

# Take a walk on the wild side

*Some people think zoos are prisons, but who is keeping whom? The animals, sleek and fed every day, or the thousands making Sunday pilgrimages to view their untamed beauty?*

Allan Blunden

The Alberta Game Farm does not sound very promising perhaps. A visit there is obviously one of those "things to see and do in and around X.", and those things are either unappealing (but good for you) or appealing (but in the event disappointing). If one has forgotten what fun animals are, then a visit to the Game Farm will probably seem to fit into the first category: boring, but salutary. An austere cultural obligation summons us to make the effort, to do our duty in the name of "science" or "culture", or simply of "taking an interest in the world around us": those who are familiar with the ethical aspects of Immanuel Kant's philosophy can console themselves with the reflection that the master would have approved, since he liked nothing better than a heavy conflict between duty and inclination, which, if resolved in favour of the former, resulted in truly moral conduct. But if you would rather watch baseball than antelope, then this is, I suppose, Kant's consolation.

Nor does the Alberta Game Farm look very promising. It lies beside the highway, some fifteen miles east of Edmonton, and if it were not for the signs one might, at a passing glance, take it for an automobile graveyard. The parking lot is rough black earth, rutted and pitted, and the cars of the visitors are dipped and slouched like sorry abandoned wrecks. The big signs, too, are brash but faded, as though a mixture of Detroit and decay.

The tickets are \$2.50, and one passes between some dull red huts that sell cigarettes and candies, all a little shabby, though whether from neglect or a decent desire to be unobtrusive one cannot tell. The paths that take the visitor through the Game Park are bare earth like the parking lot, black and oily between the high mesh fences, again reminiscent of a wrecker's yard. One expects every minute to stumble across a rusty transmission or a greasy

oil-pan, or to find oneself walking on embedded nuts and bolts. The whole site has the feel of an industrial depot rather than a wildlife habitat, something slightly unwholesome and commercial.

Some of the animal enclosures also seem obscenely industrial. The polar bears and gorillas live within great circular concrete walls, as un-subtle and brutal as a drive-in movie. White for the polar bears — a reproach to their own drab olive colour — and lurid green for the black gorillas, the kind of colour they use on the backside of small and seedy supermarkets. Yet the very brutal massiveness of the enclosures is curiously eloquent: we infer the threatening — and thrilling — power of these walled-in creatures, as though we were looking down into some deeply-embedded missile bunker.

Other animals live in big open fields, or else in steel mesh pens of various sizes. The bigger — and wilder — animals are behind high fences that slope inwards at the top, and of course one's interest grows in proportion to the fences: the more precautions to keep the animals in, the greater one's desire to see them. I suppose it is a kind of catharsis, like the traditional experience of tragedy: one toys with death in order to be purged by the experience of avoiding a catastrophe.

But whatever one's initial misgivings about the Game Farm, there can be no doubt that the animals are magnificent; and that, after all, is the point of Mr. Al Oeming's enterprise. The great Siberian tigers lie stretched out asleep, happily ignorant of the silly exploitation that has put tigers in our gas-tanks and on our cereal packets, substituting the image for the substance, so that it is almost hard to believe that those amazing bold stripes on face and flanks have not been painted on, to keep the tiger-image intact for the next advertising campaign. . . . Of course we read the sign on their cage to discover



how big and fast and dangerous they are. And this is a visitor's zoo, a popular zoo, not a scientist's laboratory: the signs do furnish the arresting fact, the incredible statistic, the homely comment ("you feel, looking up at the giraffe, that you are looking at the ultimate mammal. Over 18 feet in height . . .").

The cougars prowl and grumble, stopping to stare hard and intelligently at one particular visitor at their cage, seeming thereby to make their threats alarmingly specific and personal, as much as to say "If I ever get out, you'll be the very first." The threat is underlined with a languid growl and a flash of teeth, then prowling is deeply resumed, until Joshua and St Francis of Assisi together shall come with their trumpets of mercy.

The heavy-cheeked camels look down with sovereign disdain, like fussy old spinsters set in their ways. The cheetahs obstinately refuse to streak through their pen at 70 mph, although the sign says they can, and we rather hope that they will . . . But then this is a zoo, not Disneyland. Show-business can lure you in and lure you on; and show-business could have constructed a more elaborate environment than Mr. Oeming has done, with aviaries that have won design awards and cages that have made an architect's reputation. But the animals are untouched by all of that, and they keep their counsels. Mostly they just sleep. We have to enjoy them for what they are, not for what we expect them to do. That is why

the circus is such a thoroughly disgusting spectacle: it is a cracked mirror in which we see nothing but our own ugly faces.

But the Game Farm is full of windows that look out on to alien worlds: the Great Grey Owls, who appear to be glued tightly to their vertical tree-trunks, who swivel their heads through a sinister 180 degrees without even twitching their massive bodies, and who, if they fell, would surely punch a hole a foot deep in the ground; the enormous white Kermode's Bear, a giant Winnie-the-Pooh who suffles amiably through the trees and settles down comfortably with a somewhat distracted air, as though to meditate on some especially vexing problem that has come up this morning; the stocky zebras, "ill-tempered and not to be trusted", we are told by the sign — a serious allegation to be levelled against an animal so beloved of children's books; and the bony giraffes, who, if they had museums, would bend to look at us with bony tolerance in our glass cases and wonder why the god of giraffes had created us so small. Who knows what they are all thinking? "Pigeons plot in secrecy", sings Paul Simon. Perhaps they do. When will the gorillas invent gunpowder, though? And will owls form trade unions? One elephant, one vote. Somehow it all seems rather improbable, and wherever these animals are bound they are not likely to have our problems. Not that we really envy them their uncomplicated existence; but we would like them to tell us what they know.

And it is strange: as you wander through the Game Farm, stopping at the fences and trying to ponder the mysteries of these animals, you catch yourself clutching at the steel netting as though it were you who were imprisoned. And so it is. We are at the limits of our knowledge and understanding here, we wait wistfully to gather some clue. The animals only need us as drones who bring them food, but our needs seem greater than theirs, for we continue to wait for messages that never come. Definitely, they have the advantage of us. And I hope they continue to do so. I hope Mr. Oeming's work of preservation succeeds, and I hope we never "understand" these creatures, who have to survive not only the hunter's shells but also the cosy rationalisations of TV nature documentaries.

The Victorians thought that Charles Darwin had done them a disservice by claiming that they (the Victorians) were descended from the apes, for they resented what they took to be a comparison; but I am not at all sure that it wasn't the apes who were the victims of that comparison, and my sympathies are with them. In an age when we continue to resist the realization that our collective life is a mess — when some people still think that we have a civilization that works — it is enormously refreshing, and not a little humbling, to renew our respect for mystery by spending some time with the animals. They did, after all, outnumber us in the Ark.

