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The Dream of a Beast
By Neil Jordan
Random House, 112 pages

An advertising man awoke one morning to find himself transformed into a beast. Sounds like a creative writing class assignment in Kafka parody, granted, but Neil Jordan's fantasy novella may well prove one of the more original and prized imports of the year.

Published six years ago in England as *The Dream of the Beast* and told in a stunningly poetic voice with Poe overtones, this is the tale of a suburban Everyman who suspects his "eyes had been given a different focus" than most others, who hears gardens singing a "symmetrical hum of praise" to the afternoon and then realizes their song is in fact the hissing of lawn sprinklers. But facts have little to do with the world of this story. It is a tale--and this is where it does resemble Kafka--conveying dreamlike internal experience directly.

In his advertising office, the nameless narrator lays out a campaign for the scent of musk. When he smells this arousing animal scent on the woman who has given him the account, something deeper than his civilized outer layers responds, and his transformation begins. Jordan foreshadows the change early--the man reads his daughter bedtime stories of mythical beasts and unicorns; he does not make love with his wife but, using Iago's image, they "make the beast with two backs"--still the early clues pale beside the relentless power of the actual metamorphosis that has just begun when he meets the musk-scented woman a second time at the zoo. There they make love, beauty and the beast, and he feels an all-consuming joy: "joy I knew then was that word for when beauty was not only seen or heard, but felt from inside."

His change to beast progresses, near nightmarish at first in its strangeness. He stalks through the comforting darkness of night, human again only in his dreams. The dreams, which include an incestuous longing for his daughter, would seem perverse had the narrative voice not already swept us from a realistic to a surrealistic world, where the ego's rules of civilization are merely the artificial fetters restraining who we actually are. He dreams his daughter "came towards me and kissed me. The kiss was a brief one, but in the quick withdrawal of her face from mine I sensed a torrent of emotion. I looked into her eyes and saw them at once angry and pleading for kindness. I knew then she was in love, she had been in love and felt mishandled. . . . She called me by a name then, not my own, and it dawned on me that she was in love with me. . . . The light surrounding her was oblong and tall, suiting her proportions. Then the light changed and all the angles softened and I was staring now at a circular orb as rich as morning. There were rainbows in front of my eyes and the multitudinous curve of those hairs once more."

Increasingly, the nightmarish air clears as we sense the man is journeying down a primal course that regresses from its societal veneer toward the places and forms we've come from. Moving backward along the evolutionary path, he heads toward the place that lies on the other side of fear. A boy keeps him company and suggests that, like corn, he may be shedding his protective covering by achieving perfect form. He befriends a bat who teaches him how to fly. As the man/beast leaps into the air, Jordan too momentarily leaves his former element, dipping below the mythic tale into the considerably weaker didactic parable to let the bat preach a flash of Buddhism--"To fly cleanly you must learn pure desire, a desire that has no object. Any attachment to things of the world leaves you earthbound once more"--and of Platonism--"There is a city, he whispered, to whose shape all cities aspire."

But before he is in any real danger of turning this into *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Jordan assumes an even more mythic mode, the tone becomes "like a dream that was dreaming itself," and the narrator and boy plunge into our first element, the sea, a sea that tastes like tears. They traverse the waters and emerge at a place where the man incorporates the dying boy within him, reunites with his wife who has incorporated their daughter within her, and they merge in a kiss in the middle of a garden suggestive of Eden. As the book closes, its atmosphere has changed from haunting fear to near-beatific *deja vu*, a sense that we have come home and know the place for the first time.

The book works on many levels where it would have been easy to fail, and where many have failed before. It poses questions ranging from, "What would it be like if the products we advertise literally had the effects we suggest?" to "How can we paint the landscape of our collective unconscious?" That it evokes memories of the animal regression in the film *Altered States* with none of the disappointing gimmickry of that film's ending may be due in part to Jordan's own impressive film background, writer and director of the 1982 thriller *Angel* (released in 1984 as *Danny Boy*), *The Company of Wolves* (1985, awarded Best Director by the British Critics Circle), and *Mona Lisa* (1986), all films reflecting Jordan's absorption with myth and dreamlike imagery.

Irish-born Jordan, now living in Los Angeles, has written acclaimed fiction before. His *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories*, published in Ireland in 1976, won the Guardian Fiction Prize and established him as one of the more inventive young writers to watch. *The Dream of a Beast*, a compelling and significant novella, should bring his writing the widespread American attention his imaginativeness, depth and skill deserve.