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Lizard Brained

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Lizard Brained

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of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Thank you, Marisa Libbon, for helping me every step of the way during my four years here at Bard, including this very project; for pushing me to be the best writer I can be; for reminding me to be kind to myself but also to keep my head a swivel; and of course, for your immense patience as you made sense out of the nonsense I wrote and sent to you.

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Introduction

My senior project is told in two parts. The first is a literary analysis. The second is a work of short fiction. Both are about writing on non-human beings.

Part I is titled *Fish Faced*. In this section I explore the following stories: William Blake's *The Tyger*, *Beowulf*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Jane Yolen's *Merlin and the Dragons*, and an untitled poem by Yamabe no Akahito. These five texts were selected because they prominently feature creatures or beings that are distinctly non-human in appearance and, for the most part, behavior, be they a tiger, a whale, a dragon, or even a plant. Part II is called *Bug Eyed*. In this story of my own writing, four recent college graduates encounter a creature that strongly resembles a human, but isn't. Instead, this creature, later dubbed "Chimera," is my own fictitious example of convergent evolution. Convergent evolution is an instance in nature in which two unrelated animals evolve to attain similar physical appearances and lifestyles. Like how chameleons and cuttlefish can both completely change the colors of their skin. Or how insects and amphibians both begin their lives as larvae before metamorphosing into their final forms. Despite being very different creatures separated by millions of years of growth and change, they somehow manage to converge on a common design. A common theme.

Convergent evolution is also what connects the two parts of this project. Beyond both parts simply being pieces of writing about creatures, the two components are linked by that common theme. I explore a variety of ideas and motifs in Part I, then attempt to bring them to life in my own way in Part II. Ideas are reflected and in some ways inverted. For example, in Part I's Chapter 4, I discuss Captain Ahab's obsession with the white whale, as well as King Vortigern's disregard for the people below him. While one is full of passion and the other lacks passion, both

of these failings end up bringing ruin on themselves as well as the people around them. I then attempt to reflect both of these in Part II with the character of Bradley Holbrooke. Bradley is obsessed with this never-before-seen creature he's encountered, but is comparatively disinterested in the lives of the three people he considers friends. His passion for one thing and lack of passion for the other put the people he considers lesser in danger.

For another example, I end Part I by veering away from animals and instead discussing a poem about plants. Likewise, at the end of Part II, I suggest that Chimera may be a plant itself, or at the very least plant descended. And throughout both texts, leading up to their respective ends, I make a few small asides to plants as well as animals.

Now these points of convergence are not one-to-one. Like actual convergent evolution, there are as many differences as there are similarities. While reading, I encourage you to keep your eyes out for any other points where you think the two might converge. Though it does bear mentioning that Chimera is purely fictional and not in any way meant to reflect any actual person or group of people. Its existence simply came about from a story idea I had for a while; "What if a completely different organism evolved to look like us?"

I decided to structure my project this way for a few reasons. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write something involving a non-human creature because they fascinate me and because I seldom come across fiction about them at all. But since I was technically a Literary Studies major as well as Written Arts, I had to do a bit of both. I struggled with balancing the two components for a while; I could not quite figure out how to write a creative essay that I was satisfied with. I enjoyed the analyses I was doing, but I also wanted to create my own example of a story about a creature.

Convergent evolution is something I think about a lot, and starting with the second semester, I began toying with ways to bring that into my project. Through repeated trial and error, my project finally assumed its current form: an essay and a short story connected by theme rather than content. The main idea here is that these two different forms of writing can coexist, talking about the same concepts. Just like how humanity coexists with very different animals every day.

For a better understanding of what I'm talking about, I direct you to the project itself . . .

Part I. Fish Faced

Chapter 1. The Fish Lizard

The first thing I'm going to ask you to do is use your imagination.

Picture a creature. A creature that lives in the ocean. It sports a long, slender snout, with interlocking needle-like teeth. Passed the snout are two large, cute eyes. Its face precedes a large, bulbous body. Atop its back is the dorsal fin you would see breaching the surface. And where our arms and legs would be, long, flexible pectoral fins. That bulbous bulk eventually tapers into a streamlined tail, complete with a double-fin at the end. Perfect for propelling an animal of its size and shape through the water. It is a creature that was made for life at sea.

Now you might think I was describing some sort of fish. Perhaps a shark specifically, since I drew mentioned a dorsal fin. Or maybe some of you thought of dolphins due to the shape of the snout and the body. But since I have confirmed neither, it stands to reason that neither are correct.

The animal I just described was a reptile; the *ichthyosaurus*.

This extinct reptile from the Jurassic Period, whose name means "fish lizard,"¹ is but one example of one of the most fascinating phenomena in nature: convergent evolution. Convergent evolution is when two or more unrelated types of animals evolve a similar body plan and ecological niche, completely independent of one another.² In this case, ichthyosaurus, being a reptile, is a very different beast from all kinds of fish, and yet somehow, some way, it ended up with a body very reminiscent of what we typically associate with fish and/or dolphins. In fact,

¹"Ichthyosaurus." Prehistoric Wildlife.com, accessed April 19, 2021, <http://www.prehistoric-wildlife.com/species/i/ichthyosaurus.html>

² John Blamire, "Evolution in Action: Convergent Evolution," biodotedu.edu" accessed April 20, 2021, http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/ahp/LAD/C21/C21_Convergent.html#:~:text=When%20distantly%20related%20ineages%20such,trend%20is%20called%20convergent%20evolution.

ichthyosaurus is not unique in this respect; the word, ichthyosaur, has long been used as an umbrella term for an entire family of similarly fish-like reptiles.³ Furthermore, the fact that this body plan is shared by dolphins (and whales as a whole) means that this is an example of three-way convergent evolution. All three parties provide their own variations on the finned formula that you can see from a closer look at any one of them. Fish, reptiles, and mammals all converged on this specific design millions of years apart from each other. Of course, of these three, the ichthyosaur is the only one that is extinct; there are no descendents of them alive today. But they are far from the only examples. And I would like to provide a few more.

Staying with fish and reptiles, consider snakes and eels. Both manage to go about their lives just fine despite neither possessing limbs of any sort; instead they move across the ground or through the water or both by “slithering.” And both creatures are, I’m sure, the scariest thing you could encounter in the wild.

For a more general example, consider this: over the course of history, four different animal groups have learned how to fly. The first were insects, at around 325 million years B.C.⁴ The vast majority of animals that can fly are part of the insect family, such as the dragonfly, the housefly, the butterflies and moths, bees and hornets, among many others I hardly know the name for. The second group of fliers were reptiles; specifically, the pterosaurs at 250 million years B.C. They are the reptiles that are often mistaken for dinosaurs, but the two are actually

³ “Ichthyosaurus, Prehistoric Wildlife.com,” accessed April 18, 2021, <http://www.prehistoric-wildlife.com/species/i/ichthyosaurus.html>

⁴ Ker Than, “Insects Took Off When They Evolved Wings, Stanford Researchers Say,” Stanford News, accessed April 20, 2021. <https://news.stanford.edu/2018/01/23/insects-took-off-evolved-wings/#:~:text=But%20as%20soon%20as%20wings.and%20abundance%2C%E2%80%9D%20Payne%20said.>

quite different. However, like all non-avian dinosaurs, pterosaurs are now completely extinct.⁵ But speaking of non-avian dinosaurs, the next beings to fly, at around 150 million years B.C., were the avian descendents of those giant reptiles: birds, of course.⁶ And finally mammals, in the form of bats, followed this trend just 50 million years ago.⁷ Again, none of these families are related, but all of them ironically managed to find common ground in the air, even if they all went about it in different ways. Look at any one of their wings, and you will likely see striking similarities *and* contrasts.

The last example I want to provide could be considered a reach, but its inclusion is essential to our discussion. Would you believe me if I were to say that humans were not the first beings to use swords? Probably not, because that sounds absurd. If you were to Google when the first swords were invented, the answer would probably be around 3,300 B.C., by the Turks, made of bronze.⁸ And that is technically true. But if we are to go by our traditional English definition of what a sword is—that is, “A weapon with a long blade for cutting or thrusting”⁹—then I would say the weapon first took shape around 70 million years B.C. in the Miocene, when billfish first evolved. Billfish is the umbrella term marlins, sailfish, and the swordfish. And they are so aptly named because their upper-jaw extends forward into what is effectively a natural sword. Though comical looking, the bills make extremely effective weapons. Just as humans cut

⁵ “Pterosaurs - An Overview,” Prehistoric Wildlife.com accessed April 20, 2021 <http://www.prehistoric-wildlife.com/articles/pterosaurs-an-overview.html>

⁶ Emily K. Pifer, “The Evolution of Birds and the Origin of Flight,” Purple Martin.org, accessed April 21, 2021 <https://www.purplemartin.org/uploads/media/17-1-evolutionorigin-352.pdf>

⁷ Riley Black, “Where Did Bats Come From?” Smithsonianmag.com, accessed, April 21, 2021 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/bats-evolution-history-180974610/#:~:text=Bats%20pop%20up%20in%20the,time%20known%20as%20the%20Eocene.>

⁸ “Sword,” Britannica.com, accessed April 23, 2021 <https://www.britannica.com/technology/sword>

⁹ The first definition of a sword, according to merriam-webster.com <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sword>

and thrust with metal swords, so too do these fish with swords of flesh and bone.¹⁰ Several families of billfish are still alive today. And if you have ever witnessed one of these strange fish in action, be it in person or through a viewing device, you will be made well aware by the fineness and precision with which they swing their nose-blades. And they have been doing this millions of years before our swords were even being forged.

If the last few paragraphs haven't made it incredibly obvious by now, I am deeply engrossed in creatures. Specifically creatures that are distinctly *non-human*. Birds, fish, cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) and reptiles—especially those prehistoric reptiles like pterosaurs and dinosaurs—dominate my mind. What you may find less obvious is that I am not a biologist. Not even close. The information I have provided you with so far is incredibly broad. If I were to tell you all the details surrounding the *Ichthyosaurus*, from genus, to taxonomy, to the full history of their evolution, I wager we would still be on them for at least a couple more dozen pages. And that is the barest minimum. While I have consumed a fair amount of scientific literature surrounding these animals, I have not read nearly enough to even consider calling myself a biologist. Instead, I consider myself a fiction writer who greatly enjoys writing fiction about biology. About non-human beings.

I enjoy writing such material because I believe that creatures like reptiles and cetaceans, as well as flora (plants and fungi) naturally lend themselves to storytelling through their design alone. They tell stories simply by existing. About themselves and about their environments. Their strange, even frightening appearances and behaviors invite questions. Why does a marlin have a sword on the end of its face? What allows a blue whale to grow to such a size? What is

¹⁰F. Satini, L. Sorenson, "Full Molecular Timetree of Billfish," tandfonline.com, accessed April 19, 2021 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/11250003.2013.848945>

the lifestyle of the never seen giant squid? Why is a supposedly brainless plant able to eat flies? How exactly do separate species end up looking so similar? And how do these creatures affect their respective environments? How do they affect us? These are questions that form in my head just by looking at any of these animals. Trying to understand something as alien as a giant squid can lead you down an exciting series of branching paths that can reveal something about the creature, about the creature's environment, and perhaps even how you are affected by the existence of this creature.

Equally fascinating to me is the ways in which animals are extended and warped in myths, fantasy, and folklore. Tales and images of things like the World Turtle, the Thunderbird, and dragons, are just a few that come to mind. All of these mythical monsters have their bases in the natural world (actual turtles, birds, and thunderstorms for the former two, and various large reptilian creatures for the latter). We simply took our imagination of these real world bases and ran with them.

And in my admittedly limited time studying literature, I've found that readers must ask similar questions about the text they are consuming. Why does an author make their specific storytelling choices? And what do those choices do? To properly explore and potentially require both observation and imagination. You must observe what it is you were looking at, paying it close attention. But you must also be able to imagine something beyond what you can already observe. Observation and imagination sound like opposing states of mind, but both are necessary, even together. As such, I think that creatures and fiction go together like the inexplicable pairing of peanut butter and jelly. A marlin already has plenty going for them. All a writer has to do is add to it. An ideal convergence.

Which is why I am slightly baffled that fiction about creatures is so hard to come by.

Now I make that assertion well aware that my own knowledge of literature is still very limited. I am speaking from the perspective of someone who has grown up with Western literature. Western American Literature. And what one of the main things I have taken away in my limited time consuming Western American literature is that it is very anthropocentric; most of these books are about humanity. Look up the books and poems that are considered “The Greatest of All Time” or “Must Reads” or even parts of the decidedly general designation, “The Western Canon,” and you will most likely be met with titles like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.¹¹ Of the seven texts I just listed, *Moby-Dick* is the only one that is explicitly about a non-human creature.

Now of course I understand why this is the case. We are humans. We write. It stands to reason we should write about humans. And I am not in any way condemning any of these texts: I think quite highly of them, actually. Fiction is an extension of our reality. And the reality of myself and all of you in this room is that we are all human. But it is equally true that we are not the only part of reality, nor are we at the center of it universally; just our own. And outside our own reality, it is impossible to ignore the fact that we always coexist with other species every day.

¹¹ For this comment, I looked at the following sites and surveys; “A Brief Survey of the Great American Novel(s)” (Literary Hub), “100 Best Novels” (Modern Library) and “The Great American Novels You Should Read” (Penguin) and “14 Great American Novels: Our Top Picks” Though there is some variation, these seven are the most consistently high ranking.

Now I wish to ask you a question of my own. Have you ever been called, “lizard brained?” If you have, it is likely that whoever dubbed you so did not think highly of you, at least in that specific situation. The Lizard brain refers to the most primitive part of the brain.¹² And it is often used as a demeaning term, owing to an actual lizard’s comparatively lower intelligence. When someone is called “lizard- brained” they are likely being called “basic, simple, uncomplicated, easily stimulated, intelligent.” The issue I take with this is that to say “lizard brained” is synonymous with a lack of intelligence ignores the fact that we don’t truly understand what goes on inside of a lizard’s brain. We can run all the autopsies and diagnostics we like, but we are not lizards. So how can we know how their brains function? The word “primitive” should not be derogatory because lizards have had roughly 200 million years of evolution over us. If anything, their “lizard-brains” are such not because they are lacking, but because it is all that a lizard needs to exist.

Now before I go any further, I feel compelled to assure you that I am not a brutal misanthrope. I am not a preacher vying for reptilian supremacy. I am not Prufrock wishing that I was a crab instead of a person.¹³ But I do believe it is this same mentality behind “lizard-brained” that shuts beings who are distinctly non-human out of the more celebrated ranks of literature. If thinking like a lizard is basic and unsophisticated, it stands to reason that writing about something like a lizard carries a similar taboo. A lizard brain cannot hold a candle to the mind of a man. Not even in fiction, apparently.

And regrettably, trying to properly the prevalence of anthropocentrism in not only literature but in human culture as a whole brings a myriad of other problems: there are far too

¹² Andrew E. Budson, “Don’t Listen to Your Lizard Brain,” *psychologytoday.com*, accessed April 30, 2021 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/managing-your-memory/201712/don-t-listen-your-lizard-brain>

¹³ *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot, T. S., lines 73-74 (1915).

many moving pieces within it. In this case, when talking of anthropocentrism, we must also consider religious, racial, and environmental issues as well. And while I think these things are incredibly important—the latter two especially being the most important talking points at our current point in history—I am unfortunately, at the time of writing, unequipped to tackle such topics effectively. For me to do so would be, dare I say, detrimental to those of you wanting to learn specifically about the problems with anthropocentrism. Like the details surrounding the evolution of *ichthyosaurus*, I can't do that.

What I *can* provide are some examples of non-human beings in literature. Examples of literature and nature converging on common ground. Examples that I wish to share and explore on how we as humans can write about beings that are very different from us. The six texts I have selected are all very different in composition, medium, and content; four of them are poems of wildly varying length and tone; one of them is a marathon of a novel; and one of them is an illustrated children's book. But they all are connected in the fact that they all prominently feature characters who are not human. My criteria is quite simple: none of these beings can speak or communicate easily with humans. More importantly, none of them are anthropomorphized to the point where they might as well be humans in lizard skin, like the monster in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, or the talking farm animals in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The creatures I am interested in are those that are extended by the imagination of the writer; those that, while occasionally exhibiting human traits, prefer to revel in their more "natural" states of being. Beyond that, what ultimately links these texts together is what I put into them and take away from them. I will use what I glean from these stories to explain why I think nature and fiction work so well together. That is my argument.

Chapter 2 of this project focuses on William Blake's poem, *The Tyger*. We will look at a man's encounter with the gigantic cat, and his attempts to make sense of just what it is he is seeing. Chapter 3 follows the epic and anonymously written *Beowulf*. There, we witness the titular hero do battle with three hideous creatures, and see how the virtues of man compare and contrast with the wretched monsters. In Chapter 4, we will observe two texts alongside each other: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Jane Yolen's *Merlin and the Dragons*. While the disparity between the two books is plain—one is a full length novel, while the other is roughly twenty pages long—analyzing them side-by-side will show us that they both converge on a similar theme: that of a undoing himself and/or dooming his subordinates through his lack of understanding of the creatures they face. The final reading we will explore is a short untitled poem by Yamabe no Akahito. While it is a very clear outlier of the bunch, in part because it takes us out of the established Western material and into Japan, but also because the poem's extreme simplicity. It appears so bare that it seems dubious to say it is even about the creature present within it, or about anything for that matter. However, as I hope to make clear by the end of this writing, Akahito's poem is possibly the most important piece we will explore because its simplicity and imperfections encourage—even demand—the things I consider most important when talking about both nature and literature: observation and imagination.

So without further ado, let us begin this adventure, you and I . . .

Chapter 2. What is this . . . Thing?

How did you react the first time you ever saw a tiger? Or better yet; how did you feel when you finally paused on what exactly a tiger actually is? A ten-foot long, six-hundred pound hulking cat decorated with fiery orange hair and black stripes. A cat with a mouth that houses massive fangs and allows it to produce a chilling roar. It is a monster of an animal that would certainly have no trouble killing any poor human unlucky enough to meet it face-to-face. And for good measure, it just so happens to be in the same family as your moody house pet.¹⁴ Given this information alone, what do you do with it? How does one react to the very existence of a tiger?

That seems to be the question William Blake tries to tackle in his famous poem, *The Tyger* (1794), so named because it is about a tiger. The poem more or less opens and closes with the following stanza:

Tiger! Tiger, burning bright!
In the forest of the night.
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?¹⁵

As you can see, the tiger lends itself well to the medium of poetry. The “burning bright” likely comes from its orange pelt. If this unseen narrator had never seen a tiger prior to writing this, I can imagine they would associate the animal’s natural colors with fire. More important than that, however, is the use of the word, “symmetry.” The two most immediate definitions of the word are as follows: “Correct or pleasing proportion of the parts of a thing,” and, “Similarity or exact correspondence between different things.”¹⁶ The way these definitions read to me, they sound like they are pertaining to something that was designed. Specifically, something designed

¹⁴ “Tiger” Britannia.com, accessed April 28, 2021 <https://www.britannica.com/animal/tiger>

¹⁵ “*The Tyger*,” 1-4, Blake, William, 1794

¹⁶ The first definitions, according to merriam-webster.com

by hand. And that is what Blake seems to be getting at when he asks “What immortal hand or eye?” But doesn’t “fearful symmetry” seem to be in direct opposition with “correct or pleasing?” What is frightening about this symmetry?

Well ask yourself this question: why do we find symmetry “pleasing?” Why does it seem correct? You do not have to have an answer ready by any means, but I do implore you to at least ask. To me, Blake’s misgivings about the tiger’s symmetry speak to a greater, contradictory way we approach the word. To us humans, symmetry is both natural and unnatural. When we build or design something, do we not prefer said design to be symmetrical? It is inherently pleasing. For instance, lepidoterids—that is the family that includes butterflies and moths—are featured prominently in artwork around the world.¹⁷ You’ll notice that one thing that is emphasized is the symmetry of their wings; the patterns are either perfectly parallel or inverted, and they are always the same size, from the spots to the stripes to the varying shades of coloring. It is naturally symmetrical. Naturally pleasing.

But the truth is that asymmetry is actually everywhere in nature. Think of a tree for instance. Have you ever come across a tree whose every piece was perfectly aligned with every other piece? At least one of the branches is out of order, and that’s completely disregarding the leaves and the roots. The structure of a tree is quite chaotic.

An animal example is the fiddler crab, so named because one of its claws is comically larger than the other. It truly looks like something out of a Warner Brothers cartoon, and yet it exists in our world just the same. You could say that symmetry in both nature and architecture is almost entirely external. Just look at the interior of any building, or the inside of a human body,

¹⁷“Butterflies In Art,” astrology.com, accessed February 28, 2021 <https://artsology.com/butterfly-art.php>

and you will be hard-pressed to find anything that fits the definition. The purpose of these examples is to show that symmetry and asymmetry are equally natural and unnatural.

And according to Blake, symmetry can also be quite terrifying. As mentioned previously, the tiger is frightening because of its symmetry or perfection; it is the perfect killing machine. Tigers are not only symmetrically shaped but also patterned. Those famous black rings start on their face and continue and expand along the animal's growing body, almost like a deliberate artistic touch. And it bears repeating that tigers are gigantic.

But Blake also speaks to this animal's internal nature. The third stanza reads:

And what shoulder, & what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand? & what dread feet?¹⁸

He still of course makes notes of the tiger's monstrous physical features, like its massive killer paws for instance. But, "What shoulder and what arte could twist the sinews of thy heart?" The narrator of this poem seems to have it in their mind that something with a tiger's heart could only come about through the "shoulder" and "art" of someone or something else, further evidenced by the poem's later use of the words "anvil" and "chain." What is a tiger's heart? And why does it inspire so much fear?

I have an idea as to why. Think back to what I said about the billfish and the sword. Now try replacing "fearful" symmetry with "foreign" symmetry. A design as perfect as a tiger is terrifying not only because of what it can do, but because it is something not made by man. It is not a machine, but a living being. We had no part in the creation of the tiger; it has existed and

¹⁸ "The Tyger," 9-12, Blake, William. 1794

will continue to exist not because of us, but in spite of us. And unlike a butterfly or, in Blake's own words, a "lamb," it is not a safe, easily contained creature. The tiger warrants such strong reactions it exists in spite of what we can think is possible. It forces us to stretch the imagination. Its existence may be unsettling to Blake, but it clearly gave him a lot to write about.

One last thing that should be noted is that the first stanza of the poem is almost repeated for the final stanza. The only difference between beginning and end is that "Could" is replaced with "Dare." This change itself doesn't strike me as wholly significant, but it does call to mind the paradox that Blake creates; *The Tyger* is not symmetrical. If we go by our definition of the word, the beginning and ending cannot be so because however similar they are, they are not exactly the same. They are almost symmetrical, but not quite. You may have realized that this also holds true for the rhymes. *The Tyger* uses simple rhyming couplets: AA BB, rinse and repeat for each stanza. But in the case of the first and last stanzas, B and B somewhat break this formation. Eye does not symmetry, unless you decide to say one or the other differently from its normal English pronunciation. Almost like with the living being, the symmetry of the poem is ultimately an illusion. Too perfect to be real.

Chapter 3. Second Monster Opinion

The next story we shall explore is another poem, and while it predates Blake's work by several centuries, I think that its content makes it an appropriate next step in our discussion. *Beowulf* is an epic poem written by an anonymous author at an unspecified point in time, somewhere between the eighth and tenth century. It managed to survive all this time thanks to a single manuscript that has since been reprinted and translated countless times. Because of its incomplete nature, I find approaching *Beowulf* requires a similar mentality to approaching a fossil. Fossils are rarely complete, so when time comes for reconstruction of extinct animals, much of the animal's true appearance is left up to theory. All the reconstructionists usually have to go off of is the bones themselves.¹⁹ Likewise, because we know nothing about the author of *Beowulf*, we cannot truly know what their intentions for the story were. All we have is the text, and the things in it. And one of these things holds my interest above everything else: its famous gallery of monsters.

Like *The Tyger*, *Beowulf* features a cast of fearful, monstrous creatures. But while tigers, however unnerving they may be, still exist within our world, these three monsters are almost certainly born purely from the imagination. All thoughts that go into them are a result of the author's choice. Because of this, *Beowulf's* monster cast is especially complicated, firstly because, again, we don't know the author's true intentions behind said choices. Moreover because their portrayal only raises further questions.

On the surface, *Beowulf* is a simple story to summarize. It follows its titular character, a warrior hero from Geatland, who attains great renown by battling several monsters wreaking

¹⁹ Fran Dorey, "Preparing Fossils, Reconstructing the Past," [australian.museum](https://australian.museum/learn/australia-over-time/fossils/preparing-fossils-reconstructing-the-past/#:~:text=Once%20fossils%20are%20prepared%20and,recreate%20a%20living%20dinosaur.), accessed April 29, 2021

havoc on the land. In Herot, the stronghold of the Danes, he fights and kills the fiends Grendel and then later Grendel's mother. Then, after returning to Geatland, Beowulf rules as king for fifty years, before facing a third monster,; the dragon. Though Beowulf, with the help of his subordinate, Wiglaf, is able to slay the dragon, this encounter costs him his own life. And since Beowulf never had any heirs, the poem ends on a note of uncertainty.

Beowulf is, to put it bluntly, a very anthropocentric tale. It has human protagonists. It dedicates most of its text to human characters, human possessions, and human values. There are numerous Biblical references allusions that enforce the people and condemn the monsters. Most of the text is actually dedicated to describing human artifacts and values. And what non-human creatures are present are treated rather crudely, even factoring in all the damage they themselves cause. As the story presents itself, we are clearly meant to side with Beowulf and his comrades, and root against the monsters. The very words, "monster," "demon," or "fiend," all of which carry extremely negative and dehumanizing connotations. To be called anyone of them is to be called frightening, hideous, or repulsive among other damning terms. If a being is called any of those three words, it is usually because the observer(s) perceive them as frightening, ugly, dangerous, inhuman. Grendel and his mother are even said to be descended from the treacherous Cain,²⁰ their very existence is a twisted, dark curse. Contrast this with the things said about frequently, he is described as such: "A prince, well-loved, followed in friendship, not fear." (13.913-15). This is a sentiment echoed throughout the poem, and it speaks to what is valued in the world of this story: friendship, honor, love, and kindness. He is the hero, and the monsters are the villains. Though Beowulf himself ends up dead by the poem's finale, with said death casting

²⁰ *Beowulf: A New Translation*. Raffel, Burton. 2011. 19.1260-1265)

doubt onto the future of Geatland, he is allowed a funeral pyre, surrounded by his friends and admirers. Meanwhile, Grendel's arm is ripped off, and he and his mother's heads walls of Herot as trophies, and the dragon's corpse is unceremoniously dumped off a cliff, into the ocean. In the end, man triumphs over non-man.

Which makes the characterization of the monsters all the more curious.

The writer of *Beowulf* appears to have deemed it necessary to provide them with human thoughts of their own, despite their status as antagonists. Or at least recognizable thoughts. This is how Grendel is introduced:

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
 Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
 Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
 He had found them sprawled in sleep,
 Suspecting nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
 He slipped through the door and there in the silence
 Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
 Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their
 Bodies,
 the blood dripping him, back
 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

—2.115-125

And this is how we meet his mother, a bit later:

... The price of that evening's
 Rest was too high for the Dane who bought it
 With his life, paying as others had paid
 When Grendel inhabited Herot, the hall
 His till his crimes pulled him into hell.
 And now it was known that a monster had died
 But a monster still lived, and meant revenge.
 She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed
 in her heart, that female horror, Grendel's mother ...

—19.1251-1260

And see here how the dragon is described after a day of terrorizing the nearby village:

The beast went back to its treasure, planning
 A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,
 Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
 Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
 The hours till the almighty's candle went out,
 And evening came, and wild with anger
 It could fly burning across the land, killing
 And destroying with its breath, Then the sun was
 gone,
 And its heart was glad: glowing with rage,
 It left the tower, impatient to repay its enemies.

—32.2299-2309

I do apologize for the excess of block quotes.

These three passages about these three monsters serve a similar purpose in that they effectively humanize them. Lines like “The Monster’s thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws,” or “She’d brooded on her loss, misery had brewed in her heart,” or “Its heart was glad; glowing with rage,” indicate human thoughts coming out of these non-human beings. But their thoughts also tell us why they are the antagonists in this story. “Greed” and “rage,” in conjunction with bashing heads and burning buildings do not help in endearing themselves to us. And even in death, Grendel is still considered a wretch; his actions in the halls are described as “crimes.” He is almost certainly not human, and as such, is probably outside the realm of human jurisdiction. Moreover, at no point does he, nor his mother ever attempt to communicate with their human adversaries, so it is unclear if either party could ever explain themselves to the other. And yet his thoughts laid out in his introduction suggest that he does understand at least some human values. You could certainly say his “delight” makes his violence more punishable.

Grendel and the dragon both have chilling outings, but it is Grendel’s mother that seems to have the meatiest material here. She is given clear emotion—“loss,” and “misery” but also a

transparent and understandable motivation: “revenge” for the loss of her fiend son. While the story certainly does not end well for her, and she does carry out violent actions of her own, I don’t have a hard time imagining readers empathizing with her plight, at least to a degree. What’s interesting about her introductory stanza to me is that it makes clear the contrast and similarities between the humans and the monsters. The death of that one Dane is cause for sorrow, while the death of Grendel is a necessary loss. But death is also a common denominator between the two parties. There is an unspoken connection. And that connection complicates this otherwise simple good versus evil tale. Did Grendel and his mother always mean to be evil? Or did circumstances force their hand at some point in time? We are never given an answer, and again, things don’t go well for the mother-son duo. But the fact that their feelings exist at all invites further inquiry. There is clearly more to their minds. More than being “lizard-brained.”

The creature that intrigues me the most is the dragon. Dragons as a whole intrigue me because their existence may as well be an example of cultural and literary convergent evolution. They are everywhere throughout the world, being prominent figures in many distinct cultures. Of course, within each respective culture, the terminology is subject to change, but for the ease of conversation tonight, much as it pains me to do so, I will refer to all examples as dragons. In Egyptian mythology, we have the sun devouring Apophis. There is the colorful Aztec Quetzalcoatl. In the Slavic, Japanese, and Greek myths, there exist several variations on multi-headed dragons; Zmey Goronych, Yamata no Orochi, and the Hydra and the Ladon, respectively. Chinese dragons are consistently situated above even humans; they are wise, powerful, and divine. And of course, there is the recognizable British dragon like our friend in *Beowulf*: nasty, treasure-hoarding, fire-breathing brutes. Similar creatures appear in the *The*

Faerie Queene, *The Volsunga Saga*, and early Arthurian legends. While all of these creatures vary greatly, they are still connected by two things. The first, obviously, is that they were all conceived by humans. The second is that they are all reptilian to a degree, some more than others.²¹ And all wield incredible, terrifying amounts of power. Almost by sheer imaginary willpower, they exist and persist in the minds of many varied individuals and communities alike.

The *Beowulf* dragon is something of an anomaly within the story. It shows up much later than its predecessors—50 years to be precise—and is not said to be connected to Cain or any other Biblical figure. And while we never get a proper physical description of Grendel or his mother, we can assume that they are somewhat humanoid, considering that they are able to wrestle with Beowulf. I doubt the fifty foot-long, flying, fire-breathing behemoth is anything of the sort. But this dragon appears to be the least human-being in *Beowulf*. And yet the writer still chooses to give it human thoughts. In great detail no less. The passage I chose shows this creature meditating on its past, present and potentially future actions. It is “glad.” It is “counting.” It is able to identify the theft of a cup, and decides its next course of action based on that theft. Granted, none of them are especially nuanced. They’re all malicious intentions; the kind that would make it hard to empathize with the creature like we may have with Grendel’s mother.

Another distinction the dragon holds is its consequences. Beowulf is unable to truly best it. The dragon is the last monster fought because even though it dies, it takes the hero down with it. A feat made more impressive by the fact that for Grendel and his mother, Beowulf only utilized the bare necessities to come out on top (in fact for Grendel, he uses no weapons at all).

²¹James Burch, “Dragons Don’t Exist. So Why Are They Everywhere?” [allthatsinteresting.com](https://allthatsinteresting.com/dragon-legends). Accessed May 3, 2021 <https://allthatsinteresting.com/dragon-legends>

But for the dragon, he is forced to use his full gear. Furthermore, Beowulf does not defeat the dragon on his own. He is assisted by his comrade and cousin, Wiglaf, introduced in the following, revealing lines: “His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan’s son/and a good soldier . . . Watching Beowulf, he could see how/his king was suffering, burning. Remembering/everything his lord had given him, armor and gold, and the great estates Wextan’s family enjoyed, Wiglaf’s mind was made up. (Line 2605). Here, you can see that this dragon has forced Wiglaf to consider what kind of person he is in relation to it, his forefathers, and Beowulf. In this moment, the other warriors flee from the dragon, revealing their underlying fear. Wiglaf chooses to stay and fight alongside Beowulf, showing his underlying courage; the dragon gave him the platform to do so, as it, Grendel, and his mother all did for Beowulf. The existence of these monsters shows the reader what kind of world they are witnessing. And the attacks of these monsters force the human characters to reveal who they really are.

Speaking of which, one last thing to note is that the stolen cup that caused the dragon such a fuss was taken not by just anyone; the thief was a slave acting on the whims of a greedy master. And because of that powerful man’s greed and lack of respect for the treasure or for the dragon guarding it, many innocent people, including Beowulf, suffered lethal consequences (I am very sorry if that sounds a bit too familiar). This is a small moment within the lengthy poem, but I bring it up because the scenario of many suffering because of the actions of one delinquent individual is relevant to our next two stories.

Chapter 4. Man's Hubris

As previously mentioned, the disparity between Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Jane Yolen's *Merlin and the Dragons* should be fairly obvious. One is a 600 plus page epic. The other is a seventeen-page illustrated children's book. But to me, these two unrelated texts converge on a similar idea. Both seem to push for observing and understanding the creatures you coexist with. Moreover, both stories caution that failing to understand these larger-than-life creatures, whether it be due to irrational passion in *Moby-Dick*, or callous indifference in *Merlin and the Dragons*, can bring about that man's own folly.

I've talked about how creatures naturally lend themselves to the medium of fiction. So I suppose it is fitting that the longest book I discuss is a story about one of the largest animals on the planet. If a tiger can cause such fear in that man through its striking physical features, I can imagine the great whales causing that poor man an existential crisis. Given their size and majesty, I'd say whales deserve to have their stories told on the grandest of scales. And being the longer of the two, *Moby-Dick* warrants more time of day. A lot does happen in those 600 plus pages.

The plot is, like the previous text, reasonably simple: told through the first-person perspective of Ishmael, it follows the voyage of the New Bedford whaling vessel *The Pequod*. The objective of the vessel's Captain Ahab is to hunt down and exterminate the albino sperm whale, Moby-Dick, who years prior bit off the captain's leg. It is, first and foremost, a tale of revenge. And even if you have never read the book yourself, you may very well be familiar with where that revenge leads. Ahab's obsession with the whale drives him straight to his own death; he is dragged under the ocean's surface by the white whale, all while defiantly uttering his

famous last words: “. . . from hell’s heart I stab at thee. For hate’s sake, I spit my last breath at thee . . . thou damned whale! *Thus*, I give up the spear!” (Melville, 623). The amount of vitriol this man unleashes on this animal is astonishing, to say the least. But that’s not the only thing that is going on here. Ahab, though damning the whale, is acknowledging that he himself is hateful; he is taking these actions for “hate’s sake,” and by giving up the spear, is admitting that his final actions are ultimately futile. A deliberately bitter note for this Captain to go out on.

Of course, if you are looking at this line without much context, these words may wring a little hollow in terms of meaning. And indeed, it is context that gives Ahab’s final lines their meaning. Specifically, consider these lines in conjunction with how we are introduced to the man. The first things we are told about Ahab, aside from his numerous prior seafaring exploits, is this: “He has a wife—not three voyages wedded—a sweet, resigned girl. Think of that; by that sweet girl that old man has a child: hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? No, no, my lad; stricken, blasted if he be, Ahab has his humanities!” (Melville, 89). The speaker, Captain Peleg, is reassuring the book’s narrator, Ishmael, (and by extension the readers, especially since Ishmael is the sole point-of-view character), that despite Ahab’s peculiarities, he is still a human being. He possesses qualities that are valued by humans. In this case, a family. This is how we’re introduced to him. Humanity is being used as a baseline for goodness, for safety, for trust. You can rest well with the knowledge that he’s not a whale. He’s not a monster.

Throughout the majority of the book, the monster is, according to Ahab himself, the white whale. The rest of the crew, while unnerved by the captain’s demeanor at times, tend to agree. But more than just the gargantuan brute that most crewmembers refer to it by, Ahab seems

to think there is something more to this animal. The most prominent example of his perception of the animal positively is provided in this chilling monologue:

Hark ye yet again—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?

To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

—(Melville, 196).

“He tasks me, he heaps me.” You could say that Ahab is envisioning Moby-Dick the same ways that Blake writes on the tiger, or how *Beowulf* characterizes its monsters. This whale isn't allowed to simply exist as a whale. To Ahab, it represents or “masks” a lot more, or even just a little more; “enough,” as he puts it. Enough to hate the whale so. He is adamant that there is malice behind that “mask.” And while his quest is clearly revenge driven, in this moment, Ahab seems to see that quest as himself carrying out justice: “I will wreak that hate upon him,” reads like I will give him what he deserves. And if read that way, it makes his final words of futility all the more ironic. Nevertheless, it is interesting that to Ahab, Moby-Dick is such a damned creature because he supposedly has his own humanities, as opposed to lacking them. It is their similarities, rather than their differences, that causes Ahab to mark the whale as his enemy.

This insistence on forcing recognizable human traits onto this non-human whale also leads into the primary reason I find this text fascinating: the titular animal's portrayal. Despite

being the driving force of the entire story, Moby-Dick does not appear until the very end. Until the time of his arrival, any information on him and his nature given to the reader is second hand; warped, biased, and unreliable accounts, like Ahab's monologue. Moreover, the entire story is told in the form of first person narration. So unlike *Beowulf*, which reads rather objectively, *Moby-Dick* relies on subjectivity. His portrayal in the text is unreliable, but reliably unreliable. Perfectly imperfect. A series of reactions to this larger-than-life creature. Whatever human qualities he may possess are told to us through biased viewpoints.

Though he does brutally massacre the entire crew of *The Pequod*, Moby-Dick is acting in retaliation to pursuers. That in itself is another thing to note: *Moby-Dick* is a tale in which the apparent monster triumphs over man. And not in an act of malice, but one of self-defence. Ahab is the one who wanted this battle; the whale has "tasked him" so. But as the story's ending makes abundantly clear, waging this battle was a foolish decision. First, we were told that Ahab had his humanities. And in the end, it is that very humanity—that passion that drives him—that brings about not only his end, but the end of all the crewmembers (save for Ishmael) that followed him because he had those necessary humanities.

Merlin and the Dragons takes a similar approach to the ways it portrays its creatures, and The "hero" of the story, Emerys (a young Merlin) is hardly a hero as much as he is a quiet observer of the events. Instead of standing out from the masses because of his acts of courage and feats of strength, Emerys's defining trait is his knowledge of his environment. As the text puts it, "He spent time chasing and naming lizards and birds, while as he slept, he dreamed of dragons." (Yolen, 3).

It is his affinity for nature and his general aloofness that brings Emerys into the story's conflict. At this point in Britain's history, King Vortigern (this book's version of him) seizes control of Emrys's home village, and vainly commissions the construction of a tower at its center. Unfortunately for him—and even far less fortunately for the locals—the tower keeps on collapsing for reasons unknown to every character but Emerys. Rather than changing his course, Vortigern takes his frustrations out on the town's people, whipping them relentlessly. Every time the tower is built, it immediately collapses, and the village folk are punished for the king's actions. Emerys, thanks to his knowledge and supposed prophetic abilities, reveals that the tower cannot stand because it is being built on top of the nest of two dragons, and that only by freeing the dragons can the tower be completed. Initially skeptical, Vortigern and his forces follow Emerys's instructions, digging into the ground until they finally free the two monsters: the red dragon and the white dragon.²²

Despite this book being rooted in old English folklore,²³ these two dragons are very different beasts from the malevolent monstrosity seen in *Beowulf*. For once these dragons are freed from the earth, they immediately start fighting. But this time, there is no hero around to stop them. No one in the village or in Vortigern's forces have neither the means nor character to fight these creatures. Instead of malicious forces of evil, the red and white dragons are depicted as unstoppable, unreasonable forces of nature. And while the red dragon is eventually slain, its death is at the claws of the white dragon and nothing else.

So they do not have much in common with *Beowulf's* dragon, but they do have much in common with *Moby-Dick*. The portrayal of the whale and the two warring dragons are where the

²² Page 10.

²³ *Merlin and the Dragons* is directly inspired by a brief moment of similar events in Geoffrey of Mommouth's *A History of the Kings of Britain*.

stories converge in my eyes. Both showcase gigantic creatures that we cannot simply kill; incomprehensible beings that still manage to exist within the same world as humanity. They are beyond us, and trying to slay them less a vehicle for glory and more so one for self-destruction. *Merlin and the Dragons* takes this sentiment a step further in that at no point in this short story do the dragons even acknowledge the existence of Vortigern and his army. They simply don't matter to them. They are not the antagonists of the story; King Vortigern is.

I think this aspect of the story is best surmised by this quote on poor urban infrastructure by Talmon Joseph Smith's article on the Hurricane Katrina disaster: "You can't ignore what's underneath you. Because you build everything on top."²⁴In the context of the article, Smith is talking about the poor infrastructure designed by people who aren't forced to live in such risky places. Vortigern is the one who lays siege to this small village and desires to build a tower at its center as a monument to his own power, but said desire is undone because of his lack of understanding of this land he thinks he controls. He is only able to (temporarily) attain his goals through the counsel of Emerys, someone who actually understands this land and its inhabitants. His lack of respect for his environment leads to his literal downfall. In that case, Smith's words are especially applicable because most villagers bare Emerys failed to account for the town's foundations, and then along comes Vortigern, a man who fails to account for both the village's foundations and the village itself.

And just as it was important for Emerys to understand the creatures he coexisted with, I think it is important as a reader to consider what is seen as an uncomplicated children's book as a potential place for learning.

²⁴ Talmon Joseph Smith, "Remembering Katrina, and its Unlearned Lesson, 15 Years Later," [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/sunday-review/coronavirus-hurricane-katrina-anniversary.html), accessed March 3, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/sunday-review/coronavirus-hurricane-katrina-anniversary.html>

Chapter 5. Simple, Imperfect

I thank you all for staying with me this long. I previously stated that the last piece is an outlier among the rest of my chosen texts. I also said that it is perhaps the most important one here. I will attempt to explain both shortly, but first I must provide some context. The piece is a short, untitled poem by an eighth century Japanese poet, Yamabe no Akahito. I encountered the text by chance in an anthology assembled and translated by Kenneth Rexroth. The collection is appropriately named, *One Hundred Poems From The Japanese*, of which my chosen poem is the second. Like *Beowulf*, there are inevitably going to be aspects of the original poems lost in translation, and in this case, those changes are even more severe since Japanese is a very different language from English. I speak from personal experience on that front. I am not setting out to analyze the cultural disparity between Japanese and English forms of writing; once again, I am not equipped to do so in a respectable way. I am simply interested in what happens in the poem itself, and that is what I want to explore with you.

The poem goes like this.

When I went out
In the spring meadows
To gather violets,
I enjoyed myself
So much that I stayed all night.²⁵

That's it. That's the entire poem.

On its own, it appears lacking enough. Compared to the previous four texts, the differences in length and substance seem comical, even alongside the illustrated children's book.

²⁵ "Akahito II," from *One Hundred Poems From The Japanese*. Rexroth, Kennet. 1955

The poem lacks any noticeable structure or rhythm. It doesn't even resemble the well known Japanese haiku (seventeen syllables, five-seven-five). It is a very brief recounting of an event that happens. All we know beyond that the narrator enjoyed the event.

Paying closer attention to what little content we *do* have reveals another thing that this poem is lacking: non-human creatures. Aside from the unseen narrator, the only other beings present are the violets he is collecting. And can the violets really be considered creatures, or even beings?

Stick a pin in that question for a moment, because there is another question I'm sure many of you have that I wish to address: by including Akahito's poem in my analysis, am I not breaking my own rules? Doesn't this piece go against my already loose criteria for my other selected texts; that I chose them because they a) are at least partly about non-human creatures, and b) parts of what is considered the Western Canon? Does this poem's presence not come out of left field?

The answer is a bit of a "yes" and a bit of a "no." I'm aware of how much of a cop-out that may seem like, but allow me to explain. I ask that you look again at Akahito's writing (or rather, Rexworth's translation). And I ask that you focus on what *is* there. A man goes out into a meadow on a spring night to collect violets. He ends up enjoying himself so much that he remains in that meadow all night. Without much apparent substance or content to work with, there are few things we can do with it. Two things we *can* do, however, is observe and imagine.

And that is why I consider this poem the most important piece of art in this analysis. Akahito's brief, brief bit of writing is, above all else, a thing that exists. The narrator's experience in that meadow is a thing that happened. And it seems that to this narrator, the simple

fact that he enjoyed the experience is enough. That much, I can observe. And when I consider that this poem, as well as most of the other pieces in the collection are designed the way that they are, I can't help imagine that the poem existing is enough. The events of things simply happening—existing—seem enough for Akahito and his contemporaries as well. Moreover, the sheer simplicity of the story means that there is a lot of empty space left up to the imagination. Who is the narrator? Why is he gathering violets? And why does he enjoy being in this field so much he is willing to stay there all night? There are potential answers to be sure, if you want to imagine them or even pursue them. But if you have no desire to know, or would prefer not to know, the poem exists as is. It can be as complicated as it is simple. The two things are not mutually exclusive. The violets in the meadow exist. The person enjoyed his time there. That is enough of a story.

So no, Akahito's poem does not contain any distinctly non-human creatures I as a person so often crave to see. But it does represent the purest reason why I so enjoy learning and writing about them: to repeat myself, they tell stories just by existing. And as we have seen with the tiger, the whale, the dragons, and the billfish, or everything that ever flew, they can exist independent of or even in spite of what we humans think of them. But just the same, they also coexist with us. Again, not mutually exclusive.

And this brings me back to the question of whether or not plants can be considered beings. I had mentioned that I discovered this poem on accident, and even though I thoroughly enjoyed it, I did not seriously consider adding it to my analyses precisely because it did not fit my criteria. I did not consider plants in the same vein as dragons and whales and even ordinary birds. Plants and animals are very different things after all. But having looked through all my

chosen texts in addition to Akahito's, I realize that none of them perfectly fit my arbitrary rules. By my own admission, I chose these texts specifically because *I* saw a connecting thread between them all; the fact that they all prominently featured non-humans as important parts of their stories. I saw this theme as a point of convergence. But I am also well aware that idea, along with the majority of thoughts I have expressed are my own. For as much time I spend focusing on the thoughts and feelings of *Beowulf's* monsters, I can't help but wonder if the author ever intended them to be anything more than obstacles for the story's heroes. It is less than likely that Melville and Yolen ever intended for their respective books to be thematic counterparts. I took what I observed within these stories and let my imagination run with them. They do have their similarities to be sure, but I have tried to make the stories, not written by me, bend to my rules; to fit with my theme of convergent evolution.

Reading Akahito's poem made me realize that these rules I imposed on these texts and myself are not absolute. Of course it is possible to call a plant a being. And it is certainly reasonable to think about them the same way we think about ourselves and other animals. And it is just as reasonable to consider plants and animals wholly separate from one another. The same could be said for the stories I chose as well as the theme I chose to connect them. You see, convergent evolution results in separate species attaining similar features, but those similarities—the points where something like a bat and a bird overlap—are hardly one-to-one. Once again, all you need to do is look at the ways they fly. There is a push-pull nature to these comparisons: a paradox of sorts.

I realize that I'm going in circles with these comparisons, or that my conclusion is very inconclusive. When I began working on this project, my goal was to find what I thought was the

“best” way to write about non-human beings. And now at the end, it feels more like a still-ongoing experiment on which my data is still insufficient. What I have ultimately presented to you readers is one person’s perspective on how a few strange creatures are portrayed in a few select stories; how literature and nature can intersect and contrast. An insight into why I think non-human creatures are a natural fit for the medium of fiction.

Beyond that, if there is anything else I hope you take away from this experiment of mine, besides your own perspective on these matters, it is that you consider the imperfections and anomalies surrounding them. Not the flaws of my writing of course, I am not asking to be coddled. Consider the imperfections in the texts; how *The Tyger* breaks its own symmetry; how *Beowulf* remains an incomplete tale; how *Moby-Dick*’s perspective is skewed; how Akahito was apparently content with his sliver of writing. Consider the anomalies in nature; how a fish was using a sword well before humans were; how plants can crush a fly with its jaws; how humans can even exist. And consider examples in which you might see two or more of these things converge. Observe them, and let your imagination run with them.

Before we end this particular adventure, I’d like to return to our good friend the *ichthyosaurus*. I believe I have already made clear the sheer remarkability of *ichthyosaurus* being a reptile that had evolved to live like a fish in the sea. But an even more remarkable thing to note is that reptiles as a group evolved their specific traits for the purpose of leaving the water behind with their amphibian ancestors.²⁶ Which means that for *ichthyosaurus* to have come about, its own ancestors had to have returned to the water after they were already seemingly suited to a life on land. So in addition to being a prime example of convergent evolution, the existence of the

²⁶ “Ichthyosaurus, Prehistoric Wildlife.com,” accessed April 19, 2021, <http://www.prehistoric-wildlife.com/species/i/ichthyosaurus.html>

ichthyosaurus shows that the direction of evolution is anything but a straight line. It can come from anywhere and lead to anywhere, an ever changing series of events . . .

Part II. Bug Eyed

5:20 AM, May 31st, 2015

Last night, David was thrown into a pond.

Normally, that would be cause for laughter, especially if it was one of us who did the throwing. But it was not one of us who did the throwing. And instead of laughing, we could only stand there staring, dumb as rocks, at the freak of nature that did do the throwing. We could not comprehend what we had just witnessed. In fact, only now, roughly eight hours after the fact am I just starting to make sense of the night's events. I am notoriously slow on the uptake, but if anyone else were in my shoes last night, they probably would have needed just as much time to cope.

My friends—Raquel Wilhelm, Bradley Holbrooke, and of course, David “Guy who got thrown into the pond” Clive—and I had gone out to the generically named Wilson Park for a celebratory picnic. The celebration in question was of our graduation just four hours prior. We felt collectively that we owed ourselves a picnic.

That's another thing about the night I have to come to terms with; I just graduated from college. All four of us had graduated from college. Bradley and Raquel had both passed with honors, Biology and Anthropology students respectively. David was graduating as a Visual Artist, having already sold a few of his paintings, with more to come. All three of them are poised for bright futures, it seems. I can't help but be a little jealous.

And again, this isn't the strangest thing that happened to us that night. I apologize for the sudden digression.

It came when we were just packing it up for the night. David was rolling up the blankets; Bradley was organizing the leftover food, and Raquel was . . . well she was standing on the edge of the park's black pond. David, who was only the second most talkative among us was quick to notice his immediate superior's absence. Wanting to be in the loop of things, as he does, he joined her at the water's edge.

I recall the following conversation going something like this:

"What's up Rock?"

"Thought I saw something," she replied slowly, ignoring the lazy nickname, "Moving in the water." This of course got Bradley's attention.

"Something moving in the water?" He stepped out in front of them all to get a better look. He just saw water. Nothing else. "You sure about that? What could it have been?"

"I don't know, I just saw the surface break for a moment," sighed Raquel, now perhaps doubtful if she had seen anything at all, "Maybe another goose? You know there are a lot of geese in this park."

"Then let's get out of here," said David, "I don't wanna deal with another goose."

"You've just graduated college less than twelve hours ago and you still say "gooses?" Bradley, "It's geese, Raquel. Geese."

"Sorry, *geese*, my god graduation has not made you any less irritating."

Instead of leaving well enough alone, Bradley decided to list all the reasons why it couldn't be a goose—"It's too late at night, it would have surfaced by now, we would have heard it, etc."—in his signature rapid-fire pace as he inched closer to the pond. Nothing happened. At least nothing out of the ordinary to Bradley. But as he turned his head back to us, the surface

rippled again. Now all eight of our collective eyes were fixed on the watery gloom. Large bubbles were breaking the surface.

“Could it be a turtle?” asked Raquel?

“That size?” scoffed Bradley, though he was now backing away, “Doubt it.”

“Fish?”

“That would be a big fish.”

“Drunk snorkeler?”

Everyone turned to David.

“Hey! It’s entirely possible.”

Large bubbles burst the surface, putting the kibosh on whatever Raquel and Bradley would have said in response. Three more times, bubbles broke the surface. And on the fourth a most disturbing figure rose up out of the pond, water sliding off its shoulders like a falling robe.

“Definitely not a goose,” stammered a now wide-eyed Raquel.

Nor was it a drunk snorkeler, but I would blame anyone for thinking it was. This figure that rose from the water and slowly stepped onto the land looked like a person. A lanky, malnourished, and—I regret my use of this word, but there’s no better way to describe it—deformed person. But a person nonetheless. Thin, hunched, and draped in what looked like large leaves and weeds. It hobbled a bit. Then it lifted its head and looked at the party of four. Even in the dead of night, the combined light of the moon above and the streetlamps lining the park revealed that this thing’s face was in fact human. Human enough at least. Two eyes, a nose, a mouth, a chin, and surprisingly even hair atop the cranium. Human enough.

The stranger's eyes first fell on me. Out of habit, I suppose, I moved behind Raquel. Raquel herself was the first to get over her stunned silence and gaping jaw and finally address our new companion.

"Um hello? You alright sir?"

No response.

"Um, miss?"

Silence.

"Do you not go by either?" She caught herself. Fitting, seeing how she's always reminding us to be considerate. "Can you even hear me?"

"She literally just walked out of the goddamn pond like it was nothing and you're asking if she can hear you? Scratch that, you're talking to her period!" cried David.

"She?"

"Yeah—I think it's a woman. Looks like one. She just—woah!"

David was sharply cut off as the stranger swung its head and whole body around to face him specifically, eyes now wide open. "She," as David said it was, stepped toward him.

"Hey! Hey! That's close enough!"

Later, David would tell me that in the moment, he didn't even consider the curious coloration of the stranger's irises, nor the odd feeling of his skin against "hers;" as soon as "she" was within a foot of him, he punched "her" clean in the face. Raquel gasped. David's outstretched arm and fist lingered in the air. The stranger, in response to the blow, bent over backwards almost like a dying bird. Then straightened, eyes back on David.

"Sorry, but I did warn you. And I'll do it again if you—"

His words and his wind were knocked right out of him as the stranger jabbed him in the stomach with surgical precision. Yes, surgical precision. It then stood silently as David crumpled to the ground. We all stood with jaws clenched; I never even saw a fist move and then bam! David on the ground, clutching his stomach, although it didn't last long.

“That's it!” David shouted, standing up to throw another punch.

The stranger must have anticipated this, however, because before David could even ready a punch, his forearm was grabbed. And with its single hand wrapped around his arm, it lifted David off the ground and through him several feet through the air and that's how he ended up in the pond. He wasn't hurt, but he was astonished, as were the rest of us. For a moment no one moved. But once the stranger turned its head, I guess to look in another direction, Raquel and I moved to help David out of the muk. Bradley had been silent and still as a mannequin from the moment this stranger stepped out of the pond. At the time, I thought he was just as mortified as the rest of us. I suppose I should have known better from the expression on his face: eyeing its actions with great interest. And a little admiration.

While we helped David dry off and rid himself of any mud and/or leeches (Which he insisted was always a possibility,” the stranger gave one final glance at its surroundings. Then collapsed on its back, its spindly limbs outstretched in a star-shaped pose.

“Oh my god!” Cried Raquel, “Are you alright?”

“Is she alright? What about me?” raged David, “That thing nearly killed me!”

“*You* are standing up just fine. *She* just collapsed on the ground! And . . .” she was now feeling the stranger's skin, “Cold, course, and pale. We should call the hospital!”

“Hospital, absolutely not! We should call the cops!”

“For the record, David, you started it!”

“Because she was looking at me funny!”

“And there you go again! How do you know they’re a she?”

As usual, this back-and-forth went on for quite some time, but it was always some variation of the words above. It ultimately didn’t matter whether Raquel or David won out in their squabble. Bradley would be making the final decision.

“That’s enough for both of you!” he interjected as he approached the stranger. “We can’t call the police or take her to the hospital, and we most certainly can’t call the police. Hey, I know that sounds crazy, but please hear me out. I agree with David on one thing; whatever this is, I don’t think it is human. It did just throw David ten feet through the air with one hand. I don’t think any person could do that, especially not one who looks so . . . deformed. But I’ve never seen anything like it before. And that alone is reason enough to believe that turning it over to a government-connected organization like the Police or a hospital is a bad idea. I don’t even want to imagine what they would do to it. But if *we* take it. Back to our place .”

He could see our looks of bewilderment, a look he was used to. He raised his hands condescendingly, assuring us he understood our concerns.

“I really do,” he continued, “But I ask that you trust me on this. Let’s get it up, take it back to one of our rooms, and take a closer look at it. I want to have a closer look at it. Permit me the use of a cliché, but have I ever steered you wrong before—” noticing David’s mouth open, “No, I’m completely sober, thank you. And clean. Never done either, but I know you all have. I have the footage to prove it.”

“He does have us there,” sighed Raquel.

“Yup,” groaned David, “Alright chief, we’ll bite. What’s the plan?”

“I just gave you the plan. Let’s get her up.”

Yes, even at the time, I thought this plan was preposterous. I just wanted to leave well enough alone. But I wasn’t going to say anything. It didn’t matter what if I could have said anything; Bradley already had the majority.

Bradley grabbed the left arm, and I took the right, and Raquel supported the head. Now we were all aware of the unsettling texture of this person’s skin. It was cool and uninviting. Almost slimy, but there was a roughness to it too. Nevertheless, we departed with our new friend in hand.

The process of dragging it was difficult to say the least; in addition to the coldness of its skin and in spite of its lithe frame, it was surprisingly heavy. Several times, they had to stop to adjust their grip and stances.

"I estimate up to 300 pounds, if you can believe it," Bradley muttered.

Through the arboretum and across the streets our odd party walked, and under the cover of the late night, there was little incident; only a few questioning glances from passing pedestrians. With effort, we made it back home; our little rented house in the suburbs just outside the city.

Bradley had immediately offered to take it to his room for examination. No one had objected, since we didn’t want to have to wash slime off our sheets. So while Bradley laid the stranger to rest. Raquel and David collapsed on the sofa in the living room, too tired to even make it to their own rooms, apparently. Not that I could fault them; I was too. Brilliant Bradley was handling things and while he had kept up a stoic demeanor when he had closed the door, I

was certain he was positively giddy on the inside; the discovery of a new lifeform is just the kind of thing he would dream of.

“I only hoped that he doesn’t get too carried away in his endeavors and fail to take it’s feelings into consideration,” sighed Raquel, “I wonder what it’s thinking about, if it can even think at all.”

I settled into the living room armchair, but for hours, my eyes never left the door to Bradley’s room, and my nerves never left my body. I couldn’t sleep. Not at 11:00 PM. Not at 1:00 AM. Not even now at 5:00 in the bloody morning am I able to nod off because my beating heart just won’t let me. I’ve taken deep breaths. A lot of them. And have now been writing out all my feelings on the matter. It helps to put my thoughts to page.

Even if we are dealing with a gillman—gillwoman? Is that what David called it?—Bradley probably had the situation under control. He’s gotten all of us out of life-threatening situations with dangerous animals before; he’s warded off wolves, bears, pumas, mooses, and even sharks by, as he puts it, knowing exactly what makes them tick and responding by “punishing them for it.” But there is the cause for concern: “control.” Can Bradley really control this . . . freak we picked up? For all we know, it might not even be an animal. Not even a human animal . . .

4:00 PM, May 31st, 2015

My ears are ringing and my eyes are swirling.

A lot of things happened today. One of the good things was that we finally came up with a name for our new friend. Or rather, Bradley did.

“We’ll call it Chimera, for the time being. How’s that sound?” he had asked suddenly, after explaining his data from the tests he had supposedly been running on it all night. When asked why, he explained, “Well, Chimera is the name of a Greek monster that is made up of three different creatures; a lion, a goat, and a snake. And now that I’ve had a good look at our new friend, I’d say the name is more than appropriate. In—”

“I’d like to take a look at Chimera, then,” I blurted out .

And I distinctly remember everyone else looking at me with subtle shock, like I had just spoken out of turn in a boardroom meeting. How dare I call attention to myself.

But after that dreadful moment passed, Raquel expressed her interest in seeing the creature as well. Bradley nodded, and showed us in. David was the last to enter, for reasons I can understand. And yes, at this point, I think it is most appropriate to refer to this being as a “creature.” You’ll see what I mean.

The simplest way to describe Chimera is that it looks like a person sculpted by someone who took deliberate artistic liberties with the design. In the nightly gloom, such distinctions were hard to make, but now, illuminated by the interior lighting and the morning sun, I could see that oddities literally surround this creature at every angle. To the untrained eye, Chimera’s skin appears to be pale, but looking closer I could just make out a shade of green in there. The chest and the torso are pronounced and sharp, like fine fleshy metal. The entire body, despite its leath frame, is incredibly muscular. And now I could see why Raquel and David were so confused on

by sex of this thing; despite the broadness of the chest and hips, it lacks both breasts and genitalia. No nipples or belly buttons either. It looks more naked than it already was.

And yet, it retains enough recognizable human features to make its appearance that much more perplexing. It still has a nose, and a very sharp nose at that; two eyes, but comically large, even behind shut lids; a full head of neat, bleach-white hair; a small mouth curved neither upwards nor downwards, and looks to be sealed shut; two long arms and two long legs, each with the usual five digits on each appendage. A Chimera of appropriate and inappropriate mismatched components.

Raquel, ever concerned, stepped forward and placed her hand on Chimera's forehead. "Skin's not cold anymore," She said, "But it still feels wrong. If you know what I mean."

David was visibly still on edge after his traumatic experience. Getting a good look at the thing didn't seem to help. In fact, I think it only fueled his disbelief. I noticed he was specifically eyeing its thin arms. A moment later, he spoke:

"How could something this tiny toss around a guy my size with just one arm, Brad? It doesn't make any sense. I don't like having it in here. Can you tell us what it's gonna do?"

"I don't know yet," Bradley replied, "I've looked at it from every possible angle, except for the inside of course. Its body parts may look mismatched at first, but after spending so much time with it, the design seems to flow, in a strange sort of way." He paused before saying something that startled everyone—and I do mean everyone, "Perhaps it's time for an autopsy."

Before anyone could protest, its eyes snapped open.

And Chimera sat straight up and swiveled to look at all of us. And now that its eyes were wide open, I could all see what was so peculiar about them; there are two separate irises; a ring

of electric violet encircling sunset amber. The size of those eyeballs only further contribute to a look of crazed menace. They first fell on David, who I'm sure could only wonder what malicious, erratic thoughts lay behind those swirling orbs; perhaps it was contemplating all the ways in which it could disembowel him. Would it be violently messy or coolly efficient? Whatever he thought that it was thinking, he avoided its gaze.

“Whatever you're planning to do, don't do it! I'm warning you,” he said.

Next, they saw Raquel, who just stared right back. For a beat, there were no words. Eventually, as predicted, she tried asking a question.

“Hello?” she asked, to no reply, “I am Raquel. Raquel Wilhelm. What is your name?” She continued, very slowly. Still no response. Raquel repeated the question I think three times, but she received nothing.

Chimera next turned to me. I had been trying to keep an open mind on this creature's intentions, but as soon as those multi-colored eyes found mine, I felt an overwhelming sense of perversion. But I could not tell if it was performing said perversion on me, or the other way around. In the moment, it felt wrong for me to think it had malicious intent, or any intent at all. I thought maybe it was just curious, and there was nothing more complicated to it. But now that I think about it, is that fair either?

Chimera had leaned in closer, its nose an inch from mine. No breath, at least none that I could feel. And then Chimera poked me in the forehead with its long fifth finger. Out of the corner of my eye, David and Raquel both tensed. Bradley's eyebrows arched. And then Chimera turned to him.

Once again, there was a moment when no one moved. Then Chimera lurched forward just like it had at me; only to be met with a massive, forceful spray from a can of pesticide Bradley had been holding at his side. No reaction. Not at first. But just as we were about to unclench ourselves, Chimera let out a screech that sounded like a cicada several octaves deeper. It retreated back to the bed, and once again assumed its star position. This time, it appeared to be in great pain. Its screech eventually died down in volume, but it continued to shudder, its crazy eyes dilating violently rapidly. Not once, however, did its mouth open. While the rest of us covered our ears tightly, Bradley watched it. Then he smiled, satisfied.

“Yep, I thought so!” He stated with a bit of rare excitement..

“Thought what?” demanded Raquel “I think I’d freak out if I got sprayed in the face, too!”

“Not like this, you wouldn’t, unless you’re implying something about yourself,” said Bradley, “Maybe if it were pepper spray, but this is bug spray. Specifically,” pointing to the label as he spoke, “Glyphosate. Bad for us, sure. But on insects, it’s a whole new level of hurt. It’s how gardeners keep their greens clean. Works on amphibians too.”

“Whole new level of hurt, huh?” Raquel inquired, “Then don’t you think the spray is a little extreme.”

“I only sprayed enough to keep it away from me. It won’t be lethal, especially at this creature’s size.”

“But back up, so you’re saying that our new friend,” said David, still eyeing Chimera who still hadn’t changed positions, “Is an insect?”

“Something like that. Possibly an amphibian too. I’m not ruling that part out. But it is most likely a larval-based insect.”

David frowned. “How the hell can you just know that?”

“He doesn’t,” sighed Raquel, “You’re exaggerating. You’re smart, but not that smart, and there’s no way in hell you could know everything about Chimera in just two hours.”

I noticed a slight grimace cross Bradley’s face, but it quickly vanished.

“What do we always say to each other? Hmm? Over these past four years, what have we learned? Observation and deduction are key.” Raquel and David sighed in reluctant agreement, while Bradley continued, plainly eager to remind them of his smarts. “Think about it. We first saw Chimera, it came out of the water. A freshwater pond to be precise. Amphibians can’t really tolerate salt or brackish water, they’ll burn and die. And while some insects, like dragonflies, do fine in brackish water, most prefer a salt-free environment. Especially in the larval stage.”

“Okay, so she came out of a pond,” said Raquel, “That still doesn’t automatically make her an insect.”

“True. But you haven’t been here with it these past several hours,” he said. Like that wasn’t his doing, “I’ve been taking notes. Writing down my observations. And conducting a few, minor tests. With sounds, touch, and especially temperature. Right now, we’re at 85°—”

“You don’t need to tell me,” sighed David.

“—but when I was here alone with it, I dropped the temperature in this room all the way down to 30—don’t worry, I’ll cover the bill—and Chimera went completely immobile. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was one of your sculpture’s, David.”

“Funny,” chuckled David, “I’d definitely prefer that to whatever the hell it’s doing right now.”

Chimera was still twitching. Sort of like a dying bug, but with a little more fluid movement.

“Hey, Brad. Figured out everything you wanted to know? Because I’d really like to get it out of my house now,” pleaded David. Raquel nodded in agreement.

“Figured out everything I wanted to know? Hardly. I’m just scratching the surface!” Bradley cried with newfound excitement.

“But I think David’s right! I don’t like having her in my—wait hold on, did you ever find out the gender?”

“Sex, Raquel. Sex. Not gender. And no. No I did not. So keep calling it . . . “*it*.””

“Okay, then. Anyway, I don’t like having *it* here. And I don’t think it likes it either. Don’t you think you would either if you woke up in a stranger’s bed.”

“I doubt an insectoid brain—even one as big and complicated as this one—is contemplating its situation all that much. Insect brains are not complicated.”

“Exactly,” said David, “Which is why we should get rid of it while we still can. You may be good, Brad, but I don’t think even you could keep this thing under control forever.”

“I’m not trying to control it. I’m trying to learn from it. Besides, where is it going to go? Back to Wilson’s Park? For someone else to find it? Some person, or some organization with, shall we say, lesser intentions?”

Raquel and David had exchanged looks but no words. I was still coming to grips with how out of my depth I was to say anything.

“No, you’re probably right, Brad. Chimera’s better off here. At least for now,” sighed Raquel, somewhat defeated.

“Are you serious? We’re letting this bug . . . monster stay with us? Letting it *sleep* with us?”

“I’ll make sure it stays away from you, Dave,” said Bradley, condescendingly.

“Fat chance of that. If it is going to stay, then I suppose I’ll make sure it at least feels welcome here. And I don’t think it’s a monster,” Raquel said, eyes on Chimera who’s bodily twitch had slowed to the pace of a normal heartbeat, “No, I think it just needs some hospitality. For now.”

We looked at each other, then at Chimera’s eyes. They were in full view, yet it felt like no contact was made. We held this position for several moments, before Raquel finally announced that she’d go put on some tea and coffee.

11:00 AM, June 6th, 2015

I spent all morning wiping blue slime off Raquel’s face.

Aside from that, the past few days have been largely incident free; there was no brawling; no being flung across a room; no ear-splitting shrieks. Things were, for the most part, manageable. Bradley continued to closely monitor Chimera, taking extensive notes, and prodding it every once in a while for a new test, though again, nothing that he feared would elicit a strong reaction.

The major difficulties lay elsewhere. The first was keeping Chimera's presence—as well as our own actions—a secret. This usually means that at least one of us always has to be in the house. And usually, Bradley of course insisted it was himself, but after the first few days, the three of us three with varying degrees of reluctance, insisted that our impassioned up-and-coming scientist get out of the room and house. For while it was true that Chimera had not made any deadly moves, the rest of us were growing increasingly concerned with the effect its presence had on Bradley.

Raquel had taken to trying to reach Chimera through a few different ways. After she had made the tea and that first night, she had offered some to Chimera. Unsurprisingly, she received no reaction. Over the next several days, Raquel tried with different foods and drinks, from citric fruits to oats to poultry to plain sugar and flour. None of these items seemed to appeal to Chimera, or even gain much notice. At one point, on its own accord, Chimera rose from its cot, walked right past Raquel without even glancing at her, and, with seemingly no trouble or confusion at all, found its way to the kitchen. There, it held it, eyed it, and crushed it. Food did not seem to be much concern for it. At least nothing in the house, that is.

Attempts to talk with Chimera did not bring about much either. Raquel is adequate at Japanese, German, and French, in addition to English, but so far, none of the words she spoke in any of those languages seemed to hold much interest for Chimera. Body language seemed to be the most palatable; Raquel would not soon forget how it responded to David's punch. And just this morning, Raquel tried touching its throat, supposedly looking for potential damage to the vocal cords. If it has any. Apparently, she put pressure on the wrong point, because the next thing she knew, a deluge of blue slime came shooting out of Chimera's "nose" and into her face. After

the cleaning was finished, Raquel insisted that this accident did not put her off one bit. In fact, it made her even more determined to find out just what made Chimera tick. But try as she might, she could not parse out what was going on behind those crazed, unmoving eyes, a fact that Bradley and especially David frequently reminded her of. Despite living under the same roof, most of the time, we don't seem to exist in Chimera's mind.

But I could tell that this fact is far more frustrating to Bradley than he lets on; since he still feels compelled to keep Chimera a secret, he lacks any means of getting an inside look at its body; he's not even sure if the brain was in the skull or in the pelvis like a cockroach's.

"If only there was a way to get inside," he would muse to himself as he watched his specimen go about its inconsistent daily tasks.

But while David shares this frustration, he's had no desire to figure out what was going on inside.

"Whatever is inside can't be much more pleasant than what's on the outside," he said more than once, "I'm sure if you poke it too hard, be it with a scalpel or with yogurt rhymes, the thing will pop off. And one of us will pay for it."

And every time, both Bradley and Raquel assure him that they knew what they were doing, or that they were taking the utmost precautions. David has never admitted to being superstitious, but lately, I've noticed him through several books and websites regarding urban legends, cryptids, and spiritual omens. He seems especially keen on the legendary "mothman." I have to admit that if Chimera is indeed an insect, or at least insect descended, the idea that we had perhaps discovered a real life mothman could sound . . . semi-plausible. Maybe exciting? But on the other hand, I haven't seen Chimera exhibit much moth-like behavior. In fact, if my

previous observations are anything to go by—which, granted, isn't much—it doesn't seem to act like any creature I can think of. It never eats, and while it does lie down, it doesn't seem to sleep. It seems to be most active at night, when, much to Bradley's dismay, I can find it standing near a moonlit window, its entire body shaking with . . . I can't tell if it's joy or pain. It has yet to make that awful noise again, so it may very well be the former. I wonder . . .

Not that I've ever voiced my suspicion; though time has passed, my own judgement of the situation has not. No one is barring me from interacting with Chimera. Well, no one has said so, at least. But doubt on what to do about my situation keeps me at bay. I spend most of my time out of the house, walking up and down various blocks with no set destination in mind. Trapped in the high-speed pinball machine that is my mind.

I'm not sure I want to keep this thing a secret much longer. I want to do something, what can I do? Raquel and Bradley both seem to have a handle on this. David's keeping his distance. I don't think I trust Bradley. But I do trust Raquel and David. And they trust Bradley. But they don't trust each other. So who the hell can I trust? Myself? Ha! What good can I do? I have nothing to offer. Four years—no, over twenty years to learn things, learn how we work and why we work—twenty years and I've barely figured out my own self! How can I hope to know more than them? How can I hope to know what Chimera does? What will it do? Why does it do it? Why will it do it . . .

10:47 PM, June 11th, 2015

Today, Bradley lost his hand.

And although the rest of us are currently sitting in the lobby of the ER, after having driven him over, I don't think any of us feel much sympathy for him.

Once again, I am struggling to make sense out of what I just witnessed, though this time, I'm not sure which part of the day was the worst offender.

Up until this point, Chimera's presence, while still a secret, had become a regular thing. And that included its effect on the three active residents, I noticed. Bradley was still writing, observing, and prodding obsessively. Raquel kept trying to find new ways to probe Chimera's hypothetical psyche, though persistent as she was, I could see her lack of visible progress was starting to get to her. David was still jittery, anticipating the inevitable point where this monster snapped. Chimera itself had become less and less mobile over the course of those weeks, and in the last two days, remained almost exclusively beside the rear window each night.

This very night, as the rest of us were getting ready for bed, David, quietly as he could, entered the kitchen to retrieve a late night snack. But as he attempted to leave, he told us, Chimera's next action stopped him dead: the neck suddenly and sharply twisted and bended so that those crazed eyes were now staring at David upside down. David had no clue, nor inclination to find out what was going on; no sooner had Chimera jerked its neck than he had grabbed the biggest knife from the counter and flung it straight at it. As he put it, due to his flustered state, the knife missed the dislocated head, and instead bore its way into Chimera's chest.

The ensuing screech, far worse than the noise it had made on the first night, was more than enough to wake the rest of us.

"What happened?"

“Get this thing out of here!” cried David, “Now!”

Half-intending to follow through on that order, I first moved to pull the knife from Chimera’s chest, but Raqeul stopped me.

“Do you want her to bleed out?” She scolded, “Don’t touch that knife!”

“Well do something to shut it up! My ears are going to blow!” cried David.

“Agreed! Other people are gonna hear this!” Bradley hissed.

Again, with much uncertainty, I stepped forward to try and resolve the issue, but when Chimera’s movements became more erratic, David and Raqeul pulled me back back. The screeching siren then stilled for a moment. Then it brought one of its spindly arms down on the countertop with the motion and force of a hammer, and the marble counter cracked. Chimera steadied itself and stared at the three of us, all white with shock.

The smashed countertop was all the incentive David needed to take charge of the situation. Ignoring anything the others might have said, he grabbed the still-buried knife and roughly yanked it out.

“In hindsight, that was really stupid,” he told us here in the lobby, “guess I thought I’d be putting the poor thing out of its misery. And keeping you safe of course.” Raquel and I had both smiled at him, before our moods soured again.

Keeping us safe was clearly the last thing on Bradley’s mind.

Chimera recoiled the moment the knife was pulled, and for a moment, David hesitated. But the sight of its double-irises urged him on; he swung the knife again, aiming for the skull.

It never hit the mark because Chimera was faster; it struck David square in the stomach with its spindly arm, which was enough to send him tumbling across the room. It then for no

reason apparent did the same thing to Raquel, who had only moved an inch in a fright. I just stood there, at a loss for what to do, as usual, even in this potential life or death situation.

That's when I noticed Bradley standing behind Chimera, eyes fixed on it, and not me, nearly as crazed as Chimera's own. In his hand was his notepad, and not the pesticide. His interest was in it and not us. Not in our lives. Not in the lives of his friends he asked to trust him.

No, I'm still not sure if Chimera picked up on any of my thoughts, or if what happened next was pure coincidence. One moment it was in my face, bearing down on myself, David, and Raquel. And the next, it swung itself around to face Bradley. For a moment, all sound had left the neighborhood. And when it returned, it was an obnoxious shriek. Not from Chimera, but from Bradley. I'm still struggling to properly visualize what happened, but I can at least say what I did see. First, Chimera's supposedly tiny mouth opened wide as a snake's, revealing a horrifying set of teeth that resembled broken glass. Then, again like a snake, it lunged forward.

I blinked.

When my eyes reopened, Bradley's hand was gone. Chimera's mouth was once again sealed shut, with a new bright red paint job smeared across it. Silence, save for Bradley's whimpering. Finally, Chimera moved. Moved towards the front door. Without acknowledging any of us. Forced the door open without turning the lock and handle. None of us tried to stop it.

Then Chimera shook out its arms and from those arms unfurled leaf-like wings and then it used those leaf-like wings to pull itself into the sky and then it disappeared over the rooftops.

Then it flew away.

Where it's gone too, who else might have seen it, and what will happen to it are not the questions on our minds right now. We're all tired, and I'm sure the only thoughts Raquel and

David can spare at the moment is on the hard, hard lessons they are going to teach Bradley once he is discharged.

I myself am nodding off, my heart no longer pounding, and my head no longer a pinball machine. Not at the moment, at least. Right now, the only thoughts I can spare is to the potted fern right beside my chair.

I don't know why this is where my mind goes.

I suppose it's just a strange thing . . .

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