

FOX FRAZIER-FOLEY

Everything Changes, Nothing Dies: Passage from Human to Beast and Back Again in the Writing of Frances Justine Post

Beast, by Frances Justine Post. New York: Augury Books, 2014.

Everything changes; nothing dies: The spirit wanders here, wanders there,
enters anyone's body, passes from beasts to human beings and back to
beasts again, but never perishes.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses: Transformations*

Beast, Frances Justine Post's first book of poems, meditatively vacillates between what it identifies as animal and as human. Through a series of poetic self-portraits—beginning with "Self-Portrait as Beast" and concluding with "Self-Portrait as Cannibal"—these poems provide an illuminating oscillation between brutality and vulnerability. What does it mean to be a beast, or to be human? Where, and why, might overlaps occur between/among these identities? Post explores the frightful possibilities through rich, lyrical language, melding the mythic tradition of human-animal hybrid consciousness with fraught, postmodern edges of "glowing emergency."

The motif of self-portraiture that anchors the collection allows the narrator to both acknowledge and indulge in her own unreliability: the changing perspectives of each "portrait," (indeed, the concept of a portrait itself) are nods to the inevitable artifice and limitations of perspective. And yet Post renders this artifice advantageous and these limitations useful, using them to heighten various aspects of the speaker's (and the reader's) reality. Moment-to-moment, poem-by-poem, these portraits slowly create a bigger picture of this book's beast.

A poem like "Marionette," for example, juxtaposes vulnerable and predatory sensibilities:

At first you were a horse, then a man ready
to be let out of your stable. I own you.
I won't let you. If only you could outrun

your harness.

This speaker identifies herself as both harness and owner, the horse's caretaker and disciplinarian, as well as that which physically binds him into a certain kind of servitude; and yet, she is also "mastered," or dominated into a certain kind of obedience, by her man/her metaphorical horse—to the point that, even in the resting state of sleep, she still yearns for relief:

. . . you sleep right on top of me, heavy
on my chest. In my sleep, I dream of sleep.
I sleep so well, your hair in my mouth. I can't speak.

Some of the movement of this book overall becomes difficult in the terrain it seeks to chart: the map gets messy. For example, although any such reference is notably absent from the "Notes" section of the book, it's hard to read *Beast's* second section, "Miners," without evocation of the Chilean miners who were recently trapped underground without likely salvation or resurgence to an earthly plane. Subterranean themes might easily fit into *Beast's* mythical, nature-oriented world, but uncertainty regarding what particular significance(s) the reader is supposed to draw from this reference causes a small amount of distraction; because of this, the mining conceit feels a bit diluted in some places. The section is ultimately buoyed, however, by a few aspects that seem to clearly invite more universal, less particular interpretation: the extended metaphor of the human heart as the speaker's own mine—and also, as someone's "mine," an object of desire that one wishes to claim and possess. "Miners" might, then, also be read as "mine"-ers—an acknowledgement of the human tendency to persevere through dangerous natural surroundings to lay the victorious claim of survival. Which is to say: lovers.

Throughout the text, this depiction of lovers and danger (rendered mostly in terms of animal impulse and natural imagery) remains inextricably intertwined; in section three's poem "Pastoral," lies are equated with wishes:

On the telephone you told me you were chasing
a horse through Francis Marion Forest. But you lied.

You dreamed you were chasing a horse through Francis
Marion Forest. I've come to understand all your lies

are like wishes.

In equating potentially dangerous acts of deception and betrayal with visions of potential perfection/of what is most desirable to the speaker, Post continues her artful conflation of intimacy with predation, of love and desire with danger. And the natural world remains important, as animals acquire new significance in expressing visceral desire and its inherent threats:

Freud says horses represent love
in dreams. I looked it up. From our recent conversations,

I imagine your pursuit was halfhearted. You chase
the horse away, holding a whip but also a carrot.

I dream I am in the body of a pig. This is not a lie.
Low and heavy, my expanse of skin extends

behind me glowingly. Freud says the pig represents
lack of spirituality and ambivalence about love.

If it is not a lie, in the universe of this poem, it is by extension not a wish. The speaker, then, is confessing her discomfort with her own conflicting desires, her own competing ideas about her intimacy with her beloved. If her porcine corpus indicates a lack of spirituality, it seems to gesture towards a primacy on the immediate dictates of the body—the crude, brutal needs of the physical, ingrained in us by nature. These are the traits by which the speaker's own subconscious identifies her, even as it reveals her to be a helpless doll dragged around by her hair. And yet, in the next stanza, she shape-shifts into a horse, or tries to:

Now I'm lying, or wishing. Alone in the pen, I stick my head
through the low slats of the split-rail fence. All the others—

glossy brown or onyx or palomino, amber and snorting
with feeling—gallop and chase in the next field over.

This speaker does not pursue love as her Thou does, with carrot and whip, but rather attempts to embody love itself: her desire/attachment/need for her beloved is so strong that it comprises her entire identity (or, at the very least, she wants it to). This is one viable definition of vulnerability, and the dangers associated with such abject intimacy loom, almost unspeakably formidable: though rendered beautifully and accessibly in natural imagery, such extreme need and the aggression and submission it inspires create omnipresent psychological hazards for both speaker and reader. As Post tells us in "Self-Portrait in Shadow of Volcano," "Natural won't change disaster."

The text becomes less desperate, if not less urgent, during the fourth section, a long poem titled, "Spectators." It feels like a structural counterpoint to section two, comprised of the long sequence "Miners." On the surface, "Spectators" suggests an experience from the perspective of those who passively observe action versus those who explore and seek to claim. Contextualizing the section with an epigraph from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Post subverts expectations of passivity or remove: on the first page alone, seven active verbs appear as the dead collectively narrate, "we stoop [. . .] we stay [. . .] we follow [. . .] we carry [. . .] we become [. . .] we look [. . .] we run." These first-person-plural assertions continue, rhythmically and narratively anchoring the section. We usually consider the dead to be without agency, and most of Western thought treats the human body as an ultimately flawed entity that betrays us with its finitude; and yet, it feels natural, in the way of mythical tradition, that the dead should exhibit such agency as they watch our mortal lives. All readers will be somewhat familiar with that sort of dreamscape reality in which, of course, the rules are not the rules; thus, as "Miners" complicates the metaphor of spelunking and claiming territory for profit with the tension of being potentially trapped in dangerous spaces, so "Spectators" troubles our expectations of passivity, rendering the dead as active—perhaps more so—than the living. Even as these characters who have passed on "flicker"—that is, as their existence is momentarily extinguished, like a skipped heartbeat—these dead "become more clear," more seeable, more verifiably present, more distinguishable from thin air: realer. And this, of course, is a psychic pun on the dual nature of both existence and of clarity: to "become more clear" also means the opposite—to become more translucent, eventually transparent, eventually invisible and not verifiably present. Such is the nature of the relationship between agency and abjection—and between human and not-quite-human—in Post's *Beast*.

This conflation of seemingly contradictory realities continues: "Self-Portrait as Crumbs You Dropped" is written entirely from an animal viewpoint. This aesthetic decision is striking, because the title suggests a perspective without any agency—crumbs, traditionally, are minute inanimate fragments which, in mythic lore, are frequently consumed by wild animals in the heart of an unlit forest. And yet it is not crumbs but self-aware predators who narrate this piece; confoundingly, these animals—crows and gnats—are not natural predators, and to understand them as such is jarring; yet they assume a frightening kind of agency within the poem, their declarations underscored with vicious tone:

We, the crows that eat the crumbs. The preening
crows, glossy, we want you lost.

[. . .]

We, the gnats in your ear. The hand that slaps. The rock
that trips. The nail, blue, that sloughs off.

The reader herself becomes complicit in these abuses, her predatory sensibilities turned finally on herself as she keeps herself "lost," frustrating her own attempts at clarity or resolution. If she is not quite as frightening as "the bear that sniffs the nail. That follows you / stiff-legged, massive," she is certainly complicit in his terrifying advances against her. So, too, does this work obfuscate and confound the reader's own notions of self and identity integrity: the title invokes the mythos of Hansel and Gretel, against whose vulnerabilities elements of the forest night seem to conspire. As the forest conspires against Post's speaker in this poem, we are led to identify with her vulnerability and malleability—her fear. "We" becomes not just crows or gnats or crumbs, nor even the sadomasochistic pairing of lover and beloved, but also of speaker and reader:

We, the drool. the pelt.
In the looming dark. Our rich smell of earth.
Your perspiration betrays you. A twig snaps. Behind you.

So the forest absconds with the reader's identity—the "we" indicating her coupling with these threatening elements—it also vicariously commandeers our own. As we immerse ourselves in *Beast's* universe, we leave ourselves at the mercy of its untoward elements, delighting

as they overtake us and we, too, are lost. By the time we reach "Self-Portrait in Antarctica," in which the speaker identifies herself with a fox—"Here is a white fox / who has my eyes, black, my lips, pursed,"—and renders this fox a predator—"The only color in Antarctica / is a drop of blood falling from its red tongue"—the reader accepts her own conflation with the fox's ominous identity. When Post uses a sly apostrophe to ask the fox, "What have you been killing, my dear?" she is also, grammatically, addressing the reader, too. Just as Post's speaker has unleashed her own animalistic shadow identity in these poems, she has also freed ours. The delight is delicious, technicolor, and murderously cruel. When the speaker closes this poem by noticing her own heart, frozen beneath the tundra, she says "it glows like emergency." What makes our hearts glow, in these poems, is the emergency. Or, as Post phrases it in "Hover, Coo": "the frightening of what is known and long familiar."

It is through this terrifying journey that the details of "Self-Portrait as Cannibal" are illuminated. Both the reader and the speaker are restored to their human—or nearly-human—identities. We must acknowledge, more fully now, who and what we are—who and what these poems have allowed us to be. A human who preys upon another human, who consumes another person's identity is, after all, not a wild animal: it is a cannibal. It is a domesticated, moralized animal who has willfully abandoned human morality, kindness, and restraint, in the name of uncivilized (and not untamed) need. As Post's speaker describes savoring the preserved heart of her lover with a glass of wine—presumably a metaphor for continuing to savor the essence of a loved one who no longer offers love—we savor the essence of the departed along with her, in all its grotesqueness:

Every piece of you has its place. Your skin; cut in strips,
braided into a rope that has many household purposes.
Your tongue: muffled in the garden. Ears: ashtrays.

Your fingers: strung on a necklace, each nail
screwed down with a precious stone. Bones:
wind chime. Your hair: a brooch, a symbol of my mourning.

As we accept this gradual trajectory of monstrosities, we consume the viscous viciousness as Post's speaker comes to literally consume, and ultimately possess, the lover who has so destroyed the more vulnerable aspects of her identity:

Organs: sautéed. Muscles: smoked and cored to last me through winter. This house is a museum. I've locked myself in.
I don't need anyone else, now that you are here to stay.

It is a harrowing image of dependency to end on, and disturbing, perhaps, in the way that it satisfies. How would most readers react to a man writing a poem like this, or granting it the weight of the book's final piece? And yet, have we been secretly suspecting all this time that Post's ferocious anti-heroine would simply resume her more desperately vulnerable qualities to conclude? The savage honesty in her self-depiction is refreshing, and frighteningly fascinating. We should, perhaps, not welcome such disturbing confessions from any speaker. And yet, in this book, we do. Such is our nature: such is the nature of a Beast.