

# Poetic menagerie

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The Faber Book of Beasts  
edited by Paul Muldoon  
Faber 295pp £14.99

**T**HE trouble with Ted Hughes, a Marxist critic once told me, is that sooner or later he is going to run out of animals. Yet here is an anthology, edited by celebrated Irish poet Paul Muldoon, which aims at speaking out in defence of beastliness in all its manifestations.

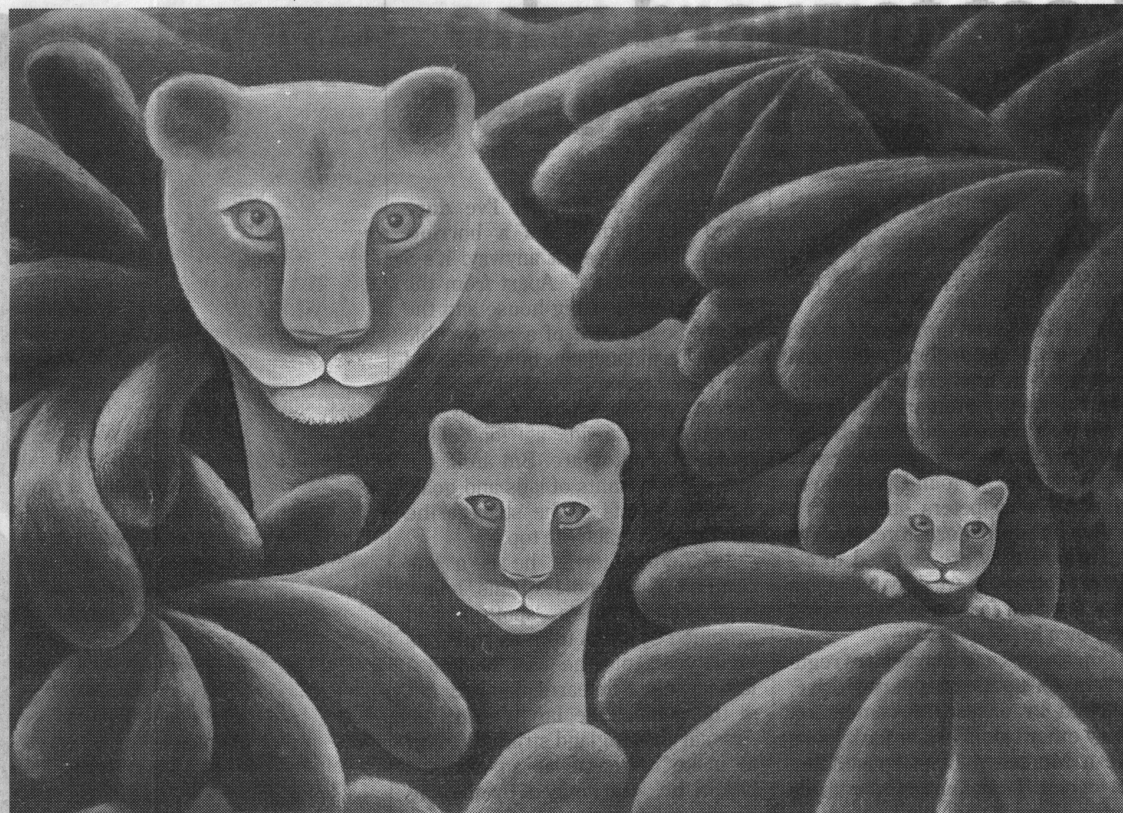
Muldoon casts his net wide in The Faber Book Of Beasts, and gives more of himself away than he does in the oblique fables of his poetry. Jettisoning the usual anthologist's principles of chronology and arrangement by author, he has placed more than 250 animal poems by 112 authors in alphabetical order according to their titles. While this strategy gives the impression of randomness, one suspects that the final selection of poems has been determined by their running order — for it can surely be no accident that Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" appears immediately before an extract from George Chapman's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* (the very same "loud and bold" version of Homer that Keats himself praised in one of his sonnets). Muldoon writes in his introduction of the private pleasure he has taken in bouncing one poem off its neighbours, but the arrangement does make it hard to look up a particular piece if you cannot recall the exact title.

Nevertheless, there is enough here that is unfamiliar and delight-

ful to appeal even to non-animal-lovers, and one of the literary trends Muldoon identifies is that of the bawdy beast-poem. What, for instance, are we to make of the anonymous "I Have a Gentle Cock" (final lines: "And every night he percheth him / In my lady's chamber")? Or the moment in "Song of Myself", Walt Whitman's spermatic hymn to the natural world, where the poet becomes excited about the "gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses"? It seems that some poets who find inspiration in the animal world (D H Lawrence would be another good example) are inclined to anatomical frankness when writing about the beast with two backs, but Muldoon has also unearthed a euphemistic counter-tradition of riddling animal verse in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

La Fontaine's fable about the grasshopper and the ant reminds us that there is a long history, stretching back to Aesop, of using animals as the instruments of allegory. James Joyce, incidentally, re-works this story in *Finnegans Wake*, transforming a charming tale about insects into an ugly story of rivalry between brothers; and Joyce plays on the near-rhyme of "insects" and "incest" when his narrator dreams about sexual relations with his daughter. But insects lost whatever charm they may once have had after Kafka published *Metamorphosis*, and that slur on their good character is probably irreversible.

Among 20th century poets, few have written more beguilingly about beasts than Marianne Moore (1887-



Eden, by Jerzy Marek: Animals waiting to be named by Adam and other poets?

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1972), whose poems, like the fabulists of antiquity, use animals in the pursuit of moral inquiry. Moore's exotic beasts — jerboas, basilisks, pangolins — are not observed in their habitat, but seen through the lens of the *National Geographic Magazine*. Moore's mastery of the outrageous comparison may be seen in her poem on the snail, where she reflects that in nature, as in poetry itself, "compression is the first grace of style."

One of the virtues of Muldoon's

Book of Beasts is its ability to make familiar things look strange — such as Baudelaire's poem "The Albatross", given a new vitality here by Ciaran Carson's excellent translation ("Brought down to earth, his gawky, gorgeous wings impede his walking"). Some of the other inclusions, such as Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", are well known, but could not properly be omitted.

As we should expect from Muldoon, the choice of entries is quirkily

intelligent and hardly ever predictable. It is a shame, though, to see two authors left out: Peter Porter, whose poem "The Last of the Dinosaurs" should have been an obvious choice, and Ogden Nash, whose lines on the rhinoceros are timelessly bad:

*The rhino is a homely beast,  
For human eyes he's not a feast.  
Farewell, farewell, you old  
rhinoceros,  
I'll stare at something less  
preproceros.*