



ERIC BASSO
BESTIARY

Poems
2008

Bestiary



ALSO BY
ERIC BASSO
FROM
SIX GALLERY PRESS

POETRY
Earthworks



FROM
ASYLUM ARTS PRESS

FICTION
The Beak Doctor
Bartholomew Fair

POETRY
Accidental Monsters
The Catwalk Watch
The Smoking Mirror
Catafalques
Ghost Light

DRAMA
Enigmas
The Golem Triptych
The Sabbattier Effect

ESSAYS
Decompositions

DREAMS
Revagations

ERIC BASSO

BESTIARY



POEMS
2008



OBSCURE
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 BESTIARY

The Dream of Orpheus

I found him in a tenement
he whose music charmed
the Lord of the Dead and
drowned the Sirens' fatal song
lay sprawled on a soiled mattress
lost to a sleep as deep as death

long ago in Erebus his lyre
dropped into misting waters
Charon leaned over the gunnel
watched it sink into the Acheron
and ferried Orpheus toward
a destiny so painful that he no
longer knows the name Eurydice

he dipped his head in Lethe's river
to forget her and now dreams only
of the beasts his lyre could not tame

January 21, 2008

Neurapod

it reads the words
one letter at a time
between the dust flecks
then a window rises
in the deep of the page

that loathsome chisel
has a heart even when
it chips mercilessly
at the marble's skin
to free new flesh beneath

a wood thrush lands
on the sill just before
the shriek of a siren
in the narrow alley
drives it off again

and every night the same
guilty whisper tumbles
down the backstairs
seeking ghostly absolution
for the uncommitted sin

Pursuit

a string tugged by an empty space
comes apart in your hand
leaves you nothing but the fear
a stalker you must shadow
before it can escape the house

no map for the blind pursuit
some streets you cannot place
take on the vague familiarity
of a half remembered dream

at every corner's turning
the thing you long for
the secretly dreaded wraith
always just out of reach

is it your own history or
a jumble of random letters
inked in a dank scriptorium
setting this unwanted future
to a past you never lived

Downpour

sorceress in a twin peaked wimple
all but the eyes lost in linen folds
she sits under the charred harp
where the spider is crawling
points to the chalice of poison
and before cup touches lips
fire funnels from a far hill
dimming noon sky to blood
and the earth to ashen rain

this is a falling ground for
dreams of Bosch and Brueghel
the rebel angels land softly
and begin the black pilgrimage
in their wooden shoes

August 27, 2008

Okulantropus

a long name for
such a small thing
a solitary eye
irising open and shut
rolling in salted reeds

not even an eye
no lids or lashes
just a jellied sac
focusing an image
no brain can see

stare for too long and it
becomes a fiery mirror
trap for a soul at bay

you'll see a face there
the mask you will wear
at the hour of death

Heliolyte

no thicker than a hair
it feeds on sunlight
forms a hoop at night
a glowing filament that
flickers with pulsing sap

by day the heliolyte seeks
refuge in purple mallows
becomes one more bristle
amid the furred flowers

some believe it's the fuse
seeding the mandragora
the tree of what men call
the earthly paradise

others take it for a halo
divinity's spinning diadem
above the tonsure of
an insect saint

Mek

you feel the humming
under your boots
as it comes from
a great distance
in the blink of an eye

no time to flee
your only hope is
to remain in place
as the mek churns its
bladed rotary jaw
just below ground

that jaw is a guess
the rest speculation
for no one living has
ever seen a mek

does it detect you by
your body heat by
the scent of fear or
is some other squeak
of betrayal at work

if it moles a circle
three times round
all memory of life
up to that moment
forever falls away

February 14, 2008

Arcturope

it knows by instinct when
the guardian star is high
and glows bright orange
to light the confines
of its shallow world

once it was guardian giant to
the bear but now arcturope
is a dwarf cringing in
a dark drawer
last and most enfeebled
of its once proud species

a desk in some musty attic
shields it from its shadow

arcturope shits out in fear
small buttes of blue ice
harder than the diamond
and far more beautiful

Klythora

once every four years
the drooling oyster lip
wreathed with auburn hairs
in some waterless waste
when the moon is full

turn and go back
the way you came

the klythora dines on sand
smoothes the grains over time
into a pink pearl

a pregnant woman closes her
moist palm on klythora's jewel
and gives birth to a monster

a man crosses klythora's path
and the hunger lures him
to his feast of doom

Triomaton

it sleeps in the cracks of walls
but always with one eye open
to the slightest movement or
sound beyond its flinty bed

your presence summons it from
a dream and as you grow used
to the dimness a stain spreads
then coagulates into some
new continent of desolation
on the most barren of maps

it reads your stare through to
a nameless dread behind the eyes
forces a second metamorphosis
that happens outside time
as triomaton calls you to witness
a retraction in the continuum
behind its rippled quiverings

when the tide is stilled you become
the man with blue spectacles
gaping into a past that may
or may not be your own

mesmerized by the face of
someone you lost long ago
a face you have never known

March 13, 2008

Blurm

this is the variable beast
the thing you come back as
in the life after the one
that takes place now
and it's never the same twice
because the former gives spawn
to the latter and so on down
fleshly corridors of hope and fear
to the hour of mass extinction

the gods savor a humor
that will never allow us to
believe in their existence

each incarnation they devise
is just for the sport of
seeing saint become sinner
turning victim into torturer
and criminal to executioner

last life's derelict wears
a crown without memory
and we are all one
with the variable beast

Pfelq

a wasp trapped indoors will
glue itself to the ceiling sucking
the plaster's marrow for nourishment

pfelq seeks comfort from
the horror vacui below as it
clings without conscience

an agreement almost a convention
requires me to withhold use
of the ladder and the swatter

they're shooting the film without us
pfelq and I will never know how
it began or how it must end

enough that what others see
is the blind side of us both
the flea's distance only we can cross

Vivurka

I think I saw one once
on the Charles Bridge in Prague

the vivurka is said to be
indigenous to Central Europe
but only the mad monk
Theodoric of Melk has left us
anything like a detailed description
which hardly anyone still believes

for what I saw on the bridge
was nothing more than a blur
a churning of dust by wind that
changed direction several times
before it scampered off to
the tolling of a vesper bell

if the vivurka exists at all
it must be in constant motion
day and night to survive
for not even the whirlwind
can reconstitute itself after
being destroyed by destroying
everything that lies on its path

if the vivurka sleeps does it die
or stir endlessly in its dream

is it the haunting ground
of a perpetual insomnia
the needful ghost we dream
to make the illusion real

April 24, 2008

Xythegarp

that head the shape of an upturned
nineteenth-century bonnet cradling
its breadloaf of exposed brain keeps
wobbling because no two of the beast's
seven legs are alike or of equal length

the seventh leg of xythegarp would be
called a tail if it did not hang from its neck
and drag the ground slowing the creature's
slouch toward the stones of a Bethlehem
the silt sank centuries before its birth

two men in a plowed field feel
their skin stiffen to linen as xythegarp
thumps across the path they'd hoped
would bring them to a quiet supper
to a sleep untroubled by dreams

Loërpis

patches of sky veined by branches
smear their traces across a glossy spine
which slithers through thick mud

the faded scrawl inks black again
the false letter of Prester John
tells of ants that dig for gold

where the bodies were dragged when
it was over no one can say but
some northern forms remain

the man I had become did me no good
when it looked straight at me
choked up some muck and gasped out

all my life the only thing I've
ever wanted was to live in
a room with gothic windows

Morcavall

one version of the legend
a grove of trees at the edge
of their father's field

the three sisters were gathering
walnuts after the rain when
they came on a depression
in the grass where some squirrels
had abandoned their hoard

as the girls filled their baskets
the ground sank beneath them
till its slopes deepened
into a wall that had no part
of grass or earth

a dark voice echoed off the stones
and the sisters learned they had
come to the House of Morcavall

you three will be my wives
because your father
seeing that his wife loved
her black stallion far beyond
any passion she bore for him

caused a sorcerer to cast
the spell which turned me
into a mere man
and this is my revenge

March 21, 2008

Cantharidopt

that spy from the Great War
who never let her face be seen
except by candlelight kept
a green blister beetle in a tank
under the cellar steps

she nurtured the insect for years
with toothed aloe leaves and fed
on its erotic essence to lure
her lovers to their doom

a beetle and a woman became
mutual parasites over time
and lost every memory of
what they once had been

the huge green thing we found
rotting on the parlor carpet
was soon swept into a bin

only later did we come upon
a woman half a finger's length
in that tank below stairs

Icopteryx

in the year of grace 1307
a drunken chandler whose
name is lost to history
took the wrong turn home
stumbled into a peat bog
and was sucked under
or some said swallowed
by a bald creature whose
scaly wings were strung with
necklaces of human skin

the centuries between are
a forgetting of that meal
a Buddhistic face remains
embedded in the cliff

no way now to purge
the suitor's scrofulous flesh
he's as old as I suspect
says he wants to marry
my dead sister and I've
a mind to let him do it

Afanil

that day in the Campo de' Fiori
when they burned Giordano Bruno
bark beetles stopped the sap
of another tree from flowing

expulsed by the Triumphant Beast
Bruno remains where he stood
hardened into an ashy wreck
a time traveler seen by those
whose time he travels in as
frozen on his journey through
their lives which to him are
the blur of a single moment

November 30, 2008

Gabiortza

east wind brings on tainted rain
leaving a film of blue dust on
our street after the downpour

that's when one will appear
walking along like any passerby
a gabiortza stops under my window
unlids the top of its head
lets out a purring darkness

a bleak foam pearls down
encasing it in a mummy mold
two men can easily carry off

we do not fear the gabiortza
you will say I am mad
but I'm as sane as you

how can a beast matter when
we know the dust the rain brings
must eventually kill us all

Foscularis

that rush you get coming in
out of the noonday sun to
the cool dark of the Café Caligula

it's really a bar because Café goes
with Caligula better than Bar
and if you lie on the floor under
one of the tables you can expect
the best service the finest wine
women and song on offer

the Beaujolais you ordered stays
untouched on the table above but
that has nothing to do with
the reason you've come here

it's the foscularis you wait for
the snorrry speech and perfume
of the woman you've most desired

everyone hates you once
but foscularis despises you forever

she snake slithers up to you
and her ribbed convulsions

tease out an ineffable ecstasy
the rapture of apocalypse
on a beer drenched floor

March 24, 2008

Gleeth

the shark was rotting in my trunk
I'd have to get rid of it fast before
the stench became noticeable but there
wasn't time to think about that now

the lizard had already stopped crawling
up my leg I couldn't find any trace of it
and didn't even try to calculate how
much time would be wasted in a search

the chimp sitting to my right bought
the next round of drinks and I settled
into what was hoped could pass in
a place like this for a meditative state

maybe I was still in the grip of paralysis
no one had told me what to expect when
the bellboy unlocked the door to my room
and we saw the gleeth crouched on the rug

over the years its sallow eyes have come to
haunt me with a sense of exile I can't shake
though we slammed and locked that door
and no one ever entered Room 209 again

Phallosaur

yes and it's an embarrassment to
the entire city a public humiliation
so I'll spare us both a description of
the head and neck except to confirm
the creature has no eyes no nose
just that spout of a mouth which
drenches our roofs and streets
with its disgusting spittle

even on the hottest afternoon
we keep our windows shut
and never venture out without
a large umbrella for protection

the latex factory manager tells us
they're working day and night to
come up with the obvious solution
but no one believes this

killing the phallosaur would be
as great a violation of our sensibilities
as the beast itself and so we wait
impatiently for it to die

the bees sleep soundly in the crocuses
the rest of us kick at the sheets
desperately trying to resist
the recurring dream of being
beaten at chess by a blind man

July 10, 2008

Monster

the first happy man
takes broth through
a straw in his nostril

the first happy man
trades in his Mercedes
for a horse and buggy

the first happy man
picks lint from your jacket
with a fine tooth comb

the first happy man
sticks his toe in your
glass of vintage wine

what is more horrible
than the unfettered joy
of the first happy man

the sad man takes out
a contract on the life
of the first happy man

when a monster arises
in our midst drastic
measures must be taken

September 12, 2008

Night

what lured me to her
the scent of raw skin
the secret stink of lust
that knows no obstacle
it cannot conquer

the lamps go out
we lie in blackness
as a single beast

when sleep comes
we will dream of
the empty clam shell
on the ocean bed
till the fish wake us

October 28, 2008

Crypting

now available on DVD
the snout sucking worms
from the sand into its nostrils
the infant gnome's life story
from birth to the doom
preceding the resurrected life

a sense that the evidence
makes the data obscure
that those involved are gone
to their deathbeds or the grave

free to live your life
don't give a thought to
the clock stopped in the cellar
the runes foretelling prophecies
that can never come to fact
or to your own illegible claw

October 25, 2008

Somniarque

the chained dog howls
at the end of the yard
oil into blue smoke

the moon tonight
a crescent thinned
to its ragged edge

the daughters lie
on straw asleep in
their wooden crates

trailing a stench
to raise the dead
Scorpio comes home

squats in his shadow
beside what has kept
me awake for hours

Trimaldus

the minstrel sings of
its wingspan
it has no wings
the peasant goes to church
on its promise of salvation

a failed paraclete hovers
above no head in benediction
wears the mask of forgetfulness
but remembers everything

I walked along the wharf
Trimaldus found me there
and said do not believe
even in yourself

that light in the water is
the sunken tongue of fire
neither you nor I have
any right to claim

Teratologist

Turin under siege 1536
the boiling oil has run out
nothing left for him to cauterize
history's earliest gunshot wounds

forced to improvise
master barber-surgeon Paré
concocted a dressing of egg yolk
turpentine and oil of roses
that worked so well
the boiling oil was
never called upon again

contemporary of Montaigne
Ronsard and Nostradamus
Ambroise Paré developed
a passion for monsters
kept a prized collection
pickled in jars and tanks
on the top floor of his house

he dissected some of them
and here they float
stilled in a green drowning

behind dulling glass
lighted by fog lamps
for the nocturnal visitor

December 15, 2008

Lessness

if there is lust
even in this afterlife
we cannot come to crime
or know the ghost it brings
to haunt our dreams

it must crawl these streets
take pity in the puddle
of a vacant sky
let the windows of the house
where we lie sleeping
shut it out as
the last star dims
above the wall

September 24, 2008

House

the taste in my mouth reminded me
of something that happened long ago

the house I entered had become
a monster a breathing entity teeming
with hideous lairs of life it was
a refuge for the calm beast in repose

these were not rooms halls or stairs
but cavities drenched in sweat
arteries sucked of blood still echoing
the faint pulse of its absence

here the prophecies were boiled
then hung out the windows to dry
their ink fading in weak sunlight

here I witnessed an instant
in an impossible future

your ghost stumbled out of
a dark wall to embrace me

Orpheus Awakening

how long have I been asleep he asked

no longer than the blink of an eye I said
as I welcomed him back to the black
pit of Tartarus that neither of us
had left in the instant of his dream

the strangest thing about him
was that he looked so ordinary
like someone you'd pass in the street

December 22, 2008

Escutcheon

who will answer for
the stain on the wall
the wrinkles in the sheet
the random shadow forcing
a face from the rug that
brings a beast to life again

the ponds and their mirrors
dissolve as the trees fall
with no hope of a rising
this duneless desert is
lush for the grazing of
the heart that snores in
a creature yet to be named

January 30, 2008



ERIC BASSO was born in Baltimore in 1947. His work has appeared in the *Chicago Review*, *Central Park*, *Collages & Bricolages*, *Fiction International*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and many other publications. His novel, *Bartholomew Fair*, is available from Asylum Arts Press. He is the author of twenty-one plays. His critically-acclaimed drama trilogy, *The Golem Triptych*, the complete short plays, *Enigmas*, his play, *The Sabbattier Effect*, a book of short fiction, *The Beak Doctor*, and five collections of poetry, *Accidental Monsters*, *The Catwalk Watch*, *The Smoking Mirror*, *Catafalques* and *Ghost Light*, are available from Asylum Arts Press, through the Leaping Dog Press. Asylum Arts Press recently published his *Decompositions: Essays on Art & Literature 1973–1989* and *Revagations: A Book of Dreams 1966–1974*. Six Gallery Press published *Earthworks*, his seventh collection of poems, last year.

Bestiary is the third section of Basso's eighth collection of poems, *Barbarous Radiates*. The first two sections, *Shoals* and *Petroglyphs*, were published by Obscure Publications last year.

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Jim Basso



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