

Bruce Beasley

Toward a Poetics of Monstrosity

1.

Pound writes somewhere that poems are all “pith and gist”: all core, that means to me, all crux, all inwardness. As Rilke asks in another context, “Where for this inside is there an outside?” The poem for me is a monstrous body, its surface all exposed inside, brain and lung and heart chamber and viscera, appalling and fascinating to stare into.

2.

My uncle, a physician, dislikes ambiguity, the untestable hypothesis. He used to call me up after reading my poems and bellow that I was “just an intellectual snob.” “You need to write a glossary for each of your poems,” he’d insist, “to EXPLAIN YOUR SYMBOLISM so people will know what the hell you’re talking about, man!”

3.

“When the monster comes along,” Rosamond Purcell writes, “the ground begins to slip.”

4.

Italians have an expression I love: *rimanere in forse*, to “remain in perhaps,” not to know, for a while. Like Keats’ negative capability, it’s a soothing respite from the “irritable reaching” of the intellect toward knowledge and fact. A *dispossession* of the experience. To stay in perhaps, to linger with the eroticized body of the temporarily or permanently unknown.

5.

“Look, Daddy, there’s paradise,” my four-year-old son Jin said to me one day. We were cleaning our way through an old junk drawer. When I finally distinguished where in the mounds of old coins and photographs and crumpled playing cards he meant me to find paradise, I saw two garish red casino cubes; pair o’ dice.

6.

The conjoined bodies, the multiple personalities of each word. Homonyms coinhabiting the same flesh of letters. Each word’s legions of selves struggling for primacy. *Passion* is suffering, is emotion, is rage, is zeal, is lust, is the Crucifixion. With language as its body, how can poem not grow excrescences, overlapping limbs? Obliquity, extremity: the too-much, the not-enough, the ill-understood, the anomalous mix. *Ellipsis*, a leaving-out, means etymologically “a leaving in.”

7.

The *monstrance* is the jeweled container that holds aloft the consecrated Host.

8.

Monstrous: extraordinary in a way to incite wonder; deviating greatly from the natural: malformed; having the appearance of a monster; shockingly wrong.

9.

The monster is created to give an outward form to a banished inner extremity: a dread, a rage, a *passion* that can't be made to stay inside, can't be acknowledged as our own. The *monster* (from *monore*, to warn; *monstrare*, to show) is what warns us, what shows or *demonstrates* us: a prodigy, an omen, urgently interpretable and nevertheless deeply alienating and strange.

If a poem is a place of extremity—emotional, linguistic, spiritual—no gloss is going to assimilate its monstrous body—phoneme, syllable, image, chant, word.

10.

In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a man of straw without a brain, who *thinks*, obsessively, about how much he wants the capacity to *think*. Brain-craving, Wizard-craving, though the Wizard's no wizard, and the brain he gets is anything but a brain. Adam and Eve, wounded by the violent act of being-made, being torn asunder from one body into two. The twenty-year restoration of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, as if not only the painting but the sacrament it depicts—matter turned to spirit, bread to sacrificed body of Christ—could revert to some original state of wholeness. The *restoration* (spiritual, psychic, emotive, cellular) of my nephew as he undergoes another kind of violent sacramental transformation through chemotherapy and radiation to drive the leukemic cells from his blood. I mean to *estrangle* the ordinary story and its language. Let its monstrous body emerge: portent, omen, monstrance-gleam. Stuck for a while at least in *perhaps*. And that's *what the hell I'm talking about*.