

The Visitor



A cat lives a few doors away from us but visits frequently. And yes, that's my house, the dark one facing you

The first day
of heavy snow
there were no prints and the cat
had clearly voted with his paws to stay
at home, warm.
The second day
I heard a tap at the door,
faint, as though gloved,
but I was doing something important
and did not respond.
There might have been more
taps but as I say
I was busy that day.
The third day the garden was still full
of lumps of white -
car-shaped, pot-shaped, shrub-shaped.
A cat
might have ended as a cat-shaped lump
if he had sat on the doormat or a stump,
but I let him in.
He shook drops of snow
(probably caught from a gate or rail)
around
like a liquid cat-herine wheel
then pushed a damp determined
forehead against my hand
for stroking
or kneading.

When I looked
outside there was a line
of paw prints, from his house
to mine.

A Day at the Zoo



It was a grey day
in February
and we paid a lot to get in.
They seemed to think it their due.
They were not there for our entertainment
but rather we
were there to contribute to postponing
their extinction
and after all
that's the stated purpose of the zoo.

The elephants
were first. They stood stone still,

a faint greenness on their hides suggesting
moss had gathered
while they watched their waterfall.

The rhinos
regarded an English February
as beyond the pale.
They dozed in their dim house,
the baby disguised as what we thought at first
was his mother's swollen knee
but his ear flickered slightly
giving the deception away.

The meerkats
had disappeared
(maybe underground?)
and we couldn't find
the giraffe.

The monkeys
were truly glad to see us.
I think we
alleviated their boredom.
They scampered out to their
moated peninsula with glee.
Each time we left their house to see
they climbed back in
and when we returned
to the leaf shaded glass hall
out they went again.
A fine game
was had by all.

The zebra lay sleeping side by side
in a stripe of sunlight they had found
while next door to their compound
the bongo
gracefully camouflaged himself
in the shadow of his wooden hall
and pretended he wasn't really there at all.

There were deer
(of various kinds)
too shy to give us more
than a fleeting glimpse,
A warty pig
(not to be confused with a warthog)
and a capybara
that seemed to be where
the map thought the meerkats might have been.

And still we couldn't find the giraffe.
You'd think a long neck would help but no,
although
we saw some camels huddled
in a knobbly ring.
They circled,
doing (perhaps) an esoteric
camel dance.
The reason was something
not for us to know.

Only one tiger
was visible, pacing
with a look of impatience
while his mate and child
hid
somewhere safe and secret
until the keepers were due
to bring their meal.
The male, I'm quite sure, saw us as an alternative
if the keeper should chance
to be late that day at the zoo.

The cheetahs tried
to hide
(to cheat?)
on a roof in their enclosure
but
it was still winter so we
could see them through the bare trees
and they looked less than pleased.

The Asiatic lions,
however, were proudly on display,
the male roaring a huge sound
– far too big for his size –
to let us know we should stay away.

There were birds ignoring us:
storks, cranes, and I think
a flamingo
though
as I missed it I have no
idea whether it was pink.
There were also ducks,
some of which were strolling on the paths like us,
like the blackbirds and starlings joining in
a general search, human and avian,
for snacks (or crumbs).

Squirrels,

too,
had decided there might be rich pickings at the zoo.
They must have had the sense
to avoid the big cats.
Either that
or they were extremely fast.

The fruit bats
simply dreamed on their branches all day
though a few
swooped
and fought and slept again
pretending to be strange fruit
and by this ruse fool
their natural prey.

The chimpanzee
house was closed for maintenance,
whether of the house, inmates or both
the sign failed to say.

By the time we reached the butterfly house
that was closed too
because it was almost the end of our day
at the zoo.
There were signs
saying 'aviary' and 'aquarium'
but by then
we were on the way
out.
They would have to wait
for another day.

We joined merging streams
flowing towards the gate.
There was tension in the air,
an anxiety not to be late,
locked on the wrong side
at some keeper's whim.
What did the inmates make
of all these others in their bright coats
who came every day and invariably left
at teatime?

Then we were all spilling, tumbling into car parks,
chattering about what we hadn't seen
and what we'd wanted to see.
(We still hadn't found the giraffe.)
But whatever we had observed
it was time we dispersed
to our own family paddocks,

our own keepers
and our own tea.

Death of a Beekeeper



In the morning he collected the bees.
He waved goodbye to her and drove some miles
Then listened to advice he didn't need (he had two hives
Already) and set out for home.

But in the car, somehow they got out,
Crawled everywhere: pedals, seats, gear lever, steering wheel,
Buzzing softly in counterpoint to the engine.
They didn't sting...knew their new protector, perhaps.
Still, it was hot
And the windows had to stay tight wound.

In the evening, he had a class to take.
He waved goodbye to her and drove a mile or two,
Talked to the confirmation group,
Readied them for the laying on of hands.
Then he prepared the church for Sunday,
Straightened the cross and candlesticks,
Checked the flower water.

His heart stopped then;
Suddenly
(They said), so he wouldn't have felt the pain.
But when instead of his car
She heard police wheels buzzing on the gravel,
Her pain was enough for both of them.

Next day a friend,
Fellow vicar and fellow bee keeper, came,
Driving a few miles to commiserate.
He visited the hives to tell the bees about the death.
Bees need to know such things.
And once they understood, although they'd only known him for a day,
They buzzed their sorrow to the warm autumn sun.

Badgers



When the badgers came to our garden
they slipped in silently
in the dark;
ghosts with rough fur, claws and a sharp bite.
First they burrowed
under the shed but found
it was not quite
the des res they'd hoped for and so they went
via the lawn (and a fine game
of plough-your-own-furrow)
to the greenhouse. Beneath its foundations
they deliberated but decided the same
drawbacks applied and finally
they settled on the raised fishpond
where they spent the winter safe
under a kind of manmade ground,
dreaming of summer scents and the stars beyond.

When the badgers came to our garden
they dug out the conventions of gardenhood, the strife
between flowers and weeds,
the military precision of design,
and made it a haven
for their own version
of wild life.

When the foxes came to our garden,
hard on the badgers' heels
(because after all, the place
was now a kind of haven),
they were not as particular.
They moved straight
into the tunnels under the shed;
the ones, you remember, the badgers had abandonèd
as not quite good enough.
The foxes didn't care.
Looking for meals
or maybe fun
they chased a few of the neighbour's chickens,
not killing them,
just causing terror and a rain
of feathers everywhere.

When the badgers (followed by the foxes)
came to our garden
the squirrels, who had lived there peacefully
for quite some time,
chattered disdainfully
from the sycamore tree and then
left to seek better lodgings
on the other side of the fence,
telling the magpies they should consider moving while they could,
before the whole neighbourhood
was turned into a wild park.
The neighbour's cat watched,
her furred expression
showing a kind of domesticated pain.
Her tail whisked.
I think she wished
the badgers had never come
to our garden.

(We eventually demolished the fishpond and the badgers moved to a neighbour's garden.)