

“The offspring of an improbable liaison between Surrealism and the American vernacular, these poems will get under your skin. This is poetry as discovery, and what John Leax found implicit in the tabloid headlines is rich and strange indeed.”

—John Wilson, Editor, *Books & Culture*

“In *Tabloid News* John Leax probes the mythic underbelly of the American unconscious with hilariously unsettling results. By applying method to the madness, Leax shows us the tragicomedy lying within ‘fear and desire.’ These poems are fun-house mirrors, reflecting back to us both our need for and our dread of the Other. And yet they also demonstrate a yearning for metamorphosis, for an ultimate union in which beauty and ugliness are made one by grace.”

—Gregory Wolfe, Editor, *Image* journal

Tabloid News

Also by John Leax

Reaching into Silence (1974)

In Season and Out (1985)

The Task of Adam (1985)

Nightwatch (1989)

Country Labors (1991)

Standing Ground (1991)

Grace Is Where I Live (1993, 2004)

Out Walking (2000)

Acknowledgments

Books & Culture: “Meet the Amazing Half Man Half Pig,” “Montana Police Shoot Bigfoot” and “I Want to Have a Space Alien’s Baby”

The Chaffin Journal: “Bizarre Creature Spotted in Louisiana Bayou”

Image: “Adoption Agency Sells Shaven Apes as Human Infants” and “Duck Hunters Shoot Angel”

The New Pantagruel: “Baby Born with Antlers,” “Smartest Ape in the World Goes to College” and “Real Life Cat Woman Found in the Ozarks and She’s Looking for Love”

River King Poetry Supplement: “World’s Fattest Twins Arrested for Stealing World’s Fattest Cat”

For James Calvin Schaap

Contents

Preface: Writing <i>Tabloid News</i>	15
Epigraph	19
Leaping Turtles Invade US	21
Baby Born with Antlers	23
Adoption Agency Sells Shaven Apes as Human Infants	25
Smartest Ape in the World Goes To College	27
World's Fattest Twins Arrested for Stealing World's Fattest Cat	30
Dog Makes \$60 Million Modeling	33
Bat Boy Is Missing	35
Meet the Amazing Half Man Half Pig	37
Duck Hunters Shoot Angel	39
I Want To Have a Space Alien's Baby	43
Merman Caught in South Pacific	45
Bizarre Creature Spotted in Louisiana Bayou	47
Montana Police Shoot Bigfoot	49
Real Life Cat Woman Found in the Ozarks and She's Looking for Love	51

Preface: Writing *Tabloid News*

In the fall of 2001, a month or so after the destruction of the World Trade Center, a tabloid headline caught my attention as I stood in the checkout line of my local grocery store: “Leaping Turtles Invade US.” With the usual mixture of amusement and wonder the tabloids stir in me, I looked more closely. Then the accompanying image registered. Large snapping turtles had clamped onto the breasts of a group of women gathered at a pool and were pulling them to the ground.

The evening before, I had been reading the poems of Pattiann Rogers. I delight in her inclination in poems such as “Suppose Your Father Was a Redbird” to suggest an oddity and then explore it. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did; right there at the register her poems and the image before me came together. Two lines sprang into my imagination, *Suppose one could believe the tabloid headlines. Suppose the stories under them were true.* I went home, went to my desk, and allowed them to play out into a poem apart from any logical or decorous censor. When I had exhausted the impulse, I had before me an oddball thing I assumed I would neither publish nor repeat.

The following spring, yielding to a whim and a need for comedy, I tacked it onto the end of a reading I gave at the

Calvin College Festival of Faith and Writing. Afterwards, a friend said to me, “So, you’ve written your 9/11 poem.” I was stunned, for I had not associated the attack of the turtles with the attack on the Twin Towers. But my friend was right. The horror of that September morning had emerged unbidden in the dark comedy of my poem—so also had my fears and uncertainty about our militant responses.

I went out from the reading reevaluating my poem and wondering if the creator of the tabloid story might not have been deliberately touching something buried in the consciousness of the paper’s readers. A few weeks later, when another headline, “Baby Born with Antlers,” caught my eye, I realized that a deep desire for connection to things other than ourselves lay beneath the outlandishness of the headlines. Nothing else I could imagine could explain the regular presentation of the half-human half-animal monsters in the tabloid features. Then I recalled the late nineteenth-century fascination with Darwinian “missing links” that led to the carnival displays of freaks and the horrendous racism of the sideshows. That fascination also lived in the tabloids. Desire and fear. The inseparable linkage of the two explains the tabloid imagination.

I decided to follow the headlines and interrogate them. I would ask of each, “What desire, what fear is represented here?” And as I found answers, I would make poems. I set myself rules: I would not buy the tabloids. I would work only with the attraction of the headline and the image. I would make up my own stories, and I would respond only to headlines that joined humans with animals or some “other” such as a space alien or an angel.¹

Over the next two-and-a-half years I would find a

surprising poignancy in the tabloids, a constant longing for transcendence and an equally constant though tragic fear of the animal body. Curiously, though the tabloids disappeared from the racks, in all that time I never saw one purchased. I never put a face with the longing or the fear that moved me as I wrote.

John Leax
Fillmore, New York
December 10, 2004

¹I violated my rules only once. A month or so after I wrote "Duck Hunters Shoot Angel," a follow-up headline, "Angel Forgives Duck Hunter," appeared. I couldn't resist opening the tabloid to learn the rest of the story. Across from that story I found the tale of the young woman who loved the space alien.

*Suppose one could believe the tabloid headlines.
Suppose the stories under them were true.*

Leaping Turtles Invade US

Suppose a leaping turtle launching himself
four feet into the sultry air to fasten
his hooked beak in a woman's breast
and dangle as tenderly as a jewel.
Or suppose, lacking sufficient spring to reach
the breast, the turtle settling
for the vulnerable lower groin of an unsuspecting male.

Suppose one million turtles
possessing the reported temperament of killer bees
were heading north from a Mexican mountain camp.
Would you go out? Would you risk with your lover
a pondside stroll or a tryst beneath the shade
of a willow overhanging a sluggish stream?

You know you wouldn't.

You'd arm yourself against the terror
with a heavy-bladed kitchen knife
or a monumental cudgel or a pilfered .45.
Your first thought would be the thought of war
and your second would be of soup.

Suppose, this once, the headline has it right—
except for a small confusion about the leaping beast
that seizes the nurturing fount,

the engendering source.
Suppose that beast is you.

Could you doubt that turtles, outraged,
might adapt, give natural selection—their place
in the present scheme of things—the old heave-ho,
build their bodies and master martial arts?
Could you doubt that, shaped and disciplined
by persistence and age, they would emerge,
shells trimmed to a minimum weight,
muscles toned to steel by four thousand leg lifts
and as many painful squats, prepared to leap?

Suppose that leaping turtles are the active voice
of nature's long endurance.
Forget war. Forget soup. Think truce.

Baby Born with Antlers

Might we assume that he is a he?
Perhaps not. The antlered whitetail
familiar to our autumn woods
is a buck, but the reindeer doe
is antlered into spring.
There is no absolute in nature
on which to ground our thought.

We may, however, assume the mother bore
her child in pain. Look at those things!
Eight points, a rack for Boone and Crockett.
Let's hope the antlers were soft
and malleable, floating like golden locks
during the passage down the dark canal,
only hardening at the shock of air.
Or perhaps the birth was breech.
Either way, we may assume the child
cried at the slap of birth. There's nothing
new in that, nothing to report. But did
the mother cry? What did she think
when the midwife placed the child,
wet and wriggling, in her arms?
Did she scream, blurt out, "Monster!"
and push the double-natured thing away?

I think not. I think she recognized

her image in its flesh and loved him,
though she'd no warning of how,
when she nursed, she'd have to guard
her eyes from the sudden lifting
of his head. I think, when she first
held him, tenderly exploring his small
body, her hand touched a tiny hoof—
a baby born with antlers
would have, at least, two hooves—
and she thought, almost absently,
that she would purchase him a flute.

Adoption Agency Sells Shaven Apes as Human Infants

It could not last long, the sweet innocence
of the slightly flattened face,
the pink cuddliness of the body,
razor nicked and dimpled.
Nor could the simian strength, the quick
dexterity of the fingers,
or the precocious mobility be hidden.

Too quickly the ape-child would grow.
Tucked into bed, it would not cry.
It would take, instead, the bright mobile
suspended to stimulate its eyes
in its hand and swing easily from
the crib's confinement, drop to the floor,
break doors and locks to reach the warmth
of its mother's body, and climb
to ring its arms about her neck.

What would her observing husband think
as she moved about the house, their
dearly bought darling growing darkly
hirsute at two months, grinning
from her shoulder, smacking its lips
anticipating pleasure?

Would he be charmed or terrified?

Would he, looking into the eyes
of his wife, find tears, a fear matching
his own that something was awfully wrong?
Or would neither see, their need
to love—greater than any disappointment—
make the ape-child beautiful,
speak to its nature and give it a soul?
Would they in the fullness of time
take it to a priest for baptism?

And if they did, would you, a congregant,
rise up like an unwanted guest
at a wedding to announce a reason
why ape and child cannot be joined?
Or would you sit quietly,
watch the priest pour water
over the head so that it splashed
into the font of every blessing?
And if it splashed, a sparkling droplet
landing like spittle on your eye,
might you be changed, blessed?
Like the mother? Like the father?

Smartest Ape in the World Goes to College

Knowing the admissions department was by law committed to a policy of nondiscrimination, he applied. His test scores were excellent and no campus visit was required. In reply to the question, “What do you expect to gain from a liberal arts education?” he wrote, “It is my goal to become fully human.” His ambition led, of course, to admission into an honors section. Orientation caused him fear—he wasn’t sure how to dress, and housing worried him—he couldn’t decide if coed or single-sex was best. He went with coed, figuring life in the presence of women might be uplifting. Online registration allowed him to avoid actually meeting with his advisor, though he felt the exchange of emails valuable and enlightening. Concerned that classmates and professors might find his vocalizations awkward, he chose large lectures over the intimacy of smaller classes. But he could not hide. He moved with an animal grace that attracted women. His speech, slow and often withheld, also worked against him, his reticence projecting

a deep vulnerability and awakening
needs he meant to rise above.

He received many invitations. Shyly
he made excuses. He invented a girl
at home and retreated to his books.
He studied hard, played no sports,
and told no tales of conquest or
betrayal. Men thought him a bore.

For many months he was happy,
undisturbed in his belief
he could, by thought, add cubits
to his stature. He read Thoreau:
*I know of no more encouraging
fact than the unquestioned ability
of man to elevate his life
by a conscious endeavor.*

Then a darker, upstart poet
troubled his upward dream
of mobility. Descent with
modification suggested all
was chance. To be human marked no
final elevation, no end
achieved. Still the inward cry
of aspiration kept his soul

in motion. If Thoreau had found
within himself a half-starved hound,
a pilgrim saint, and learned
to reverence both, he too could be
a husband of the wild and walk
at peace in the sun-bright
wilderness of his division.

One day in Spring, invited
by a sprightly girl to picnic
in the college woods,
he took his chance in hand.
Beneath the trees, they touched
a wisdom not at all provincial.
The baying of a hound once lost
was heard as far as town. The saint
inscribed a poem in the bark.

World's Fattest Twins Arrested for Stealing World's Fattest Cat

Reportedly each weighs a ton and a half.
Seated side by side, brother and sister,
they are two slumping mountains,
the kind you find in coal country,
giving in to gravity, tailings at their feet.
Nothing about them is stable.

The twin on the right is called
Bald Mountain, for he has shaved his pate.
He is full of donuts and laughter.
The twin on the left is called
Black Forest, for she is hairy,
full of cake and melancholy.
Both are stay-at-homes.
They sit like comic monks and ruminates
on their hand-to-mouth existence.

Bald Mountain reads Nero Wolfe
and dreams of tending orchids
in a glass house. In his mind
the world is rational. In his heart
the world is Krispy Kreme.

Black Forest broods before a window
open to the street. She would like
to be in love, but the only man she knows

is her brother. She keeps a journal,
writing down what she sees—daffodils
in spring, mums in fall. Someday,
she hopes, Bald Mountain will read it
and be pleased—perhaps write her a poem.

It is Black Forest, at her window,
who sees the cat overflowing
the jogging stroller being rushed
down the street, taking all
the exercise it desires
breathing in and breathing out.

Black Forest is stunned by the weight
of glory. Her stomach rumbles.
She cuts a wedge of cake, stuffs it
in her mouth and chews.
It is not what she wants. Mumbling,
she points. Bald Mountain laughs
at the crumbs tumbling like a landslide
down the sunlit slopes of her breasts.

Then he too sees the cat—
resplendent, a long scarf flying
from the folds of its orange-striped neck,
a yowl of perfect delight

trailing in the wake of its coming.

That its cry signifies nothing
more than the promise of tuna
means nothing to Black Forest,
means nothing to Bald Mountain.
Vision has awakened in them longing,
and longing has stirred faith,
faith to move mountains.
As one they rise, push out the window,
and avalanche across the yard.
Neither grass nor shrub nor tree
can slow the crush of their desire.
All fall before them.

They snatch the cat—its owner
screaming for help, retreating,
terrified before their rude descent.
They clutch it to themselves,
name it Beyond Desire.

It snarls, turns ugly and scratches.
Black Forest hides her face.
Bald Mountain lets loose and weeps.
A siren calls in the distance.
The mountains do not move.