

Beastly readingⁱ

An animal poetics of parchment:

Witness each manuscript – a stack of dead
animal parts, flesh cleared, skin stretched, blood spent.

Heed the old riddleⁱⁱ that speaks in pigment:

A life-thief stole my world-strength, left instead
an animal poetics of parchment;

the bird's once wind-stiff quill, in an ardent
scribe's hand, dipped ink, tracked black on my bed
of animal parts, flesh cleared, skin stretched, blood spent,

hair and sinews pumiced smooth to vellum meant
to receive the word for true heart and head.

An animal poetics of parchment:

Consider a codex so corpulent,
five hundred sheep or moreⁱⁱⁱ in one book read
on animal parts, flesh cleared, skin stretched, blood spent.

Glorious books, promising man's ascent,
abide on flayed hides of beasts now centuries dead.

An animal poetics of parchment.

Animal parts, flesh cleared, skin stretched, blood spent.

Shirley Pendlebury

Notes

ⁱ The poem draws on Holsinger, Bruce. 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal.' *Modern Language Association, PMLA*, vol. 124, no.2, 2009, pp. 616-23.

ⁱⁱ The twenty-fourth (in some editions, twenty-sixth) riddle of *The Exeter Book*, a tenth century anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry. In gesturing towards the riddle, I borrow three short phrases from Craig Williamson's translation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Codex Amiatinus* required over 500 hides.