

Hands in Kid Gloves

In the museum scriptorium, my hands,
in kid gloves, turn the leaves of a codex.

I thrill to gilded capitals, quill's bite on vellum
and black minuscule's march between margins,

marvel at illuminated gargoyles and soft-eyed cows,
smile at bored monks' marginal graffiti,

admire, oblivious to slaughtered calves from whose
flayed skins vellum was scraped, stretched and whitened.

'A life-thief stole my world strength, ripped off flesh and left me skin'
— so begins a riddle whose answer is both Bible and beast.¹

A book to guide belief, borne on hide of a butchered beast.
Whitened calf for the book, fattened calf for the feast.

Let us count our ways of crafting beasts to form our animal selves.

Shirley Pendlebury

¹ The twenty-fourth riddle (in some editions, the twenty-sixth riddle) from *The Exeter Book*, a tenth-century anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry. See Bruce Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal', *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 2, March 2009, pp. 616-623.