

“De apen zijn weer terug in de natuur”¹

Today I went to the zoo.

This one's a country zoo, if you can call it that – it's less a zoo than the city zoo, where there are cages of concrete and steel. This zoo has electrical wire, water traps and golf-ball nets. It's got more greenery (if it hasn't been trampled down), so it's sort of a rest home for the animals from the city zoo. And lots of us people go to this greener zoo too. Sort of like a rest home for us. As if all God's creatures need a break from concrete.

The Others are at the zoo looking back at us, talking back at us, smelling back at us. There were even some goats for us to be touched back by, poor things. This is weird: normally, all we people sense is our own insensible products. Even these goats were touchable because we made them so. But maybe they're less artifactual than streets, keyboards, pants. Maybe me and them dumb goats are in the same boat together. Trying to sense something that's not insensible.

I had two thoughts I wanted to remember, and my mind has been atrophied by writing so I must therefore remember by writing.

One, I saw the mini-forests and was filled with the urge to go to a maxi-forest. There were otters on a mini-hill with a mini-grove of trees over their heads, and a mini-pool under them where they didn't swim, maybe because the water-slide was turned off. And there was an other place with black paper-mâché moth cocoons like Labrador retrievers hanging from trees. A rope fence maintained me as detached observer of the mini-forests, but there was a little leaf strewn patch for us tourists to tread on. It was soft under my boots, and I realised then why I wear boots. It's for going places like that soft underneath. So I wanted to be where the otters could be found but mightn't be found because the forest was maxi, not mini, and where I might be under the trees and over the leaves instead of beside them. Where my boots could be fulfilled. And this awoke a melancholy in me, for why is it that I am not so situated? You know well.

Two, we saw the bison. My bison, you could say, but in a strange way. Later we saw the other bison, from across the pond, the cousins of my bison. Maybe they are more my bison than mine are? Maybe they're both my bison because of where they've ended up. In the rest home. And that continued the melancholy. These great beasts stood there possessed of the dignity a king should have had facing the chopping block, trundling along in a wagon. I

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couldn't fathom how anyone could think that in appreciating their dignity I was appreciating myself. We aren't the only things with faces to be read. My dearest asked me if I could imagine clouds of bison thundering over the plains. And isn't it stupid that one has to use imagination when faced, in the flesh, by the very animal that should be so thundering? But where would it thunder? In a circle about its paddock? Pah! In appreciating these beasts I am necessarily lamenting their being here for me to appreciate. "Recreation" undermines whatever you do the rest of the time. Now I remember why I can't even turn them back out onto my plains to let them try and thunder again. I've been too used to seeing fences over my country, but they're there. The grass sea has been subdivided to keep our dumb bovines dumb, so there's no room for the monsters. Have we already put the monsters to sleep? I hope they haven't forgotten how to be monstrous, to be monsters. I am ashamed, not simply because these beasts are hardly beastly in here, but because there's no place for them to be beastly out there. God has no more cattle, thanks to me and mine.

And so, I was glad to be at the zoo, but that very gladness is what made me sad. How can this be a rest home? If this is rest, what the hell is work? And then we went "home." Out there where the machines aren't vaguely ambient, surrounding the rest home, but rather where they zoom by one's face. Noisemakers. We're all street people, aren't we? I got off the bus after staring at straight lines made out of straight-lined bricks the whole way, and I saw my wife looking at me from further down the pavings. The sun was behind her, the last bit of gold on the last bit of flesh in that place of hard rectitude. And I was struck by the thought that something doesn't fit. So I said to her, "the apes are back in nature again" and she knew what I meant.

1 The title is the plural form of "Het aapje is weer terug in de natuur," a line from the last page of the Dutch toddler's book *Safari* (Endhoven: ImageBooks Factory B.V., 2003).