

OFF RADAR: 'What Rough Beasts: Poetry/Prints'

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By Dana Wilde

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WHAT ROUGH BEASTS

**POETRY/PRINTS
Leslie Moore**



In my acquaintance with Leslie Moore I've always known she has a fascination for animals, especially wild animals, and especially spiders. But I did not really understand the extent of it until I got to read her new collection of poems and artwork, "What Rough Beasts."

The 40 or so poems in the book are playful, wry, vivid expressions of encounters with animals in the neighborhood. And the two dozen or so expertly reproduced drawings and prints, some black and white, some color, sharply evoke the homespun mood of the poems. And packaged in the plain-spoken, down-to-earth imagery is a preoccupation with what is going on in animals' minds. This is more complicated than you might think.

The idea that you can sense what others are thinking or feeling is called in philosophy "theory of mind." To vastly oversimplify it, there is no empirical way to know the thoughts or mental experiences of anyone besides yourself. In other words, you have no direct experience or knowledge of another person's mental world, or if there is even any mental world other than yours in the first place. (Some philosophers are so uncertain about the existence of other people that they've made disturbingly detailed arguments for the idea that all the world's a computer program and all the men and women merely apps.) So based on perceptual clues (such as smiles or frowns) and on what people say about themselves, we all go around with the working theory that other people have thoughts and feelings like ours. A theory of mind.

Leslie Moore clearly has a highly active theory of mind that extends beyond humans. In many of her poems we find her in touch, or trying to be in touch, with the mental world of animals. "Daddy Long Legs, Pholcus phalangioides" begins:

We view each other with mutual suspicion,
the bathroom spider through all eight arachnid
eyes, and I, a two-eyed towering monster.
Convinced I'm trying to drown her
when I turn on the tap, she eight-foots it
out of the tub, all thin-limbed, flexible,



"What Rough Beasts: Poetry/Prints" by Leslie Moore; Littoral Books, Portland, Maine, 2021; 84 pages, paperback, \$18.95.

and fragile. Fears I'll step on her
as we do a mismatched minuet
across the tile floor.

In these lines, she's clearly imagining that the spider's scurrying implies it is feeling suspicious and scared. This could be just a simple, fun, romantic projection of human emotions onto a non-human creature. Or, it could be more. As I believe Leslie is well aware, there's scientific evidence suggesting spiders can, after a fashion, think ([see Backyard Naturalist, April 7, 2021](#)). And so maybe this story from the bathtub is more than mere playfulness, and a true expression of some strange intersection between human and arachnid consciousness.

And maybe there are even more intimate intersections. In "After the Splash," the speaker of the poem and some unspecified companion (maybe Leslie's husband, [Tom Moore](#), former poet laureate of Belfast) look out from their porch to see "a bird floundering in the cove" amid spray and pounding wings. "It's a bald eagle and my heart thrashes with it," the speaker says. She is feeling the bird's frantic fear so fully that she feels compelled to try to go its rescue. It turns out the eagle is quite capable of righting its own situation and "doesn't need me". But the empathic emotion felt by the human is nonetheless real. You get the feeling emotions are not just intersecting, but being shared with the animal.

Of course, there is no empirical evidence that any sharing is going on. What would "sharing emotion" even mean in neuroscience? On the other hand, this is poetry, which is frequently not empirical but often true anyway.

There are poems in "What Rough Beasts" about crows, coyotes, woodpeckers, squirrels, bears, snakes, butterflies, frogs, the family dog and the neighbors. The title poem (based on a line from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" forecasting civilization-wide cataclysm) is about a red-tailed hawk coldly monitoring blueberry barrens for prey while elsewhere a feral mob attacks the U.S. Capitol. Maybe the hawk has its own theory of what the mob's fractured mental world is like.

I have no way of knowing what the author's intent was when she made these poems and artworks. But I do know "What Rough Beasts" is a book by a multimedia artist of infectious curiosity and inventiveness.

Leslie Moore lives in Belfast and is a participant in the [Wheelbarrow School](#) of poets and the Winterberry Collective of printmakers based in Waldoboro. "What Rough Beasts" is available [online](#) and through local book stores.

Leslie will be reading from her book 2-4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 23, at Cove Street Arts in Portland, along with Gary Lawless and [Katherine Hagopian Berry](#).

Off Radar takes note of poetry and books with Maine connections the first and third Fridays of each month. Dana Wilde is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Contact him at [\[email protected\]](#)

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