

centered history. In describing a friend who returned from Palestine only to get arrested, the diarist observes: “An interesting psychological process: people ‘cross over’ walls by thinking of their past or their future. In the present—‘überleben’—they survive.” — *Michael Casper*

TABLEAU

THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF COCK ROBIN

BY WALTER POTTER

CENTRAL QUESTION: *Is taxidermy art?*

Taxidermist's lifespan: 1835–1918; Animals humanized in taxidermist's oeuvre: kittens, rats, rabbits, birds; Auctioned value of taxidermist's life's work, in 2003: £500,000; Number of years taxidermist spent on *The Death and Burial of Cock Robin*: seven; Recommended if you like: Bidibidobidiboo by Maurizio Cattelan, *Body Worlds* exhibition, America's Funniest Home Videos (*the animal clips*) c. 1989–1997.

By the time of his death, in 1918, Walter Potter had stuffed more than ten thousand specimens for his museum, but his greatest taxidermy tableau remains his first, *The Death and Burial of Cock Robin*. The work, begun when Potter was only nineteen, reenacts the funeral from the nursery rhyme of the same name, which poses a series of questions such as “Who killed Cock Robin?” (“‘I,’ said the sparrow, ‘with my little bow and arrow’”) and “Who’ll dig his grave?” (“‘I,’ said the owl, ‘with my spade and shovel’”).

Nursery rhymes often contain morbid imagery: sightless mice being chased with a butcher knife (“Three Blind Mice”) and birds being methodically dismembered (“Alouette”), to name two that involve animal cruelty. Just as these verses take their unsettling power from their ability to soothe the macabre (horrific death!) into the

quotidian (memorable ditty!), Potter’s work gains depth by casting dead animals as civilized humans: a frog shaves another frog, two guinea pigs play cricket, seventeen ginger tabby and white kittens partake in colorful pastries at a tea party. So it is in *The Death and Burial of Cock Robin*: Avian mourners perch on a leafless tree while others line up in pairs behind the coffin, heads lowered; several shed glass tears. The stuffed sparrow displays his bow and arrow, the owl grips a tiny shovel at the edge of the open grave, and the robin lies tucked inside an open, faded blue coffin. (The rhyme also mentions a bull, though instead of stuffing a real bull, which would have been impossible to fit into the glass case, Potter bought a hairless and skinless model a little larger than the owl, cut off the hair from a calfskin, and glued it to the model; the result looks eerily real.) The tableau also includes characters that never appear in the rhyme: nightingale, goldfinch, hawfinch, brambling, bunting, cuckoo, butterfly. The pallbearer, a kite, is absent; kites were extremely rare, and Potter did not believe in killing animals for taxidermy’s sake.

If you find taxidermy revolting, consider human-embalming practices: we suction fluids from the internal organs with a hose, plug body cavities with cotton gauze, and fasten the mouth shut. Here is where questions of motives, or of artistic intent, enter. Both embalming and taxidermy attempt to preserve the memory of the dead, rejecting mortality in order to embrace it. An embalmer wants the viewer to feel a connection with a dead loved one; Potter wanted the viewer to feel a connection with his dead animals. Good art, Tolstoy believed, fosters feelings of “universal brotherhood.” A tableau of dead birds mourning a dead bird (posed as a dead bird) takes the connection a step further: it portrays animals as our equals in compassion, in mortality, but especially in the way we can be deadened by the death of others, the way life cannot go on and goes on simultaneously.

If you still find taxidermy revolting, consider our attitudes toward animals today: Aside from consuming them, we consider it noble to separate them at a young age from their mothers, distribute them to various households, and “fix” them so they cannot reproduce. Of course, most pet owners have good intentions. So, for better or for worse, did Walter Potter.

—*Jeannie Vanasco*