



**World's Fattest Twins Arrested  
for Stealing World's Fattest Cat**  
*Complete story page 30*

As Seen in  
*Books & Culture!*  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

WordFarm Post

# Tabloid News

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## Duck Hunters Shoot Angel



The thing was coming straight at me, head high across the open water, and it was big. I pulled up and let loose with both barrels, dropping it ten yards out. I turned to the dog but it wouldn't retrieve,

just hung back in the blind whimpering. It was twice her size anyway. Harold, my partner, nearly blind himself with keeping off the cold all morning, just stared, muttering . . .

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*poems by* **John Leax**

“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

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## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

*<sup>1</sup>I 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.