

Creature Features

by A. D. Coleman

Animals of various kinds and sizes inhabit us, depend on us, become our parasites and symbiotes, thrive on our excretions and sheddings, provide us with theirs, stalk us, serve as our prey, nourish us, and feed on us while we live and after we die. A tapeworm will set up shop in your intestines, the "doctor fish" of Turkey will nibble away your psoriasis lesions, a tiger will eat your pulsing heart, worms and flies and ants and beetles will devour your corpse.

They'll do this while showing no compunction, without a qualm or second thought, simply as part of the natural order of things. Nietzsche wrote, "Insects sting, not from malice, but because they too want to live. . . . [T]hey desire our blood, not our pain." Nothing personal, as the mafiosi like to say; just business.

Which suggests that such philosophical and ethical concepts as "animal rights," vegetarianism, and "cruelty to animals," unique to homo sapiens, are, strictly speaking, sentimental notions, because they involve no reciprocity. In general, with the exception of domesticated beasts like dogs, cats, and horses, most creatures respond indifferently to the pain and suffering of any but their mates, offspring, and (in some cases) herd or tribe. As a rule, they use even their own kind, and certainly every other genus and species, with alacrity, and without pangs of conscience. Why should we expect different behavior of ourselves?

This book of George Malave's raises that question by bringing together two different but related groups of images. The first set had its inception in 1967, early in the photographer's career, when he decided to take his camera to a live-poultry market he'd first encountered on childhood shopping trips with his mother. "Watching an animal being beheaded changes one's perception of life, and at such an early age it stays with you," Malave says. In the decades since, he has returned again and again to the scrutiny of animals. His subjects here (including some he observed at that very market) are mostly dead: slaughtered and prepared for consumption as food, stuffed for display, awaiting dissection. In one instance, they're graven in stone, gargoyles; in another, cast

in metal. A few are alive and unharmed, or were when these images were made.

From the evidence he provides, we require remarkably little visual data to identify at least the creatureness of other species, even those with which we have relatively little contact. From the tiniest clues we distinguish them from plant and mineral forms, regardless of how thoroughly civilized we have become. A hardwired facility, no doubt, never far below the civilized veneer. And recognition of these features inevitably brings with it a taste of anxiety, because somewhere along the evolutionary ladder these beings parted company from us but still reveal our kinship. That chicken foot doesn't look so very different from your own hand, does it? That horse's eye could be your own.

A grim dread hangs over these images, which confront in blunt fashion what we do to animals other than our own kind while implicitly proposing how we treat each other. Malave produced them using conventional photographic techniques for interpretive description: standard black & white film, single exposures made with a small camera, proximity to the subject, strategies of framing, selective depth of field, thoughtful printmaking from the resulting negatives. Reduced to shades of gray, what would feel lurid, melodramatic, and gory in color becomes emotionally manageable. Malave's creative decision allows us to move past repulsion into the close attention to detail he asks of us as we consider the fragments he isolates, and their implications.

The second set of images gathered here evolved from the first. It represents a project begun early in the 1970s as "a way to intensify the sensation of the otherness in things. . . . They became what they are by accident first, then by intention." For these, Malave has digitally "flopped" or reversed sections of negatives that show half of an animal's face, then seamed them together so that each side mirrors the other. By this method he generates what appear as portraits of beings whose visages are identical on both sides.

Something very deep in us — as deep, perhaps, as whatever lets us tell animal from vegetable and mineral — instinctively reads this as unnatural and, indeed, uncanny. We maintain a subliminal awareness that, Janus-like, we each carry two faces, manifesting that perception in our decisions as to which constitutes our own "best" profile. The disruption of this natural imbalance has an extremely unsettling

psychological effect. That's evident when photographers use this device with human faces, as they sometimes do. Malave demonstrates that it holds true for visual play with animal faces as well.

Demonic essences seem to emerge from this hybridizing process, intensified further by the fact that Malave did not always photograph his subjects head-on to start with, so they acquire new facial and head shapes that we read as photographically credible yet biologically awry. Especially, of course, the impossible Cyclopean entity that stares at us through its lone unblinking eye.

From Eadweard Muybridge in the 1880s on, photographers have looked closely at animals — in the wild, in captivity, untamed and domesticated, alive and dead, imaginary and real. They've also considered our treatment (and mistreatment) of other species in all of those situations. To name just a few contemporary figures who have produced extended bodies of work on those subjects or even devoted their entire output to it, we have James Balog, Peter Beard, Kate Breakey, Keith Carter, Barbara Norfleet, Elliott Erwitt, Richard Misrach, Sandy Skoglund, Joan Fontcuberta, and Rosamund Wolff Purcell. So Malave with these projects joins a large and distinguished cohort. But it's hardly a unified chorus; the perspectives of the above-named figures and many more range from affection — even reverence — to alienation, and from the detached to the highly personal and emotional.

Malave's work has its own distinctive flavors. Nightmarish images, these visions of his, though quietly so. Which set affects you as the most grotesque? Which seem the most dream-like: the real victims of our appetites for food and spectacle and inquiry, or the imaginary revenants? Take your pick. They all have an implacable quality, but not a particularly malevolent aspect. If these symbolize the animal spirits that come for you when it's your turn to serve as entrée or entertainment for the rest of of the animal world, then it seems they'll take you down with no hard feelings, presumably doing to us as we have done to them. Nothing personal. Just business.