

# The Parasite Poems

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## **The Tapeworm is not the Problem: *Dipylidium caninum***

Take the cestode for its lack  
Of body cavity or reproductive tracts,  
Its swirl of egg and larvae,  
It encysts. You see its segments that grow  
Wider than long until they are gravid  
And break off:

Proglottids, the glob of pieces,  
the aesthetic of white wriggles in stool,  
And pored, pinpricked with egg-holes  
For laying in the moist  
Steam-warmed worm home  
Of feces.

The tapeworm is not the problem  
Enterically, the dog's intestine  
Is not fileted villi, is not  
Diarrheic or diseased, is not  
Malformed by flat worms  
Or sick.

And the problem is not the tapeworm's  
Slender section of pale, stark white  
So we see them immediately  
in shifty glimmer of sunlight over dog dung,  
worm giving life to new worms,  
and spreading:

we can't keep from the fleas,  
egg packets already in feces, already  
carrying them to new dogs,  
whose new itch requires teeth to scratch,  
who swallow jumping bugs, and their eggs,  
and worm eggs, too.

The problem is there are worms leaving  
Unseemly places, and worms  
In backyards, and, imagine, feeling  
Wiggings deep in bellies,  
The shiver of something gravid

Leaving you

As it came, with stealth, and silently,  
Imagine a worm not named worm,  
But clean, alabaster, surviving,  
Shimmering tube, simplistic living,  
Imagine the disgust we attach,  
Viscerally, to worm.

Imagine the tubes and meat we keep  
Under skin to feel human  
Think, without these, we would be  
Flat-lined and in need  
Of a warm host, and moist home  
We would need

Hooks and suckers, and faces  
Like vacuums, and no one  
Would even know we were there  
Until we left, until we made new of us,  
More of us, and we would say  
This is all we need.

## **Fasciola, Prometheus, the Eagle, Augury**

### I. Fasciola

This is the liver full of flukes:  
Tar pigment teased trails,  
Trapped flats without pores,  
Cirrhotic nodules, pocked  
Specks of pecked flesh,  
Tissue hems, inflamed.  
These are the parasites,  
Platyhelminths, named:  
Magna, for size, hepatica,  
The lesser, the common,  
The finding on necropsy  
You get without many  
Signs, without much  
Suspicion but the plenty  
Of snails, with right-handed  
Shells, in the cow pen,  
The good host for young  
Flukes beginning, learning  
Migration through bodies,  
Through feet, first, then out  
Opposite ends, onto leaves  
Of the wet grasses cows eat.

### II. Prometheus

It's no surprise the liver  
Resembles a snail's foot,  
In that soft-shape way  
That way that makes you  
Want to touch, to feel  
As something other feels,  
Makes you want to be  
The water washing salt  
Away from snail's feet  
The liver, expert filter,  
Must be more feeling  
To know what to keep  
And what to bleed out  
In bile than the heart  
Pumping blood through  
It twice, as if it's unsure

About being in charge  
And so fragile with power,  
And the liver so capable  
Of taking pain in drink  
Or drug or for the sake  
Of some parasite,  
Regenerative, forever.

### III. The Eagle

We know that organs  
Look different after  
Infection, but what  
About the difference  
Between a few inches  
And the sky, what about  
The colors, up-close  
You might find, each time  
You look after leaving,  
After feasting, *imagine*  
Your feast returning,  
As you glide off, the air  
Of dead tissue fading,  
Imagine eating the same  
Thing every day your whole  
Life, never changing, what  
Zeus knew about eagles  
Was their taste for good meat,  
Imagine it changed with each  
Meal, Prometheus' liver,  
Once fluked, once toxic,  
Once green with bile,  
Each different from the Eagle's  
Last, imagine this liver  
Rearranged, recreated,  
Even becoming a new liver  
After each meal, a sicker  
Liver, but a real one,  
A good one, for the scavenger  
To return, liver after liver  
After liver after liver to eat.

### IV. Augury

This is medicine telling  
A new story, predicting,

From entrails, disease,  
And what the world  
Might know, years  
From now, this:  
Livers reorganize  
Futures, apparently,  
They are incidentally  
Nodular, reliably  
Reliable, and sturdy.  
Pick a piece of flesh  
For later and listen  
To the organ, listen  
Like an eagle, head-hole  
Ears peeking through  
Feathers slicked back  
With blood, the last  
Meal painted dark  
Across tympanic  
Membranes, the eagle,  
Who knew how to read  
Food, who knew a new  
Day would hold more  
Yet, more liver to peck  
At, more pieces to read,  
If sick, if parasitized,  
If lumped with old scars,  
The liver is a new study  
Every hour, a new groove  
Every minute, new blood  
Beating through it,  
The liver is predictable,  
Unreliably, the liver  
Is fortune telling sick  
Bodies new medicine.

Sonnet for The Many-Named Louse:  
*Papillon d'amour, Pthirus pubis, The Pubic Louse*

Why *do* you think this louse would want to live?  
this lazy flightless buzzard sucking skin  
for pleasure, creeping, crevice-finding itch  
that crawls a nest in coarse-haired places, then,  
in folds of flesh, it burrows claws, and head,  
and teeth until it must not breathe a breath  
of air unless it's dander filled, or dead  
integument. A hungry ick who lets  
its eggs, like glue, create another bug  
of short and ugly build. Relationships,  
it relishes. It shares itself, a drug  
of lust. Unsealed, this louse's crusted lips  
might wheeze: it lives for *this*: the product of  
*desire*, crab louse, *Butterfly of Love*.

## Questing

If anything is to be said of blood suckers  
It is their prayer,  
Questing. Eyeless,  
Their scent  
Glands will find you.

She is a real scientist,  
Questing for truth.  
Her truth is labor,  
Hot sweat and yard sticks, measuring tape

The truth of ticks is resilience.  
How many days without—  
Do they live—  
What do they fast for?—  
Before

She finds them clinging to vessels  
In her skin. And to the cloth net  
She drags behind her,  
Along the twenty or so feet  
She's measured out.

They have fallen,  
The ticks, from the air,  
It seems. And landed on plant  
Stems, and looked back upward,  
Front legs creating their waiting  
Pose, hands, did they have wings  
Once? Toward heavens,

At least toward her.  
She is sweet, she is good.  
She is life-blood  
And she is here to find them,  
and count them and give them a name. She is unafraid

Of the bloodborne,  
Of the quick pinch  
Of saliva leaking disease  
Of mouthpart inoculation.  
Of her hungry worshippers, finally feeding

After months, she is used to running

Fingers through thick crusts  
In her hair at night, used to picking  
Hard specks of blood off her skin,  
And putting them in petri dishes to identify  
Under microscopes.

The truth of ticks is not a truth at all,  
But a motivation, for life,  
A reliance on flesh, an admirable  
Commitment to the best host, and the best blood.

She studies them, species supposed to be  
Quarantined, diseaseless ones,  
She peels off and leaves,  
But she is the end  
For the one or two she needs for samples.

“If anything is to be said of the blood suckers,”  
She thinks, “It is their belief, in something good,  
It is their quest for warm blood,  
It is the cement in their spit that keeps them loyal  
To things that can’t pick them off,  
For as long as they can live.”

## **I Have Goat Lice On Me: Physical Exam And Anesthesia: Remembering**

I.

On me, Bovicola,  
Usual ruminant chewer

B-o-v-i-c-o-l-a  
Caprae. The goat louse

Head and body louse, itchy,  
The head and body

Ratio: 2:1: Big  
Head for biting

And body, useless,  
Half that width.

II.

I got this bug  
From being

Thorough while I took  
The heart rate,

Breaths per minute,  
Temperature,

Of a Boer goat  
With thin muscling

A tiny frame,  
Lumbar spine

Like a bony purse  
Handle to hold

While rearranging  
Anesthetized body parts.

III.

How could this goat,  
Asleep know

It was crawling  
With the little beasts

And how would  
It feel, anyway,

The hold of their tiny  
Feet on its head

With almost no reflexes  
Left to twitch at them?

IV.

Goats like to stop  
Breathing

Under gases.  
Rubber bags

Filled with drug  
And oxygen

Pump their lungs,  
My hands squeeze

The bag at three-to-four  
Breaths per minute

At five minutes,  
I scribble a heart rate

On an anesthesia sheet  
With a temperature,

And my man-made  
Breaths per minute.

V.

There is no time  
To itch when learning

How to keep  
An animal alive

But we itch anyway,  
Because lice don't

Sleep like their hosts do.  
We don't scratch

With the gloved hands  
Contaminated

With all manner of goat,  
Or busy with breathing bag,

But with the pen  
We sometimes hold

In our mouth while checking  
The patient's vitals.

VI.

Even though  
Bovicola don't belong

On us, we find  
Them later, still

Scratch them out  
Of our hair, still

Curse the slow  
Waking of our goat, still

VII.

For as long as we had  
To hug the infested thing

To hold her upright,  
We watched

Her heart speed up  
And her lungs move

On their own,  
Even breathing,

Until a cough  
Tells us to extubate

And stand her up  
On the floor again

Already forgiving her  
Her infestation,

And reliving her  
Anesthesia as the first

Time we brought a goat  
Back to life.

VIII.

This is how we remember  
The lab work,

Procedure, the record-keeping,  
Because we remember

What crawled on us  
That day, weeks ago

When we were so  
Thorough.

IX.

We are always already  
Doing something else

By the time we find  
Them, crawling still

On our skin, even  
When we go to sleep,

Reminding us still  
Of the skills we still

Need to know in a week,  
In a month, in a year,

And longer, and still  
We itch to remember,

Goat lice and anesthesia sleep  
And we dream slow

Heart beats and breathing,  
And parasites even,

And the longer we wait to wake  
Up, the itchier we get.