

Monkey House

by Rachel Yoder

The night before, I had been drinking at The Tombs. Down these metal steps to low brick ceilings and brick floors and brick walls and, on those walls, oars crossed in Xs and rigging and black and white photographs of unsmiling, mustachioed men laying their hands on white boats.

The waiters wore starched, white aprons so long they brushed the tops of their shoes. It was the kind of place that took itself seriously. I sat with the others in a dark booth and tipped pints of amber away inside of me. People talked around us. They made underwater noises. I moved my head from side to side, slowly. It was murky and deep. We were echoes of other people, fading from ourselves. I kept pouring amber light inside. I wanted only to purr and glow.

That night, I burst from underground to greet the latecomer, a tall, unsteady girl with an expensive camera and absent eyes. I never excited myself over her, but that night I was in love, and I ran to her and embraced her, until gravity changed us. We fell like that, my arms around her. My head hit first. I laughed and laughed, looking at the black sky.

The next morning, Adam screamed at the monkeys, making monkey sounds through the fence. The monkeys were in some enclosure called the *skyway* or *gymnasium* or another similar stupidity. There was a filmy white net around the trees and ropes and wooden platforms so that the monkeys would not escape. They swung with their long arms through the canopy. Adam screamed and shook the fence. He twined his fingers through the metal and began to crawl up the side. Small children looked at him and did not laugh. It was supposed to be funny. He was on something, but it wasn't helping.

We went to the monkey house where there was a pair of chimps behind glass. They had straw and water and shit in the corners. One played with a white bucket. He put it over his head, then beat on it and screamed.

I love them, I said, putting my palms on the glass. *Look at how I love them.*

The chimps looked at us, and we had to look back. We owed them at least that. Adam and I considered them as if we were at calling hours, our hands held in prayerful formations. Their eyes were dark and human and the saddest of all God's creatures.

We looked at other primates, small orange ones with long hair and others with big ears and oddly shaped heads and rings on their tails. They hopped and yelled and had tiny hands.

Earlier that morning, I had awoken on the couch. It was one of those couches you find only in dormitories or rehabilitation facilities or institutions for the insane, a wooden frame covered in faded blue upholstery and not enough padding. I had slept there, wretched, until he came for me. *Look at you*, he said, shaking his head. He despised me. I had made promises.

He took me home with him and scrambled some eggs and fried thinly cut potatoes until brown. I tried to drink orange juice. *Never again*, he said. *Never again or I can't do this. I won't.* He shoved a plate onto the coffee table. I watched the food turn cold.

Then it was the monkeys and the skyway or gymnasium and the glass and the shit. It was the darkness of the monkey house with rectangles of light, small bodies moving in the limbs and grass. It was fathers holding their small daughters' hands, and him holding mine. *You have to stop*, he whispered. His breath moved my hair. *I'll leave you.*

We walked into the light where tired elephants slung their trunks and big cats moved over hills. My head was swollen, the whole back of my skull throbbing and black. I raised my fingers and felt the bruise as a mad man might touch his lover's face. It was then I promised to stop with what I'd been doing, with The Tombs and amber light. I thought that was the end of it.

Years later, coming down into a fading-sun valley on the way to Malibu, I passed a building I'd seen before in a dream. White with black shutters, two stories, and a flatness about it, an unfeeling. *Christ*, I said to the man with whom I was traveling, *what is that place? Look at it.* As we drove by, the sunlight appeared to slash through the black glass of the windows. It was like an animal baring its teeth. We both stared, our heads craned to see. No one was there.

The feeling it gave me was queer, as if remembering a place I'd never been, or remembering somewhere I had yet to arrive, the picture on a postcard I'd sent to myself from a country where I'd never lived.

An old state asylum, the man said.

It felt as if this was where I had grown up, and then where I had died.

And of course it was, of course I had been a patient there, and of course the ride by in the car was only a short circuit in my brain, caused by electroshock, which is where I was at that very moment, lashed on a table with wires connected to my head, even as I sat in the passenger seat of the old Volvo, with the window open and my elbow hung out the window and the air smelling of fish and destiny, the ocean only minutes in front of us, houses perched on their ledges overlooking the curved sea. Of course, I lived in two worlds,

the past and the present, or maybe it was the present and the future, or was it the imagined and the real, and of course it was hard to tell which was which, and what was true.

And of course that feeling—of finally arriving at the black-shuttered house of which I'd dreamt, of finding a terrible home—of course this feeling has everything to do with everything, with Malibu, and with what came before, especially with that, with that night at The Tombs, and that morning in the monkey house, and Adam's breath on my aching skull, and me speaking into the blackness, pleading with him, *Please don't. Oh God. Oh Jesus. Please don't leave me here.*

