

Everyday Zoology

by Tim Jones-Yelvington

*"The zoology of dreams is far poorer than the zoology of the Maker."
--Jorge Luis Borges, The Book of Imaginary Beings*

All your life, you've dreamed of zoos. Immense zoos with complex, shifting geographies. Zoos whose maps redraw themselves while you read them, and whose paths uncoil and rewind as you walk them.

Zoos populated by extraordinary imaginary animals.

In one dream, you are standing on an overlook above an otherworldly savannah. In the distance, a herd of hooved orange sherbet and salmon-colored creatures cluster. Their heads are two-dimensional discs, each with a single cycloptic eye, balanced atop giraffe-like necks. In another, you see hundreds of Giant Pandas ambling up broad concrete steps. When they turn to face you, they reveal visages of baboons, neon pink and protruding, their mouths agape, fanged and shrieking.

When you awaken, the feeling is what you most remember, a medley of wonderment and terror.

You are a young mother. You share an apartment with your husband and child in a tree-lined and pedestrian-friendly neighborhood of a large city. Your block is populated by herds of children, most blonde and under the age of five. They graze on snack packs in the neighborhood's epicenter, an intricately patterned brick plaza, flanked by benches and a bustling sidewalk café and decorated by a frothing deco fountain and a raised octagonal stage. During the summer months, a middle-aged folksinger perches, finger-plucking open tunings fit for a Windham Hill record. Children amble, prance and pounce from the platform,

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careening toward opposite corners and climbing quaint streetlamps imported from a village in Germany.

Today, pushing your child's stroller through the plaza, you glimpse an old woman. You have seen her before. Barely larger than a Hobbit, she tucks her legs and recedes into one corner of a bench. Her skin reminds you of your child's fingers left too long in the bath. Yellowing hair piles atop her head in a bouffant that tumbles and flips. Despite the Summer heat, she wears an ankle-length red wool coat with fur cuffs and collar. She sucks cigarettes between her protruding lips, which are painted a garish red that would not be out of place in your child's collection of finger paints.

Sometimes, you and your child ride the train and visit your city's art museum. Your favorite painter is Toulouse-Lautrec. The old woman reminds you of his subjects, lurid and sickly Parisian dancers and prostitutes, only wizened in the sun. A plastic grocery bag sits in her lap, collapsing around an invisible round object. You recall the round and gaping mouth of a baboon-panda and shiver.

You are on your way to the bookstore. You and your husband deliberately chose a neighborhood with things for kids to do. There is a story-time circuit traveled by the neighborhood's mothers. Children are read to nearly every day of the week, migrating from the library to the children's clothing boutique to the local coffee shop. Fridays at the bookstore are your favorite. The saleswoman is an acting major, and enlivens her readings with suspenseful timing and memorable character voices.

There is another mother you like best. Her smile is broad and open. Her hair is an orderly tumble, loose and healthy. She has an easy confidence, seeming to possess naturally what all of the other mothers work overtime to approximate. Usually, you make it a point to stand beside her. You whisper in her ear. She laughs at your jokes. She quiets your tics, if only temporarily.

You scan for her as you enter the bookstore. Children swarm the reading room, romping and scaling adult shoulders. A mother sweeps away a crying toddler who has mistakenly clutched an unfamiliar parent's leg. You do not see her anywhere.

She still has not arrived when the salesgirl begins to read. You hide yourself for feeling insensibly disappointed.

Today's story is about a zoo where the animals are escaping. The monkeys are the ringleaders, convincing a free sparrow to deliver instructions to the other animals. You are incredulous. Certainly some incentive beyond altruism would be required for the sparrow to do the monkeys' bidding. Perhaps if the author had explained that the mischievous sparrow drew vicarious pleasure from thwarting the zookeeper—

Your attention wanders. A book on a nearby shelf catches your eye. The Book of Imaginary Beings, the spine says. You open the book to a random page. There is a line drawing of a horrific creature with the head and torso of a lion, tapering into the bulbous and pointed abdomen of an ant. A title across the top of the page reads, "The Mermecolian." For a moment, you are unable to look away. Then you snap the book shut and shove it back onto the shelf, not bothering to check whether it has landed correctly.

On the last page of the children's story, elephants stampede past the befuddled zookeeper. Small mammals scurry underfoot. The monkeys roost in a nearby tree, tittering.

When a week passes and you still have not seen your favorite mother, you grow concerned.

"Maybe she moved away," your husband says.

You are lying beside him. Your bedside lamp casts alien shadows across your blanket.

“She would tell me if she moved away.”

“Do I know her? What's her name?”

“She never told me.”

“Then she can't be that good a friend.”

“She's always there. I want to make sure she's okay.”

He rolls onto his side and flings one arm around you.

“That's why I love you. Always caring about others.”

You find yourself thinking unexpectedly about the old woman in the square. You wonder what she keeps inside her plastic bag.

You dream of zoos. This time, you are winding down a narrow path through tall grasses that ripple in the wind. A giant bipedal tiger, with the powerful haunches and hind legs of a kangaroo, bounds toward you in powerful, aerodynamic leaps. It suspends overhead, poised to crush you.

You awaken gasping, your bangs pasted to your forehead by sweat, determined to find out what happened to the mother.

In the morning, your first stop is the bookstore. The acting major lounges behind the counter, thumbing Beckett. She sheds her book as the door chime jingles. You ask if she has seen anyone fitting the mother's description. She gapes wide-eyed and open-mouthed. You realize in your haste you are rushing your sentences, and have forgotten to comb your hair.

“A lot of mothers come in here, ma'am. I might've seen her, but I couldn't say for sure.”

“You would remember her. She's not like the others.”

You feel an urge to strike her with one of the hard-covers piled on the countertop. You push your child's stroller out the door forcefully. It strikes a crack in the pavement and jostles. Your child howls.

From across the plaza, the old woman glares at you. She pulls her cigarette from between her lips and points its lit tip toward you. Your chest pounds.

She flings the cigarette behind her, up the quiet block that dead-ends into the plaza. Then she swivels and hobbles up the street.

Your child's cries escalate as you race your stroller to catch the old woman. You park the stroller beside a bench and sweep up your yelping child, taking after the woman on foot.

Halfway down the block, she waits for you atop a short staircase into a garden apartment. You follow her into a tiny room, paneled in knotty pine stained a sickly orange. The air is stale and musty. Stacks of newspaper border her worn sofa, which is swathed in psychedelic afghans. Porcelain figurines, dressed in dust, bunch on every available surface.

The back wall is taken up by what seem like hundreds of spatulas, inset and spaced equidistantly within a gilded frame. You recognize the logo emblazoned on each handle. They are from *the Homestore*. You and your husband registered there for dishes and a blender. Your friends bought you a fondue pot. Each spatula is decorated at the tip by a screen-printed seasonal graphic. Snowflakes, Christmas

trees and snowmen for the Winter holidays. Spiders, candy corn and pumpkins for Halloween. Hearts and cupids for Valentine's Day. Eggs and rabbits for Easter. The spatulas are mounted in what appears to be chronological and seasonal order. The collection must span more than a decade.

You know why the old woman summoned you, and why you followed her. You realize you have known since yesterday, when you lay in bed and thought about the old woman. You say what you came here to say.

“You know where she is, don't you? Tell me how to find her.”

You watch the old woman linger before the wall of spatulas. She examines a Thanksgiving turkey and shakes her head. An Autumn maple leaf is similarly rejected. Finally, she settles on a summer spatula decorated with a bright yellow sun and detaches it from the wall. She removes a white ceramic mixing bowl from her plastic bag. From her pockets, she pulls an old-fashioned silver cigarette case and velvet flask. She rolls two cigarettes between her hands, crumbling them into the mixing bowl. She pours liquid from her flask and stirs with the spatula. She motions for you to look.

A face emerges from the mixture. It is long and simian, its nose painted bright red and flanked by ridged blue columns and a round poof of olive fur. Its eyes glow a fiendish orange. You remember seeing this creature before, when your mother took you to the zoo. As a child, you were fascinated, and chattered about the animal for days. Now you cannot remember its name.

The next day, you ask to borrow your husband's credit card.

“I need to rent a car.”

“Why do you need to rent a car?”

"I'm taking our child to the zoo."

"The zoo is in the park. You don't need a car to get there."

"I want to go to the big zoo. In the suburbs."

Your husband sighs. "Our child is too young to remember going to the zoo."

When you arrive, the exhibit has changed. When you visited as a child, it opened like a giant picture window onto a vast and alien expanse. Now it is smaller, a concrete box painted to resemble an African jungle. You wonder what your child sees, and what it will remember. It occurs to you that for a child, an ordinary tiger might fascinate and frighten as thoroughly as one with the legs of a kangaroo.

You and your child are the only visitors. The stillness is uncanny. Tiny monkeys leap and coil acrobatically from gnarled synthetic treetops. A tropical bird flies above you and settles in a branch on the opposite side of the path. You look at a sign, and see a picture of the creature from the mixing bowl. It is called a mandrill. You remember now. You look around the exhibit, but do not see anything resembling a mandrill. Your child grows restless in its stroller. You begin to wonder if this was a mistake.

In an instant, the mandrill appears from an opening in the rock, poised on its front feet, majestic and bizarre. Its eyes meet yours. It blinks twice and nods knowingly. It follows a curve along the wall. You follow along a parallel curve in the path.

You find yourself facing a doorway to the women's restroom. You push inside.

You look at your own image in the mirror and encounter the mother, standing nearby, holding her child. Her eyes twinkle. Her hair tumbles as though blown by wind. She waves.

You know now she has never been far. Beside you, behind you, or in midair above you. Whispering in your ear. You watch her fade away, receding like the mandrill disappearing behind the rock.

Your child stirs. You lift the child from its stroller and examine it beneath the fluorescent lights, as though noticing it for the first time. Its skin a mess of permeable surfaces and peculiar coloration. Dangling tentacles twitch. Mystery membranes snuffle.

You open your mouth, fanged and shrieking.

