

DAVID CARILLO

The Form of the Body, A Body of Forms: On Cary Pagel's *Experiments That I Should Like Tried at My Own Death*

Experiments That I Should Like Tried at My Own Death, by Carly Pagel.
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In the first section of Carly Pagel's new book of poetry, *Experiments I Should Like Tried At My Own Death*, is a short poem entitled "Taxidermy." Taxidermy is six lines long, and is formed through a mixture of syllabics and white space. Each line is twenty syllables long. Each line is interrupted at fifteen syllables by a caesura of white space that varies in length, after which, the last five syllables follow and finish the line.

Here's what the poem looks like:

The flesh still appears the flesh of the living I can tell you	these pins this tape does
stay a body made-up The sheets do ruin You witness a	gold-top as it crush-
es into pallid pulp The corpse forms such rotten mark But I	who am familiar
with the true nature of your soul can tell you the last breath has	lied to you your whole
life: <i>death is not quite shutting</i> Slender limbs placed in perfect pro-	portion to stem Such
a fleeting rush In this way glazed gaze reflects the flush of the	work of the steady

There's a tension here worth noting between what we might call the "natural order" of the poem, that is, the 20-syllable line, and the white space, which creeps through the poem, expanding and contracting along the way. The tension speaks to the significance of form here, and elsewhere in the book. In order to understand that significance we must look at the form of the poem alongside the subject matter. In the poem, the speaker seems to address that which will soon be stuffed and mounted, or already has, and in the first two lines discloses what can be described as a good working knowledge of the process that has or will take place:

The flesh still appears the flesh of the living I can tell you	these pins this tape does
stay a body made-up	

but we are aware of what we went through to get there. What develops is a curious coexistence; a form holding disparate entities together somehow, a body, if you will, put back together with a variety of parts.

White space itself as a body, conforming to and reshaping the body of the poem is one vision of the body in a book arrayed with variations of the body. Six of the most compelling poems in the book give us an entirely different vision: All six are dense prose poems comprised entirely of quotations from a multiplicity of sources. We're told that these poems are excerpted from a book entitled *The Botched Bestiary*. What *The Botched Bestiary* is is not explained, but we can be fairly certain that it is some kind of encyclopedia or other almanac-like text; we can also be certain that the text takes as its responsibility to study, catalog and archive instances of "the body."

Look for instance, at the opening lines of the first "entry" entitled "Those That May Disappear":

"The body [was] first described in 1843. It vanished from view after that and was presumed extinct until it was rediscovered in 1967. It is found only in Australia. The body is currently listed as endangered and a number of the populations are now considered extinct." "The body from North America was considered . . . extinct in the 1980's but recently it has resurfaced. Little is known about the body, but what is known is very strange. It can grown up to three feet in length[,] and when handled gives off a smell like lilies. The body is believed to be able to spit in defense." "A body has been seen often amid grim dregs and sediment."

Though not in any way rare, the illuminated "T" immediately gives us a sense of an archaic text, one just as concerned with cataloging the apocryphal as the factual. This is in fact what we get. Consider the shift between the attempt at an accurate timeline, the reference to the endangered list and extinct populations, and the more anecdotal information "when handled gives of a smell / like lilies. The body is believed to be able to spit in defense." In lines such as that we get the impression of a far-reaching, but somewhat flawed project. I think of something along the lines of the gold-mining ants of India in *The Histories*; an exploration, a catalog of all information not just all the facts. And there's more here: placed in the lower right-hand corner of each "Bestiary" page is a box made of thin lines that cross each other at the corners. It could be a legend, or a cipher of sorts, or at the very least, just different sort of list. In it under the heading COMMON NAMES are a number of animals, mythical and actual, as well as other names, types. Accompanying "Those That May Disappear" is this:

COMMON NAMES: Basilisks, Chimeras, Dragons, Fish, Giant Palouse Earthworm, Griffons, Harpies, Hirococervi, Hydras, I, New Holland Mouse, Pickerel, Sayers, Species, Sphinxes, Trout, Unicorns, Vultures

In the author's notes, Pagel tells us that the Bestiary poems are "tethered" to three texts, one being Jorge Luis Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*. We see that influence in the introduction of such creatures to the page, even though they exist outside of the poem itself. While these lists do include many of the creatures one would find in Borges, it's interesting to see the project of the Bestiary poems (or should I say pages) expanding.

Note the "I" in this list. Elsewhere, we find, among other things, "Rubber Chicken," "User," "You/Yourself." At once, the pronouns seem out of place, as if caught up in a net cast for an entirely different species. Indeed, I think that we can make enough sense of the two basic categories of creatures, that is, mythical and actual, to understand that, to a certain extent, the human stands apart, as does, say, rubber chicken, from an otherwise clear set of categories. That said, it's difficult to not find a variety of ways to read these concepts as being a part of the larger project of the Bestiary, that is, categorization, naming, inclusion. What's more is that, the inclusion of the "I" and other human pronouns, calls into question our involvement in the piece. This is an idea that I want to get to a little later. There is however, something to this list, as one in which we see clear categories with such outlying additions, that we must consider the idea of this list, and somehow botched. We must also consider the poems themselves and their existence as an assembly of quotations as also, somehow botched.

Botched, it seems, comes from another of the main texts that the author notes as having influenced the Bestiary poems: *The Post-modern Animal*, by Steven Baker. In an article published in 2008 in *Antennae*, Steven Baker confronts what he sees to be the negative perception of a certain postmodern genre of art that focuses on what he calls "botched taxidermy" a term Baker coined in *The Post Modern Animal*. In *Antennae*, Baker explains that he uses this term to "describe a range of artworks in which the image of the animal takes an unconventional and sometimes startling form." The term, he continues, "characterize[s] those instances of recent art practice where things..... appear to *have gone wrong* with the animal, as it were, but where it still *holds together*."

For instance, *Antennae* includes with his essay the image of the artist Thomas Grünfeld's piece entitled "Misfit (Cow)," which shows the full body of an ostrich, posed mid-stride, with full, lustrous feathers, and the head of a cow, horns and all, seamlessly, almost organically you might say, perched on the body the right where the ostriches neck should emerge. Baker, in further describing the significance of the term botched taxidermy, goes on to say that works of art such as the Grünfeld piece, render the animal "abrasively visible" rather than "straightforwardly realistic" and thus, "invisible."

I'm not entirely sure to what extent we can use the term "abrasive" in describing the Bestiary poems, but I think there are abrasive elements to be found at times. Take a look at the conclusion of "Those That Are Possessed by Nightmare":

"In disposing of the...body...the same preliminary proceedings commonly take place as in the case of a body...the head is cut off the whole...the lips and tongue are separately removed and hoisted on deck...But nothing like this, in the present case, had been done." "The truth is more startling." "The image of a wild body [became] the starting-point of a daydream." "A flagrant body in flight." "All bodies watching." "The body [had] a dream of [its] own. [It was] one dream...A dream of dreams."

The first three lines of this passage are, of course, from Moby Dick. And the representation of the flensing, gutting, and extraction of the whale, abrasive, I think, in the that the whale becomes newly visible: the lips of whale, the tongue of a whale, hoisted onto the deck of a ship, become new ways to consider the whale as an animal, especially since its great size, and place of residence, might tend to obscure it otherwise.

That said, what I'm trying to get at has to do with my recognition of those lines. Pagel, in the author's notes, gives us what seem to be a full (or at least partial) list of sources from which the Bestiary poems are assembled. The challenge in these poems comes from the lack of context that exists alongside the constructed context. Every quotation speaks to the body, each quotation seems to speak to the category in which it's been placed. Where's the possession by nightmare in the lines above? Perhaps in the dismemberment, that newly visible whale sliced to pieces. Perhaps in the "A flagrant body in flight." "All bodies watching." What seems clear, though, is that as I draw out the relationships between quotation and quotation, category and quotation that I become in some ways responsible for the way this excerpt (or any others) from the Bestiary holds together.

On the other hand, it is, of course, the quotations themselves, the "body parts" of the poems that contribute to its "botched" design.

A series of quotations with little or no identification, with virtually no contextual material, no transitional language, yet presented as a coherent whole has, in some sense, gone wrong. Yet, in equating, in some way, the poems here to the kind of taxidermy/art Baker discusses, I am counting myself among those that become newly visible.

That I might recognize a source amongst the multiplicity or sources, or piece together the threads, pin or tape together some parts, in order to see the Bestiary hold together despite the "botched" causes me to become as the reader, of the Bestiary newly visible to myself as a participant in finding a form for the Bestiary. Conversely, I get the sense that I will never pin down the true nature of the Bestiary, that there is an inherent formlessness to that lack of all information that might locate these excerpts, and therefore, the larger work. Even the insertion of the "I" into the legends at the bottom of the page seems to speak to a constant movement, a shifting between form and formlessness. This is what strikes me as special about this book: how it collects and catalogs, implicitly and explicitly, a world of perplexity, of being thrown, that also reveals itself to be necessary and vital to forming a more complete, enduring view of the world.

In the poem "Table Talking," which references the practice through which when spirits are contacted and they make the "hop[ped] crackle[d] / hum[med] like a vibrating string," the speaker relates to us that it was his father losing his leg that "biographers credit William James' / early & lasting interest / in finding a form / for spiritual inquisition beyond / religion beyond his field of study—science—beyond / psychology....". James's early & lasting interest in finding a form beyond anything he knew well speaks to that need for being thrown, as it were. And seems all the more relevant when we consider the world he was concerned with: that which reveals itself after death, if, say, "death is not quite shutting," ought we not pursue what all else? The poem goes on the catalog James's experience of his younger brother's death. James's interest leads him, so the poem tells us, to later join "....The Society / for Psychical Research . . . ," at which point "he remarked 'the phenomena / are there lying broadcast over the surface / of history. . . !'" Here again we can recall the project of the Bestiary poems, to gather up, archive and catalog, whether actual, mythical, or some hybrid forms.

All this, we see, can often be a terrifying, death defying act. The poem "Storm," which begins with the lines "Experience the reeling twist of burn / amber umber / russet leaves...." and appeals continually to the reader to that end, asking more and more of the individual: "...Experience the door warped / & creaking....Experience your own

hand / trembling your own heart / thundering your own mind weaving a thatched veil— / a divination: the possibility / of grand / amendment. . . .” Necessary still, a part of all life, nevertheless harrowing.