

The Zoo

For Gordon Rohlehr

The stoic, old man, nodding goat,
the rear-feet, knock-kneed antelopes,
with slow, translucent, deep, autumnal
watercolour eyes:

grave birds: vulture & raven,
rook, and all sorts of crows:
hawks, like hooked councillors:
and the ostrich, that withered

scholar, camel-like, with knobby
knees and x/act feet: the dodo,
like someone you know: sophisticated
uncle; and the cats: those

velvet devils, nerv-
ous leopards, dreaming tygers with black paws
for pillows; the blue
electric panther with moonlight in her eyes
smouldering aloof

the lions
sitting in the sun like dozing, stretched-out golden
thunder

then those queer creatures: the little boar-
rhinoceros, with stumpy tusks & bony face
pushed permanently into flatt-
ened grunts; the long-

tit-

udinal & arrogantly vert-
ical giraffes, with tip-
toe heads; and parakeets
with cries like falling plates

and those thin awkward little gentlemen,
the penguin, posing in clerical black
& white, stand-
ing stock-

stance with blink-
ing, pale, pink eyes;
even their transformation into duck-
sleek, underwater innocence like that of seals -



the seals
themselves like large sad shell-
fish, cling-
ing to the rocks in lieu of shell -

cannot conceal the fact
that where they play or flap
is merely minor freedom for them:
that all these birds & beasts:

the polar-bears like solid smiling ghosts,
sitting to their necks in yellow water,
cracking nuts,
the monkeys, act-

ive lion-rats,
alert, red-bottom'd, india-rubber acrobats,
picking their family fleas
or swinging one-hand hellos from a pole:

the flap-ear'd, bumpy-headed, dusty-coloured, loco-
motive elephants, with small savannas on their
backs,
flexing their hose-pipe nose & grinning for a bun -
are merely gathered here so we can gape &
celebrate their public idiosyncrasies -
so we can pause, point, peel oranges,
buy buns to throw,

clutch at each other's sleeve
and feel we recognize some old acquaintance
sticking out his thong,
our next-door neighbour the orang-

outang

.

But towards dusk we came upon flamingoes
with delicately fashioned, bent, and coloured
chinese heads; with necks like poured

venetian glass; with red reed legs
and sunset-softly-tinted-coral-coloured wings

Here on this river where they feed
continually splashing silence on their slender

stilts and still protesting at the solitude
 with their surprising tints, we lost the sense
 of caged & circumscribed freedom - the geometric
 shadowed zebra
 eating goat-wise at the wall -
 Here by this gentle water, these flamingoes,
 court of pleasant mandarins, these
 fragile, sibilantly feeding herds,
 these fishers of such fine perfection
 they do not splash a sound:
 unlock
 the ugly gadgets of the zoo: release
 the leopard, lemur and the kangaroo:
 so that the eagle finds again his perch,
 the polar bear his berg,
 the monkeys hanging one-hand down
 forgets his act and
 falls
 the flopping seals become sea-
 cats again, torpedo-shaped with whiskers
 and lions stretch & roll their golden thunder down
 the quivering river of the crocodiles
 And we this autumn evening falling
 watch in our minds the pink flamingoes rise
 and rise/ing wish them well for well
 we know their wings bless bird & beast
 and pray they slumber well
 and that the nervous cat, the do-
 cile dog, the never-changing camel
 find in these silent fleets now sailing heaven
 release from this long xile's solitude still holding
 them

