ends with the descent to earth
James Bell

the skeleton

after Utagawa Kuniyoshi

at the edge of the world in depths of night
where belief still exists it rises at the prow
of the reed boat - what should not be real

or even so large demands attention in hollows
that once held eyes and raises questions
on why it comes at all - there can be no rationale

with a monster that wears the mere framework
of what holds body and soul together - where
the pose is actively aggressive - possesses

that will to scare samurai do not acknowledge -
make to draw swords as to slice bone is their normal -
the reality beasts of the night do not understand
Jim Bennett

my lovely little monster

a black shape lost in a deep black shadow
the sound of soft pads on the wooden floor
the warm smell of death full of carrion and grass
wet fur and brimstone that walks in the night

the sound of soft pads on the wooden floor
when the light is off and the full moon bright
wet fur and brimstone that walks in the night
masked by the noise outside my door

when the light is off and the full moon bright
I lie and listen for its sounds at night
masked by the noises outside my door
its footsteps breathing the pounding of its heart

I lie and listen for its sounds at night
the snarl beside my ear just before I wake
its footsteps breathing the pounding of its heart
movement in the dark from the corner of the room

the snarl beside my ear just before I wake
the warm smell of death full of carrion and grass
movement in the dark near the corner of the room
a black shape lost in a deep black shadow
James Bell

the gallimauf

at first I thought you were just gibberish
then realise you are actually a gallimauf
which is always a matter for review
an attempt to go from sublime to ridiculous

then to realise you are actually a gallimauf
is close to being a true revelation
an attempt to go from sublime to ridiculous
when a sense of preparation is in order

is close to being a true revelation
when the nonsense of the beast is realised
where a sense of proportion is in order
in a precise account from beginning to end

when the nonsense of the beast is realised
a real nature of such caricatures described
in a precise account from beginning to end -
you would not be the first to chicken out

a real nature of such caricatures described
which is always a matter for review
you would not be the first to chicken out -
at first I thought you were just gibberish
Monster City

You sense something quickens among the stores’ glamour,
cafes on the up-and-coming quay.
It brands you with its scent –
coffee and fast food, exhaust fumes,
urine-splashed alleyways to nowhere.
Night is banished from its lair,
and the river, tattooed with light
from bridges, glass towers, vital signs,
winds you in long limbs
as you search in vain for stars,
follow the streets’ pulse
to chambers of the underground,
where the beep of ticket barriers
measures footfall, counts the beat.
You stand on the edge
feel the thrill when trains rush through,
ever mind the gap, the Tannoy’s
syllables shattering like glass,
voiceless commuters,
their blank faces blanking you.
And when you ride the escalator to sunrise,
see your reflection multiplied
in windows and steel doors,
you know you will never leave.
Monsters

Here be monsters and dragons:
an anus-faced youth sucking his thumb
a fish with a harlot's face
a monstrous moth
a toad with a magpie's wings
a severed head on a stick
and a fearsome mouth, full of teeth,
as big as a house.

Here be monsters and beastly things
best to let sleeping dragons lie and
not go into the dark

where they live
off the edge of a map.
Writer’s Bios

James Bell has published two poetry collections *the just vanished place* (2008) and *fishing for beginners* (2010), both from tall-lighthouse. He lives in Brittany where he contributes articles and photography to an English language journal and continues to publish poems nationally and internationally, with recent print appearances in *Tears in the Fence, Elbow Room, The Journal, Shearsman, The Stony Thursday Book, Under the Radar, Long Exposure Magazine* and *Upstairs at Duroc*.

Jim Bennett has written 74 books and numerous chapbooks and pamphlets in a 49 year career as a poet. Jim lives near Liverpool in the UK and tours giving readings of his work throughout the year. He is widely published and has won many competitions and awards for poetry and performance. He runs [www.poetrykit.org](http://www.poetrykit.org) - one of the world’s most successful internet sites for poets.

Lesley Burt lives in Dorset. Her poetry has been published online, including in *Long Exposure* and the Poetry Kit website, and in magazines including: *Tears in the Fence, Prole, The Interpreter’s House, Sarasvati, Reach* and *The Butchers Dog*.

Bob Cooper has had 7 collections published; with 5 of them, between 1994 and 2000, winning Pamphlet Competitions. Another prizewinning pamphlet was published by Wardwood in 2012. He has also had a full length collection published by Arrowhead in 2002 and another will be published with Pindrop in 2017. Bob is retired and lives in Birmingham, UK.

Annest Gwilym lives in North Wales, near the Snowdonia National Park, with her Jack Russell terrier. She is a native Welsh speaker. Her writing has been published in a number of literary magazines including *Ariadne’s Thread, The Cannon’s Mouth, The Journal, Clear Poetry* and *Poetry Space*. A couple of her poems were published in the Templar annual competition anthology Mill in November 2015. Annest has received four Special Commendations and one Shortlisted in writing competitions in recent years. She was joint runner-up in the Cheshire Prize for Literature 2015, for short fiction. Her interests include beachcombing for that elusive chunk of Ambergris, and making her own jewellery, which she sells.

Jan Harris lives in Nottinghamshire with a number of less exotic beasties than the creatures that have run, jumped and flown into her poetry lately. Grey squirrels and frogs featured in poems published by Fair Acre Press as part of their *Maligned Species Series* of e-books, and a zoo full of extinct and endangered creatures inhabited a poem selected by Earlyworks Press as runner-up in their Web Poetry Competition.

Raoul Izzard is an English teacher who lives and works in Barcelona. When he isn’t correcting his students’ English, caring for his two-year-old son, Pau, or walking his dog, June, he likes to write poetry.
**Martha Landman** lives in Adelaide, Australia, and has been a member of Poetry Kit for a number of years. She has published poems in a variety of online journals and anthologies. She was a member of the editing committee for *Voices of the North*, an anthology of stories and poems about North Queensland.


**Stuart Nunn** is a retired FE lecturer living in South Gloucestershire. He is a member of Cheltenham Poetry Society and Cherington Poets as well as the PK List. He has had poems published in *Smiths Knoll, Envoi and South* as well as other magazines. He is chairman of an athletics club, but never breaks into a run.

**Grant van Wingerden** is a long term Peker with previous Poetry Kit project appearances. Grant is a poet and lyricist who grew up in a remote country town with thirty one fellow farming families. Of all the succession of kangaroos, emus, crows and galahs he could have gone for, he saw the Bestiary as a good opportunity to write about one of the lesser spotted creatures there.