

The Book of Imaginary Beings is inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' encyclopedia of fantastic zoology of the same name.

I. The Monster Acheron

Only one man ever saw the monster Acheron, and that, but a single time.
Acheron was larger than a mountain.
Its eyes shot forth flames and its mouth was so enormous
that nine thousand men would fit inside.
Two of the condemned, like pillars or caryatids,
held the monster's jaws open;
one was upright, the other upside-down.
The beast had three gullets; all vomited forth inextinguishable fire.
From the beast's belly there issued the constant lamentations
of the numberless condemned who had been devoured.
Inside the monster [were] found tears, fog and mist,
the cracking and crushing sound of teeth,
fire, an unbearable burning sensation, a glacial cold,
dogs, bears, lions, and snakes.
In this legend, Hell is an animal with other animals inside it.

II. Sirens

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us and we drown.

- T. S. Eliot,

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

III. The Squonk

Few people outside of Pennsylvania have ever heard of this quaint beast,
which is said to be fairly common in the hemlock forests of that state.
The Squonk is of a very retiring disposition,
generally traveling about at twilight and dusk.
Because of its misfitting skin, which is covered with warts and moles,
it is always unhappy;
in fact it is said, by people who are best able to judge,
to be the most morbid of beasts.
Hunters who are good at tracking are able to follow a Squonk
by its tear-stained trail, for the animal weeps constantly.
When cornered and escape seems impossible,
or when surprised and frightened,
it may even dissolve itself in tears.

IV. The A Bao A Qu

On the staircase of the Tower of Victory in Chitor,
there has lived since the beginning of time the A Bao A Qu,
which is sensitive to the virtues possessed by human souls.
It lives upon the first step in a state of lethargy,
and comes to conscious life only when someone climbs the stairs.
On each step, the creature's color grows more intense,
its form becomes more perfect,
and the light that emanates from it shines ever brighter.
Proof of the creature's sensitivity is the fact that it achieves its perfect form

only when it reaches the topmost step,
when the person who has climbed the stairs has become a fully evolved
and realized spirit.
When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain,
and its moaning is a barely perceptible murmur
similar to the whisper of silk.
Down through the centuries,
the A Bao A Qu has reached perfection only once.

V. The Western Dragon and the Eastern Dragon

In the West, the Dragon was always thought of as evil.
One of the classic feats or labors of the hero

was to defeat and slay a Dragon

~~

Time has considerably tarnished the prestige of Dragons.
We believe in lions as reality and symbol;
we believe in the Minoatur as symbol, though no longer as reality;
the Dragon is perhaps the best known
though also the least fortunate of fantastic animals.
It strikes us as puerile, a creature of childhood,
and its puerility contaminates the stories in which it figures.

~~

Lung, the Chinese Dragon, is one of the four magical animals;
the others are the Unicorn, the Phoenix, and the Turtle.
The Dragon of the Western World is terrifying in the best of cases,
ridiculous in the worst;
the *Lung* of Chinese tradition possesses divinity
and is like an angel that is also a lion.