
BESTIARY OF GALL



POEMS BY EMILIA PHILLIPS

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Poems by Emilia Phillips

SUNDRESS PUBLICATIONS

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*“The wind moves into the empty head
And begins to give birth to its own little winds”*

—Vasko Popa, “Seed”

=====

FABLE: [*when its belly feels the pangs of birth,
its offspring bite through the mother's body and break out*]

each syllable that breath made up between them
each syllable made up breath

evaporates gathers as rain as mundus a cloud
as a cloud we've seen before the same a word

as a word we've seen the same the brain floats in
a jorum of saltwater the brain as an oyster

outgrown its shell who can tell the difference
between the story of a memory the memory

of a story who can tell what cravings are ours
what our mothers'

—*that breath between*—

bestowed to us in enwombed

FABLE: [*A sick lion will seek out an ape and devour it*]

In the morning in the mirror I had

all the usual things—
and then the unusual

that seemed not so because it was no longer
imagined:

A black mane that abe-lincolned

my chin & grew wild upon my head & grassed
my neck & grew

as I looked at myself

in the mirror—tho
I began to lose where I began,
what was me & what was livery

of a beast. Even the shears I took to
the dismantling lied about

what they witnessed—

—In the polished blade, I was a strangeress.
—In the dull blade, I was

a dull blade.

FABLE: [*Sailors believe it is an island, and when the creature
feels the heat of their fires, it dives into the water and drags
the ship down into the depths*]

The bridges that rose
With the flood: suspension, truss, closed
 Spandrel arch— at each end
The water never formed to mind or voice,
 The lithe disguise,
Intramolecular: thing *of* water, thing *in*—
(The letterbox frame, a grainy shot.)
The water is never the same
Twice, & it always is. We row forward
Even coming back
 From the dead—

In Praise of Aurochs

“they spare neither man nor wild beast which they have espied”

—Caesar’s Commentaries on the Gallic War

When Caesar saw them driven into Gallic
pits by their own charges, raptorial
horn drives, Achillic in hubris, the world pressed

into a crescent hoofprint, sodden with
the fungal smell of ordure & addled
the dust cloud kicked up by meaning—

the consul fisted roots down into the dugout
where a beast, broken, lay steaming
from the snout, auric, the great beard

& dewlap soft as the pubis & inner
thigh of the Gaul girl brought to him on
the Sambre. (*The bovine ululated!*) The Sabine

women careened away, marble in fright,
as if already carved into myth, their veins
streamed with words, & becoming

colder. The auroch bull deserved mercy—
Caesar’s sword thrust into the throat, the horns
cracked from the skull to be tipped in silver

as drinking vessel, scrotum severed
like a heavy lobed fig, sack of defrutum,
symbol sweet, *cowed*. Of rhinoceran mass—

the chimera of elephant & cattle, hooved
daemon, martyr, driven domestic, all shock
& awe: Auroch. Uri. The beef.

FABLE: [*at rest, the soul is stirred & roused & becomes
its own master, & itself performs all the functions of the body*]

After one bite you let the gala fall.

(We're living in a war.)

The woman ahead of us yanks on the chain
of a Great Dane. Leg raised, it teeters
over, struggles to its feet. The bag
of apples hangs heavy
from your wrist. A bee lands in your hair.

(I don't tell.)

(It approaches the border
of your naked ear.)

YouTube: Dog Eating a Human Leg On the Ganges
—Uploaded January 2010

& who would
stop it? water heals
around the rock
on which it tears
fat, slack-lining
muscle, skin, & dries
in the sun burning
white eye into
camera
phone held by a man
who begins
talking to others
or to me, & the dog
turns, hearing
the voice, & I
know then if
you approached
it would not be
afraid or change
even for the moment
you wrap your
arms around
its neck & burrow
your nose into
the sweet-sick
fur, kiss, & unto it
breathe a soul
of your own
conception.

FABLE: [*when the swarms fly off without a point or purposet*]

We will be the myth we make of ourselves.
We bind our wrists in horse hair & cry
with beef tongue.

 We are prisoners
of a sultry war. We sink our river-skiffs with wine
bottles. We pray to many gods.

When we drink, we call ourselves many
names: *gam*, *legion*, *prey*. We black out & bite
our lips until they bleed. With cold meat,
we ease our swelling.

 We're known to feed
our milk-cows to the lions, our honeycombs
to bears. We seal this vellum envelope
with propolis. Into our eyes
we drip hot wax until we appear
again

 blind, epicene, & young.

FABLE: [*That horse is in such fine fettle his spine lies*]
(*Vulcana, strongwoman, to Atlas, strongman*)

So relaxes one muscle as another contracts—
For mettle

we slogged the road out

as we walked it. Two men

I can lift at once & like ragdolls bung them! For laughs,
Inamorato,

I'll knot their beards. You hold

two leaden globes: One where I am

Sister; the other, *Mistress*—

I raise our youngest to suckle, & it is
hallowed. Like us,

the gods must have known, though
immense

in their love, they could hurl themselves
from the earth—
enburdened as they were having no

weight at all.

FABLE: [*As soon as it sees that their feathers are black,
it recognizes them as its own and feeds them more copiously*]

the ills we do the ills instruct us so we instruct
the children we tell them children use your inside
voices be each a little mouse whisper in our ears
do not worry I will not tell your parents do not
worry little child your parents are here there
is no man with red hair there is something in
the wall scratching do not be afraid do not
climb the hill the hill off limits *sinai was altogether*
smoke we tell you the truth we say who's
signature is this they say I signed for
my mother she told me to say do you
know what forgery is do not tell the ills we do not
the children came unto the wilderness are you
ill we say do you not feel well we say speak
up do what I say let me feel
your forehead why did you make yourself
sick we say you're burning up we say *lay down*
and roar



Bestiary

I. *Canis lupus familiaris*, Tennessee, 2004 (euthanasia)

Pointblank, the retriever doesn't back down, never learned
to be gun shy, never heel: blood drools from your arm (anticoagulants

jiggered in your morning handful) & now you're tremorous
with a .357, your vanity gun, service revolver, stolen after forced

retirement. (*Morphine enough to kill a regular man, & yet, still drive
to the station.*) My father's old partner, my mother's second

husband, she took you in after the wreck, asleep (self- anesthesia)
behind the wheel: two shattered femurs, a splenectomy, morsels

of your liver, lungs, & kidney removed. The strays were left inside
our fence by neighbors or found in the street, a Pekinese

came when the brown lab was in heat & this one first turned
on you the winter we had no heat, shoved from the bed

you shared (my mother slept on the couch), nagged by fleas, a thick
coat: now he's relentless, alpha, gnashes at the barrel,

you swear he's rabid, cock the hammer, & after (before you
stuff the accordion-limp body into garbage bags & drive to the church

dumpster) you list into the back door & breathe, hot barrel searing
(*healing?*) the wound where the teeth sank in.

II. *Elephas maximus indicus*, pulling heavy machinery in Sheffield, England in a photograph for *Illustrated War News*, 1916 (beast of burden)

One track for the trolley, another for the working | | elephant, an adolescent scarred | | & pinched. The passengers rubberneck though we can't | | in the grain see their features, only ivory | | ovums of their upturned faces. The natural | | habitat for elephants born in the West | | is the cage. Just ahead, a man walks, his gaze | | to the camera, his expression of recognition but not | | knowing, Now or yet, now or yet. Shift | | your view, Plutarch said, & turn | | your curiosity inwards, if you delight | | to study the history of evils, We can | | assume the elephant didn't know | | what he pulled, that it weighed | | the same with each step, We can | | assume the elephant had no concept | | of strength except pulling, pulling, We can | | look out from a locus at which we've never stood, We can | | assume the man continued for several more | | seconds (Now or yet, now or yet) turned | | in the direction that would become us, we became, that we are, We can assume | | most cages can only be unlocked from within.

III. *Columba livia*, MI14-proposed war tactic (suicide)

Each carrier pigeon will be trained to fly
into Nazi searchlights with an incendiary
light
as a letter.

IV. *Equus ferus caballus*, a veterinary log (diagnosis)

At night the black mare eats the fence, lips & gums pierced with splinters, tumid tongue dissolving the rails' ice crust.

Pica aversive presentation: oral. Lemon juice to the tongue upon a patient's apprehension after every ingestion attempt. Some will open their mouths to receive punishment, delight in the practice thereby null.

The mare won't be led with bridle to the barn where sweet feed germs the air. Three days she's eaten only what's inedible. Walking the path to pasture & from the box elder, I watch her at the post, her bite wrenched, moiling until the wooden stud is avulsed from the frozen earth. (The falling rails, hushed by snow.)

Aversive presentation: physical. A small water pistol is holstered in my coat. Should the patient attempt ingestion: a spray to the face. Cold water is most effective.

She drags the posts to the center of the pasture.

(Why do you waste? Why do you hoard?)

Her teeth flake like shale in her work of disassembling but she attempts no escape through the broken border.

I touch her bloated abdomen; tomorrow, unburden a great weight.

Sternum to navel, the scalpel glides
heavy-edged

& burred, opening again the body particular
organ by organ,
the lesser first, the dense liver, as music

plays. (*A sleepy lagoon & two hearts*

in tune.) The white masks loom like a dream
before sleep, pain singing

as if through glass (a drone)—

It was almost
heroic. (*This moment of love will haunt me*.)
Both hands into the steaming abdomen. The freefall,
the body rising

on the parachute of the soul (*out of the sky & slowly
growing dimmer*). The shadow of

the Caucasian bird sharpens as we pray:

We mutiny like secrets, our infinite windows
of flesh. O knowledge, slippery,
you're heaved still warm onto steel.

VI. *Myotis leucopterus*, Iran, 2011 (bloodsport)

The photographs of the downed drone reproduce
like cells, in the thought-wombs, *The blood of man*

can normally support only one

parasite at a time: for the camera,
the Guard skirted the display with an American flag
made of plastic, & though the bars
remain intact (*an unidentified colonel runs his hand along*

the wing), skulls relieve
the stars.

VII. *Vulpes vulpes*, "Fox Box with Clouds," by Stephen Paternite,
Mixed Media, 1975 (taxidermy)

Fox lowers her head
at the edge of a square pond
full of still image.

VIII. *Equus ferus caballus*, Vivarium at the Instituto
Clodomiro Picado (anti-venom)

Needled, the haunch ripples like upsurged water, volcanic black, its tail gathered against swatting. A scrub thumbs in the syringe of venom, this cycle's neurotoxin of *terceopelo*, dark-calmed & milked of its urinous syrup in another blue-white room. Three injections, three months, blood drawn hot from the neck of the seventeen-hand. Centrifuge, & separation—iron heavy, the red cells sink, as the white creams & filters out. In the vein, the needle vibrates. The horse bears dull teeth, gums inflamed. Again the flies gather over his body, notched ears shimmering silver.

—*Sea quieto.*

—*Be still now.*

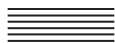


TABLE: [*the ass, being a brutish and lecherous creature*]

whatsoever thy hand findeth to do do it they say so they say but for such
proceeding I'm charged by them by the hands of charged men for
my own safety so they say they bunked me in solitary that bitch left
I began to come apart I was coming apart in county six ribs left
cheek a collarbone punctured lung two fingers a thumb broken
phalanges they call them my face an apple turning in reverse
bruised back to yellow sour the one eye full of blood like a water
balloon waiting to pop I couldn't make it to my sentencing laid
up with nothing nothing on my mind all that morphine I felt
like a level the vial of yellow with a bubble that slides like a long
continuous kiss on the underside sometimes it dropped to my
feet and I felt like how the ocean must feel when a diver goes in
soft shoes on the bottom right then gravity is nothing but tilt
other times it'd go the other way hang for a moment in my
spine at the base of my skull the bends before it'd fill my brain
near bursting that bitch left me I push the button *whatsoever thy
hand findeth to do* I push the button they let me have it I'm not a
skel they let me have control I have control the bubble was
level at my center only when I was sleeping I dreamed well there
but I don't remember *whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from*

FABLE: [*human brain, as in the case of all other animals, is double*]

I am *un*-seen like opening a canister of film to watch
the captured vanish in the sun. My bones cleave from my
skin, my flesh as the soul's raw eye presses the keyhole,
blinking. We blacken the teeth in the newspaper, pierce
eyes with crooked nails. Man begot of rocks, we scab in
lichen & rust. See us locked in battle taking turns
to deal a deadly blow. Such is the end of vision at the
end of time, the passage, a day. When they took me,
they asked me not who I was or where but how I'd
gotten there & how I'd forgotten. My breath is strange
to my lover. Ivy chokes the tower & a shadow bends to the
thin tin tubes inside & listens. No one says a word.
No one prays. Mark me, & be astonished. I am
escaped with my teeth. Lay a hand on each
magnified half of me.

FABLE: [*the male puts his head in the female's mouth in order
to release his semen; she, in her ecstasy, bites his head off*]

Our future selves arrive
like old friends

for the night & never
leave: their tooth-

brushes now fixtures,
the milk empties

from jug to their lips—
slugtrails on their chins.

So what kind of hosts would
we be if we didn't

raise our hands, dab
our shining faces clean?

Sus Scrofa Dictum

“Possession of the following live species is prohibited...Wild boar, wild hog, wild swine, feral pig, feral hog, feral swine, Old world swine, razorback, eurasian wild boar, Russian wild boar...”

Thus, illegal to pen & slop a pig caught in the wild.

Ergo, its swine descended.

Notwithstanding the feral begot the tame begot the feral.

Wherefore, A pig is a pig is a pig.

Ad coelom, Its odor is evidence of keeping.

Ipso facto: the hoof print or shadow thereof.

However, *Can you even tell the difference?*

Pig A has tusks. Pig B is pink.

Henceforth: Take. Eat.

Toward: The eradication of invasive species.

Moreover, The pastoral is not a state of mind, but a mind of the state.

Ex parte: *Send us into the swine, that we enter into them.*

Or: *Who is keeping whom?*

By the by, Pigs will eat anything. Even pigs.

Likewise: The sow, her half-feral bastard.

Thereafter: A pig is.

Still & all, a tabula rasa.

Furthermore, again, accordingly.

FABLE: [*Poor creatures that we are, the best
days of our lives are first to fly*]

In the evening before the last party
they sit on opposite sides of the room
they shared all weekend with nothing but the light
between them that bows & backs away

through the window, & the luster of it all

makes everything seem that much more
distant & unsayable, so they say nothing
as her skirt shifts & reveals a knee

he wants to kiss even now
(crawling to her, squeezing her calves...)

but night's coming and their bags
are open on the bed,

so they close their eyes & stand to leave
as if through a hall of mirrors.

FABLE: [*In winter the wolves are hairy, but in summer they are naked*]

Moving within the streets—
From vestibule

To vestibule

That lined the buildings, all

A tang-yellow with a slender
Mirror like a voice on a distant

Telephone call. Within each,
I changed. I changed

—a mint dress to tuxedo to denim & boot
—a scarf answered to remind me my weakness

(The throat.) I walked

Each block, each as someone else—

And someone else
As me.

Some distances harbor disguise
Like a mouse
Playing dead inside the mouth

Of a wild & distended bitch
Parched of fat for the now sucked milk.

FABLE: [*tongue will heal a wound if he licks it*]

How far the unknown transcends

the old dog in the metal
tub shivers

what we know

oatmeal for hotspots, oil
of cedar for fleas, little liver pills—
pain, the palatine
cleft by tumor a thumb
against the jaw, & harder,
she opens, gags

one by one, & by the hand

she disappeared
in the underbrush in death,
she rolled & took
on its stench

half willing, half reluctant

of each other
we know nothing,
of another—

I know none

to be led, & leave

the lather, & pouring over—
beneath my fingers her muscles
roll through water,
she blinks, & rinses
black

Paradiso

On the edge of our window
table, light through glass
refracts. Two bottles. We break

bread & fill our saucers
shallow, eat until on the street
below, a car hammerheads

into bicycle, rider's leg
rag-wrung in aluminum
frame undertread. Squeal—

the brakes, & down
the hood the body skids. Crack
& recoil. Pavement. Driver

& his passenger
unbuckle. The mussels
steam open. To your lips, you touch

your napkin, turn away.
Inverted, the scene in the bottles
gleaming. Vinegar, oil.

FABLE: [*the nightingale comforts itself in its
sleepless toil by singing sweetly*]

when I heard I could not speak I blew up
balloons to fill something with myself I walked through
the house the floor moved I stepped on
some *no stones in heaven but what serves /*
for thunder my path filled in behind me
my hairs began to reach to pull away I was coming apart I didn't
sleep for days air whispered away the knotted
navel puckered as a child my heliumed
fish lost half its air on currents floated waist
high through the house ghostly
nudging my mother when her back was turned focused
on something else a task a friend says while tripping once
her boyfriend squeezed into the closet
balloons said open it she fell
on her knees was covered *no stones in heaven* the flow like cells
red blood like words like ions I popped them *slashed*
o what *o with stroke* is the half-life
of my word against him?

FABLE: [*The ass gets its name because men sit on it*]

The untranslatable

pronouns

will ride, side
saddle,

into

the new

language of

Death

like kings without
sons.

FABLE: [*the males are jealous of the young, & will bite off their testicles*]

Through the windows of a passenger
Train, we served hot black coffee
To the villagers running the tracks—

The burns were glorious—

& complete. The nervous
System, dammed—

By the splinter of a self that lodges in the skin
Of a dream. & yet, they smiled

With their yellow teeth,
Snouty as wolves, as wild ass—
I believe

Heaven an unlit match tip—
Phosphorus dome. All the roads
Of the year

Slid into ditches, mud—

& arose a flotsam—

Of thigh bruise,
Hip kiss, our cloven
love.

Beside you, I slept best—
With my eyes open.

FABLE: [*the sheep conceived lambs of the same colour as the ram
appeared to them when they saw it reflected in the water as they mated*]

I ran away with him because he knew
my song *I'll build you a home*

in the meadow before there was another
man and another man before that before

there was only my child my only
child I sang to *away away come away*

with me I asked her one hot Sunday
in bed her father was mowing *the grass grows wild*

the wind blows free before the child there was only
a song which like a child creates itself duplicating

two now four now eight now the body's chorus I was
a girl watching Stewart the mountain

man Fonda and Peck but Debbie
Reynolds I liked most in dancehall pink corsets gold

hose lace-up heels a gauze
floret on her hat like a thought

she turned down two
men for marriage who wanted her

gold claim inherited *away away* I wanted
a husband I couldn't stand the thought without watching

now the yellow letters the Technicolor the letterbox
frame all seem see-through like a tinted window like stain

glass panels it is nothing
like the story I tell now is story I tell backwards

come

NOTES

All titles of the “fable” poems are from Hippocrates (trans. Withington), *Virgil’s Georgics* (trans. Fallon), or a *Bestiary Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodly 764* (trans. Richard Barber).

“In Praise of Aurochs” takes its epigraph from the Handy Literal Translation of *Caesar’s Commentaries on the Gallic War* (1898).

“Bestiarum Exterminii” absorbs language from Plutarch’s “On Curiosity,” David Lambert Lack’s *Darwin’s Finches* (1947), Dante’s *Inferno*, & the song “Sleepy Lagoon,” sung by Harry James in 1942.

Section III. relies on historical record of the UK’s exploration into pigeon warfare, spear-headed by Wing Commander WDL Rayner. His plan included a 400-pigeon loft & two-ounce explosives attached to the pigeons along with “bacterial warfare agents.”

Section IV. describes the condition of pica, a disorder in which an individual or animal is compelled to eat inedible objects or materials;

Section V. references a May 5, 1945 crash in southern Japan, after which, eight American airmen underwent vivisection at Kyushu Imperial University, as well as the Caucasian bird, a great eagle that was ordered by Zeus to feed on Prometheus’s liver;

Section VI. refers to the US RQ-170 Sentinel drone that crashed in Iran in December 2011;

& Section VIII. is set at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San José, the sole producers the anti-venom for Central America.

“**FABLE:** [*The human brain, as in the case of all other animals, is double*]” borrows imagery from Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon Letters* (1787) and Job.

“**FABLE:** [*tongue will heal a wound if he licks it*]” borrows language from Longfellow’s “Nature.”

“Paradiso” is for Gregory Kimbrell. This poem borrows architecture from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

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The Adroit Journal: “**FABLE**: [*tongue will heal a wound if he licks it*]”

Birmingham Poetry Review: “In Praise of Aurochs”

Bigger Than They Appear: An Anthology of Short Poems: “**FABLE**: [*the male puts his head in the female’s mouth in order to release his semen; she, in her ecstasy, bites his head off*]”

The Collagist: “Paradiso” “Bestiary”

Colorado Review: “YouTube: Dog Eating a Human Leg On the Ganges”

Devil’s Lake: “**FABLE**: [*That horse is in such fine fettle his spine lies*]

DIAGRAM: “Sus Scrofa Dictum”

Handsome Journal: “**FABLE**: [*A sick lion will seek out an ape and devour it*],” “**FABLE**: [*Sailors believe it is an island, and when the creature feels the heat of their fires, it dives into the water and drags the ship down into the depths*],” “**FABLE**: [*Poor creatures that we are, the best days of our lives are first to fly*]”

The Paris-American: “**FABLE**: [*when the swarms fly off without a point or purpose*]” and “**FABLE**: [*The males are jealous of the young, & will bite off their testicles*]”

I’m grateful to the *The Paris-American* for nominating “**FABLE**: [*The males are jealous of the young, & will bite off their testicles*]” for a Pushcart Prize.

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