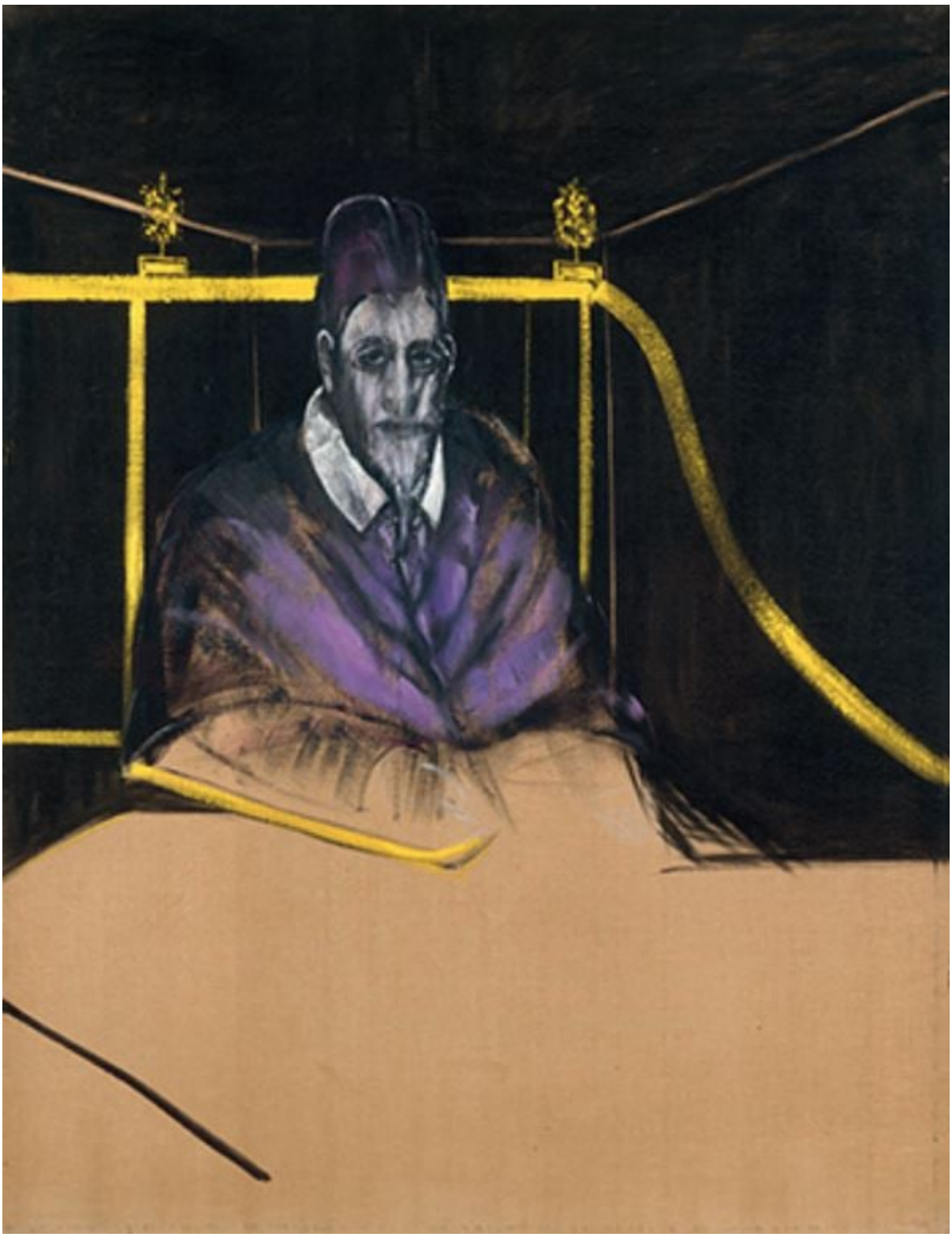
I Am a Beast, a Monster Grown

by Matthew Wardour (April 2020)



Study for Portrait I, Francis Bacon, 1953

The waves soared until they seemed to meet the moon. Then they hurtled towards the promenade in military unison. It was as if an army were coming. Soon the shore had reached the town centre. Billy was running as fast as he could, yet he hardly seemed to move.

The water was within feet of him when he saw, surfing on the tip of the foremost wave, a man in a Victorian bathtub, his hands gripped onto each side as if he were steering it. He was dressed like an old-fashioned lifeboatman; he may well have been a lifeboatman. He grabbed Billy and pulled him into the bathtub.

"The moon comes hither!" he roared.

Billy looked up at the sky and saw the moon grinning back. It seemed to move with the waves—or rather the waves with it. Billy became convinced it was marshalling the waves.

"We ha' but little time," said the lifeboatman, jerking the bathtub to the left. "Hold thy breath; for a great wave cometh!"

Looming over them was the top of the wave. "Haste!" said the lifeboatman, handing Billy a teaspoon. "Thou'lt ha' to emptieth mine vessel, lest the water take us and drown us; then smother us till come that heavy sleep."

The wave crashed over them; Billy frantically tried to empty to the bathtub with the teaspoon. "It's no use!" Billy shouted; "there's too much water!"

"Over yonder," said the lifeboatman, "I espy a steep hill to descendeth. Thou must keep us afloat for but a moment longer: thy spoon, boy, thy spoon!"

They managed to land atop the hill but were poised

motionless on the tip. The lifeboatman scrambled to the other end of the tub. “Come hither, boy!” The bathtub slowly tilted downwards and began skating down the hill at a great speed.

As they descended the bathtub transformed into a horse and carriage, the lifeboatman into a driver, and the waves into a flock of bats. Then, nearing the bottom of the hill, the carriage became a limousine, the driver a chauffeur, and the bats a flock of pigeons. The pigeons flew away and the flood ceased. The limousine then stopped and the chauffeur showed Billy out. The moon had disappeared and stars overwhelmed the sky. Billy found himself at the entrance of his house. The door was ajar. He crept in.

He heard the clamour of cutlery and plates and ornaments; a soft maniacal laugh followed. He walked slowly down the hallway, which seemed to extend infinitely, and finally entered the kitchen. There, hunched over the worktop with his back to Billy, was a tall lanky man in black trousers and a black turtleneck. He wore a beanie hat with an extravagantly large bobble on top, and over his shoulder was a bulging sack.

He turned abruptly to Billy: his face was long and gaunt and unshaven, and his nose was terribly crooked; he was almost comically ugly. He smirked and ran absurdly from the house.

Billy chased after him. As the thief vaulted over the garden fence, Billy attempted to do the same but became stuck at the top, balancing uncomfortably on his stomach. He began to fall head first and quickly lost consciousness . . .

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Billy’s eyelids pushed themselves open and he let out a terrific yawn. He wrapped the duvet around him and nestled his head into the pillow, content to go back to sleep. But within seconds his thoughts interrupted him: he suddenly

remembered what had just taken place, and, without wondering why he was now in bed, he leapt out, still in his pyjamas, and launched from the window and into the garden.

He must be at least half a mile ahead by now, thought Billy, *but I know a shortcut*. He darted through his neighbours' gardens. None were surprised to see him; they all picked up their phones to ring his mother, and they all said the same thing: "You'd better come out: Billy's at it again."

"Thief!" he shouted, beating his fist in the air. "I come for thee! No fence canst I mount, no tree canst I climb; for I am William Greenal—mountaineer, detective, astronaut, veteran, two-time World Chess Champion, one-time political prisoner, Minister without Portfolio, elephant-whisperer, gargoyle-tamer, phlebotomist and retired countertenor!" And with that he sang *fortissimo* the most extraordinary high A.

This was far from an extensive list. For Billy, despite being only twelve years of age, believed he had led a life more busy and varied than any one person could possibly achieve in their lifetime. He was able to sustain remarkable cognitive dissonances: he at once believed he had spent a year on Titan establishing the first colony (in addition to the three years spent travelling there and back), another several years as one of the Queen's Guards, and a further two years as an 'international' (as he termed it) rodent extinguisher. All told, this would have meant that his adventures began when he was two and a half—and this is to ignore the hundreds more he believed to have happened.

As Billy went forth with admirable speed, the familiar sound of a police siren could be heard moving towards his location. Once caught up with Billy, the policemen, after promising him they had a team in pursuit of the thief, returned him to his mother.

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"I have seen paranoia, hallucinations, personality disorders," said the doctor, "but not otherwise healthy and sane people who believe every dream they have to be true." Billy's parents had heard this all before. The last doctor had said the same thing, as had the dozens before him. They all said it with a facade of concern that barely concealed their intense fascination (though this doctor hid his less than most). They would speak in long paragraphs and with great authority on Billy's condition, by way of listing everything he was not afflicted with.

"I see no fever," continued the doctor, studying a sheet of paper through thick-rimmed spectacles, his bony fingers moving around the desk like dancers in an experimental ballet, "nor any physical sign of infection or illness or disease. Further tests indicate Billy is nothing less than a healthy boy. It may also reassure you to know that there is no change between the results of these tests and those previously on Billy's record."

Ah, here comes the point, thought Billy's father, *when the doc refers us to his colleague*.

"There is, I'm afraid, nothing I can do." He sagged back into his chair and looked up at Billy's parents with a bored expression. "I'm therefore obliged to recommend you several psychiatrists, psychotherapists, neurologists, children's therapists, and other such *creatures*."

"We've tried all that lot before," said Billy's father, "and I think I speak for both of us," –he looked to Billy's mother– "when I say we are beginning to think it's all a waste of time." He was trying to control his frustration. For this doctor had been referred to them by another doctor, and the chain of specialists ran back accordingly.

"I see, I understand completely," said the doctor,

his eyes drifting slowly and contemplatively towards the ceiling. He seemed quite unlike the other doctors they had visited, now even more so. From the beginning he seemed to be holding something back. The time had come for this unborn thought, whatever it was, to finally come out.

"Now, this is quite unorthodox—or rather unsettling orthodox—and I wouldn't normally suggest it, and moreover I cannot say it will be in the slightest bit effective." The doctor murmured indistinctly and was noticeably excited, having now broken entirely from the formal manner of a doctor. "But it did occur to me that Billy's condition might not be medical at all. Have you thought about—and please do not think me absurd for suggesting this—have you thought about taking Billy to a philosopher?"

"A philosopher?" said Billy's mother, confused.

Billy's father gave a contemptuous laugh. "That has to be the silliest thing I've ever heard. What will he say? Something like 'it's all in his mind.' Honestly, it's like going back to the Middle Ages, like science and medicine were never invented. Next you'll tell us to go see a priest and get Billy exorcised."

"Now, Mr Greenal, as you happen to mention the fact, the person I had in mind is also a theologian."

"A theologian!" exclaimed Billy's mother.

"Doctor," said Billy's father, "this is becoming simply inappropriate—a complete abuse of your authority by referring us to some wooly-minded airhead."

"Let me give you his contact information," said the doctor, clambering eagerly for his notepad and pen, "just in case you change your mind."

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And so several days later, following one particularly strange episode in which Billy was convinced he had metamorphosed into an Alpine goat, and which had led his parents to newfound levels of desperation, Billy found himself seated in a university office on a wonky plastic chair and surrounded by shelves of books and a damp air. From behind an archaic oak desk, the philosopher stared at him with warm curiosity. The philosopher was an older man with a round luminous head and grey hair that sprouted nearly a foot each side. He wore an ill-fitting red jumper which was stretched painfully around his enormity. And most curiously of all, resting on what must have been a nose (though it looked more like a sort of flattened pear), were spectacles in which the left lense was missing.

"So, Billy," said he, "I'm told you've led an extraordinary life."

Billy then related many of his incredible memories, including one he claimed to have happened but three days ago in which he won a Nobel Prize for the invention of a new linguistic-musical language to record the birdsong of the Australian lyrebird.

The philosopher began jotting something down: *As treach'rous phantoms in the mist delude.*

"This sounds like a most thrilling life," said the philosopher, still scribbling in his notebook.

"No, I'm getting tired of it."

The philosopher looked up. "Then why not stop?"

"Well I can't stop now, can I?"

The philosopher nodded and gave the most imperceptible of smiles. He placed his pen between his teeth, fiddled with one of the holes in his sweater, then spoke:

“What do you think is the purpose of your life, Billy? It isn’t a simple question, I know. Perhaps you could tell me a few things which you live for? For instance, I write and speak, and in doing so I hope to help others by revealing what is often unnoticed. What about you?”

“There are so many things. I’ve never settled on just one thing.” Billy then proceeded to list many of his adventures.

“What of your family?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Is family important to you?”

“Well, there’s much else going on, and it’s all so important. There’s other people too.”

“I see. Do you dream, Billy?”

“No, I hardly even sleep, to be honest.”

The conversation continued in the same vein for another few hours, the philosopher at first fascinated by the inventions of Billy’s mind, but slowly he became more serious and even distressed. He scribbled prolifically, although to any observer his notes would have borne no relation to the conversation.

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“It has become permissible since Freud for people to take their dreams seriously,” said the philosopher, speaking to Billy’s parents. “I fear Billy has caught the worst of this social contagion. It is true that there is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason. Yet Billy’s imagination always predominates. There

exists another poor creature who has nothing but reason, and who is thus driven mad; but Billy is not mad; merely he is a sane person who experiences life not as it is."

"I knew this was a waste of time," grumbled Billy's father.

"Be patient, dear," interjected the mother; "I'm sure he's not so daft as he seems."

"I assure you I am perfectly daft, but as far as I can tell your son isn't. I would suggest, rather, that Billy's condition results from weakness. Those weak in character are capable of far greater evil than the strong. The weak person cannot deny himself. We have to be frank that Billy's detachment and lack of regard for reality is a form of evil."

"My son's not evil!" exclaimed the mother. "He's not perfect," she added apologetically, "but he's far from evil."

"It may be an evil done unto him but it is evil nonetheless. Consider two great figures. Caligula was the weakest of men; St Francis was the strongest. St Francis may have been kind and gentle, he may have been physically weak, but his asceticism and dedication showed great strength. He showed that from poverty can come power, not weakness. In the case of Caligula, however, his strength was given to him by a system, not created from within. He was indulgent and perverted; his only power came from a governmental system in which he could evade responsibility, delegate all things onerous to others and pursue every pleasure he so desired. He was the weakest of men: he possessed no real strength except that which was given to him or stolen by him.

"Billy is no Caligula, as Billy shows no greater disposition towards sin than you or I. But nevertheless, like Caligula he draws his strength from without—from his dreams and from the actions of others which he then imagines as

attributed to himself.”

The philosopher pushed himself up from his chair, walked out from his desk, lifted up his right leg, and hopped over to the corner of the room. He then put his right leg back down and put his hands behind his back. Rocking on his feet, he continued:

“The lesson Billy needs to learn is a tough one: do not have dreams, they are an impediment to living. Like the alcoholic, he copes with his life by any means other than actually living.”

The philosopher squatted down thrice, then resumed:

“I find it particularly curious how Billy even changes his demeanor and language as the result of a dream. He really is reinventing himself each time; and so each time he travels further and further from his true self. The most important things do not matter to him. He does not think of himself as your son, nor as a resident of his town nor a citizen of his nation; he does not consider himself as belonging to a school nor to a group of friends. He thinks of himself as above all those ties that most people find most important in life. It is a characteristic way of dismissing one’s own insignificance by dismissing that of those around you.

“Everyone is insignificant, and this is no bad thing. It is a problem, however—perhaps now more than before—that most want to be significant: this dissonance will corrode what is good and true about oneself.”

He waltzed over to the side of the desk—and I use the word “waltzed” literally—then dragged the desk to the corner of the room from which he had just so gracefully danced. He then laid on the pale section of carpet where his desk had been. Moving each leg up into the air with metric

regularity, and panting and sweating monstrously, he again continued:

"The solution, however, is not to bring him back down to earth, as it were—or rather, that is only half the solution. You say you have tried to help him by getting him to socialise, to play, to watch television—to do those things you believe to be normal for a boy of his age. None of this will work. Billy has shown a predilection to reading and walking—those great idle pursuits—and indeed Creation itself quite apart from your own efforts and inclinations. You cannot engage his mind in anything else. For Billy's mind tends towards heaven, yet at the moment it is wayward, floating up but not knowing the destination it should reach. I do not refer to heaven literally and I am not seeking, at this moment, to evangelise either you or Billy or both; I only mean that Billy has a philosopher's mind, the sort of mind that produces novels and art and great music. But he has no direction for these impulses, and so he floats in between earth and heaven (again I use the term metaphorically), without sight of either the practicalities of this earth or the profundities of heaven.

"What I suggest you try is some role reversal. Act like Billy: be ludicrous, pretend you are in a dream state. Deprive Billy of all comforts. He needs to learn an obvious truth: that we are always alone in our dreams. He will eventually keep falling until he hits the ground and rediscovers earth. And it is from there that he can finally look up to heaven, rather than pretending he has already arrived, or that it could possibly exist in this life."

The philosopher lay there, no longer speaking or moving. They were all silent for at least half a minute until Billy's father, irritated, asked what the philosopher was doing.

"You know very well what I'm doing," he replied.

“I am lying down. What you want to know is why. And I will tell you: I do it because I can. Yet I also do it because I can’t. For instance, I was quite able to lower myself onto the floor, yet I am quite unable to lever myself back up—or at least, I find the prospect altogether disagreeable.”

Billy’s parents, perplexed and fed up, left the philosopher to his own amusements. It was several hours before he finally got up.

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“There are no real-life dreams,” murmured the philosopher. He put on his coat and left his study. The university hallways were dimly lit. He ventured out of the building and into the foggy November night.

“Yes, yes,” he replied to himself, “there are no mythologies … we have superheroes but no conception of real heroes . . . noble stories . . . great lives for most people exist only in imaginations . . . not even their own imaginations . . . day-to-day life is absent of what was once commonplace . . . we once believed dragons to have flown above the earth . . . we now believe we believed dragons once flew above the earth . . . ”

As he walked along the philosopher was writing furiously in his notepad; but again, these scribblings bore little relation to the words he muttered.

It is notable that in this university, where comfort and leisure were cultivated, and where the ordinary was seen with horror, the behaviour of the philosopher was considered perfectly healthy—behaviour that in normal society would make a person unemployable. Eccentricities were de rigueur, and most professors and ambitious students cultivated the affectations necessary for their chosen life. Some were bohemians and nonconformists; others deliberate anachronisms. Some were spectacularly loquacious, always eager to be the one

who makes the most ridiculous argument; and others cultivated silence as an expression of superiority. But the philosopher was not putting on an act. He behaved the same way when he knew, or at least thought, no one was watching. He was wholly himself; he was simply too oblivious to be otherwise.

His mindset was pre-rational and pre-psychological. He did not analyse himself except in searching for virtues and vices; he was a good and charitable man. He did not suffer melancholy because there have existed few men less preoccupied with themselves. He had an almost identical temperament to Billy but the opposite outlook; for he had discovered a fascination with the world whereas Billy had been repulsed by it, comforting himself with fantasy. Thus the philosopher forgot himself and Billy never could.

He stopped upon seeing an empty bus slowly driving by: 'not in service' read the screen above the driver.

"Dragons," he exclaimed breathlessly, "their existence doesn't matter … we imagined them then dismissed them . . . then we invented them . . . we were better off when dragons did not exist . . . we were somehow saner . . . the world is more wonderful without dragons than it is with . . . "

He huffed. "The dragons are dead; long live the dragons! . . . stories never end well . . . the modern has killed the myth and replaced it with fact . . . and so the power of imagination grows ever more confident . . . we are told what to believe; we do not feel it . . . poor Billy, poor Billy . . . "

The philosopher entered a field and kept walking in a perfectly straight line, over fences, through fields and woods, to a destination God only knew.

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Some months later, Billy's parents again became desperate and so decided to follow the philosopher's advice. They had removed all comfort from Billy's life. He had no means of leisure except his own narrowing thoughts; no food but that which was necessary; no books, no toys, not even pictures. His room was bare except for a mattress and a wardrobe. This had no effect except to reduce the extravagance of his dreams. They became closer to nightmares – but nightmares with the frightening simplicity of Chinese torture.

With every comfort removed, the house became a prison, his room a cell; and his parents were the maddest of prison guards. Every morning while Billy had his flavourless porridge they would get out their castanets and fandango around the kitchen table. They would then leave for work not by car, but by elephant. And when they returned home, they would spend much of their time sitting on the television watching the sofa.

None of these events would colour Billy's increasingly bleak dreams. His dreams had once flourished thanks to the normality of his past life. His life was now too confused, too uncomfortable, indeed too unreal to stimulate the sorts of nocturnal fancies he once had. Yet he still believed in those past dreams, and he even tried assuring himself that the present was itself a dream—his first ever dream, Billy thought—one from which he would soon awaken.

One day Billy had the simplest of all nightmares: an embrace by the purest darkness: no sound, no sight, no smell, no sense at all. He awoke confused. His confusion transformed into anxiety then into panic. He did not know why, but he felt entirely empty. "Who am I?" he said, punctuating each word with a strained breath. His heart gave from exhaustion, and he fell into an eternal sleep. He had lost himself. He did not die: he had ceased to exist.

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