

Zsófia Bán
Translated from the Hungarian by Paul Olchváry

NIGHT ZOO

By the sea of Borneo, there we sat, and sat, and sat, when all at once we found words in the water. (Impatiently we smashed the bottle against the rocks.) This is what we read:

We usually arranged to rendezvous at the night zoo, hoping that wouldn't be so conspicuous. There was a day zoo, too, but there the sun would have beat down upon us vertically with its pitiless force, illuminating our most secret thoughts. We were half a degree from the Equator and ten thousand degrees from freedom. At night the steam was a tad less suffocating; not that cold existed here, only the barely distinguishable shades of heat. After a torrent of tropical rain, which came and went in an overwhelming instant, like a fleeting orgasm of unexpected intensity, more often than not the sun sponged up the moisture in no time from the steaming hot asphalt. Two minutes later, the very memory of that downpour belonged to the past, the city's diligently cleaned gutters having swallowed the surreal deluge in the blink of an eye. Usually I caught the bus on Bras Basah Road, for that route took me right to the zoo. The bus ran through the night with hardly a passenger. Invariably I

would stare at a Malaysian soap opera on the flat screen of the bus TV all the way to the last stop—the night zoo. Just who’d cooked up the idea of opening a night zoo, I do not know, but clearly it was the work of no everyday mind. Like every brilliant idea, though, this one was simplicity itself. It doesn’t take a brain scientist, much less a biologist, to know that most animals are active especially at night, especially wild ones. While in a day zoo we typically see the inhabitants wallowing around, prostrated by the heat, unwilling to stir the slightest bit except at feeding time, life in the night zoo stirred with spellbinding force: everyone coming and going, caressing, eating, lovemaking, bathing, visiting with the neighbors—in a word, *living*. Moreover, the zoo’s shrewdly planned lighting only enhanced the spectacle; let’s just say it cast the whole venture in a “positive light.” To keep from scaring the animals away and disturbing their eyes, the lamps were hidden in the bushes and in the leafy boughs of trees, and even the color and intensity of the light was set to the most ideal conditions. Sometimes all you could make out was the animals’ silhouettes before the sweltering background of the bluish-black night, as if characters in one of those shadow plays that are a favorite in this region. As for the zoo’s visitors, they may have felt themselves to be in some enigmatic, unfathomable dream, one they weren’t in a hurry to wake up out of. The more docile animals were free to go about their way on the path together with us: the tapir, for example, was always lying down in front of the little train that wound its way about the zoo,

prostrating himself on the tracks like some heroic lover in despair, but after being subjected to a bit of poking and goading he invariably saw fit to give up his original aim, and instead shuffled over to the path and commenced sniffing at the pedestrians with his huge, sensitive snout.

My heart began racing the moment I reached the entrance. We hadn't seen each other for a week, and after so long your absence was almost unbearable. Occasionally we were able to meet more often; sometimes it just depended on the weather, for if the sky opened up with a fury of rain, there wasn't much chance of bringing off an open-air rendezvous. And it's not like we could go anywhere else: the circumstances weren't right, and we were each under surveillance. Of course, many other factors kept us from being together as often as we wished. We had to take care not to draw the attention of the authorities, for in this country our love was banned, it counted as a crime, and one did not recover overnight from the legal consequences of discovery. Corporal punishment was not only sanctioned, it was idealized: according to the prevalent ideology, physical confinement wasn't worth a thing without physical punishment. And so the years of one's sentence were complemented by a corresponding number of lashes. Not that the cane found the ripe flesh it sought, no, it had to settle on the marks left by earlier beatings. Only by permeating the flesh does guilt really take hold in the guilty: such was the thinking of the authorities. Just as love, too, is only true if it permeates the flesh. Your touch did much more than simply

permeate my flesh, though; it was verily scorched into me with a branding iron. No longer could it be driven out of me without a trace; it had left its mark forever, for a lifetime, and if somehow it could have been cut out of me nonetheless, I myself would have ceased to exist, I would have become nothing but an evaporated thought. Only from out of you did my body, my soul, my life draw meaning, exist, become realized. Time, for us, was defined by that ponderous weight of the days that passed between our rendezvous; everything else had meaning only relative to this. As soon as I stepped through the zoo's front gate I felt my cells once again come alive, my pores open up, my senses spark into action with an almost impossible precision, as if under the influence of some drug. Even from afar, before my eyes could take you in, I could smell you. You were close at hand, I knew, and that in and of itself was enough for my sense of smell to transcend not only the time that had passed since our most recent meeting, but also the space that stretched so tightly between us still, allowing me to breathe in your fragrance. Above all, I loved sniffing behind your ears and at the curve of your neck. Everything I found there made me feel I could snap a wildcat's neck in an instant, tear apart its living flesh, climb a thirty-thousand foot mountain and slowly, leisurely lick the snowcap off its top, the flakes melting on my tongue. Smelling you, I sensed I'd finally found my way home, that I was in that secret inner home where I always should be, and that from there I could go even further, deeper and deeper inside, to the depths of

that silky darkness from whence there is neither a way back nor a reason to return, for nothing exists outside of this, or rather, that which does exist is but an empty shell. Your smell, like a magic touch that held the promise of an imminent future, lit up each and every bygone touch of yours upon my skin, one after another, like a thousand tiny light bulbs on a baobab tree adorned for a festival. My skin tingled as if subjected to a faint electric current, and in my mind I could distinguish between each and every touch—its place, time, name—and as they lit up one after another I saw each face of yours before me, every one belonging to a different touch: *This one*, from dusk on that day in the tepid sand on the coast of the Indian Ocean, when your glaring white teeth bit a scorpion-shaped tattoo into the thin flesh above my breast. . . . *This one*, from when we took refuge in the temple's covered entryway from before a sudden downpour, pressing our backs against that stone wall whose every square inch was carved, and so a whole army of gods bore witness to our drinking, licking, and sucking the manna out of each other to the last drop, like hungry jackal pups, again and again until the storm died down. . . . *This one*, from when we lost our way in the forest and no longer saw even the trail markers on the trees, no, not a thing was marked wherever we looked, and so we were compelled to mark each other's unfurling skin and flesh so as to somehow find our way back to the world of meaning, and as we leaned up against that tree stump in the forest we became one with the air molecules, stole our way into the ferns' pores, nestled our

way into the moss, and writhed in the traps set by the flesh-eating plants until all at once it seemed best to surrender ourselves, to become one with the dark purple of their petals: the color of your bites. . . . *This one*, from when we looked down upon the village from the grassy sunbathed hillside and glimpsed the villagers hustling and bustling in preparation for some festival, cooking the holiday feast in giant kettles, tanning animal skins by pummeling them with thick bamboo sticks, beating their drums—and that is when we decided to celebrate along with them, but in our own fashion, so that this holy day should unfold in all its splendor, so it should be memorable, and as the curve of our backs now pressed against the curve of the hillside, whoever happened to have the upper hand at any given moment and be on top amid this embrace of ours, an embrace with no end and to no end, she was the one whose back was warmed by the sun, for fulfillment was not concentrated in a single point, no, instead it was more like a tenaciously enduring sound on an unexpectedly lovely, unrepeatable afternoon piano recital, one that takes us dreamy music lovers in the audience completely by surprise just as we were slipping off into furtive after-lunch naps: a sound that now morphs into one unforeseen new note after another, making our hearts ever more restless, for we have been caught off guard, quite unlike attending some evening concert by some big name star, when we suspect even while waiting in line at the cloakroom beforehand that what we hear will clutch us by the heart and by the throat, which is why we are not surprised at all when this

does in fact happen, indeed, we head the sensation off at the pass: waiting, yearning, and when it does strike, we nod with satisfaction: yes, this is precisely what we were waiting for, now we might even go on home; but at that recital earlier in the day, we find ourselves listening to an unfamiliar pianist as the afternoon sunlight shines askew through the window of the concert hall, its rays falling languidly upon the opposite wall, highlighting certain details of the gilded plaster sculptures and the stuccoes while shadows obscure yet other details—and all at once the silence is broken by a string of notes we hadn't armed ourselves against in the least, and when this happens, it's like someone's torn a sharp tool into our hearts, and as if that weren't enough, it lodges in our chests—in skin, flesh, bones—forever, impossible to tear out. The more we tug, the deeper it goes, and then suddenly we resign ourselves to the thought that it will stay right where it is, that from now on this will be its place: ever so slightly we lean up against it, letting it take us wherever it would go, maybe even right on out of this concert hall, out into the afternoon sun and out of the city, too: onto a grassy, sunlit, faraway hilltop where that stubbornly enduring sound will then guide us into the night, into the following morning, and into those countless, boundless days to come. . . .

This one, from when a funeral procession passed us by: donning colorful festive headdresses, the villagers were silently pushing along a carriage ornamented with brilliantly colored carved swans and bearing the body of the old priest, a few of the villagers standing on top beside the coffin to

make sure it wouldn't slip off, the village's oldest man occupying the place of honor up front, he looked at least one hundred twenty years old, his thin, liver-spotted, trembling hands grasping the coffin, above all so he himself wouldn't slip away into nothingness; and then we stepped out from beside the wall and into the procession, following along to a tall funeral pyre in a freshly cut clearing at the edge of the jungle, and on top of this pyre stood a huge wooden bull whose backside opened into a cavernous inside, and it was through this orifice that the villagers first crammed in the coffin, followed by the mementos and devotional objects and gifts they'd brought along, yes, every last object went right into the bull, and when the line finally came to an end and every mourner had deposited his or her provisions for the old priest's journey ahead, then somewhere from beyond the clearing, in the jungle, there came the faint sound of gamelan music, whereupon the villagers lit the pyre with all due ceremonious gravity, and the bull and its contents began to burn, the smoke rising, higher and higher above the jungle canopy; and then slowly, delicately I penetrated you, slipping inside, really, for there was no need for penetration, and the fluids welled up between your legs as if they'd been waiting only for this, flowing all over my hand, my arm, and I went deeper and deeper, encountering no resistance, thinking that surely I'd hit something sooner or later that would block my way, but I was wrong, that's not what happened, and when not only my hands, my arms, my shoulders, my head, my trunk, and my cunt were inside you but also

my legs and my feet, then all at once I began to swim, sensing I'd found my way back to the original, primal medium; that I'd finally found the secret passage, and I knew that if I could just hold my breath long enough, I could swim through this labyrinth and emerge on the other side, up to the sun, the air, the opposite shore, where they could not catch up with me, where the laws in force here meant nothing, where I would be free, where I could be yours, irrevocably yours.

Slowly, vigilantly I stepped along the main path of the night zoo, for running would have raised attention, and as my thoughts went at breakneck speed one by one through those bygone touches flashing before me, the zoo's freely roaming inhabitants passed by: a nine-banded armadillo shuffled past, and then came the collared peccary; two little coatis; the tapir, full of life anew after rising up out of its unutterable despair on the train tracks; the spotted deer; longtailed monkeys with their thick heads of hair; roguish, orphaned gorilla babies from the rehabilitation center; proboscis monkeys with their protruding noses; pandas wobbling about like silly little fools; jaunty, perky goats; ancient-looking pigs; duckbill platypuses; kangaroos; badgers; and desert jumping mice. Yes, everyone was coming and going who felt compelled to contribute in some measure to the secret act soon to transpire between us: those who felt that with their presence they could ensure us of their sympathy and their solidarity, their concern and their love. The larger wild animals—those kept at a distance by way of trenches of various

depths and widths—strode anxiously to and fro: even from further off they must have sensed the tension in the air. The nighttime lighting lent an air of drama to their anxiously trembling silhouettes. A cacophony of yelps, howls, and roars filled the sultry night, accompanied by the cicadas' constant piercing drone. Practically joining in on the noise, my heart began beating more and more loudly and wildly as I neared the elephants' rock garden, where we held our rendezvous. By now, all that kept me from glimpsing you was a single curve—a curve cut elegantly into the path and lined with rare orchids. Now, as always, I felt sure, you would be there first. No matter how I tore through the city to reach you all the sooner, every single time you were already there, waiting with such self-possessed repose that to you, it seemed, this was life itself, as if you couldn't possibly have anything more meaningful to do, as if your every other action was filled with genuine substance only by virtue of *this*. And so it was. It was true of us both. As I now turned around the curve, my lungs and bronchial tubes suddenly clogged up with steaming hot air, and although there was nothing I wanted more just now than to see you, for a moment I shut my eyes so I wouldn't immediately see what I wanted to see, or else so I wouldn't immediately see that what I wanted to see perhaps wasn't there. I stood there for a moment, eyes shut, as a bat's flapping wings wafted air across my face. And then I opened my eyes. Dilating in the dark, my pupils received your image like some promise forced out long ago but only now fulfilled. There you stood in all your

full, splendid self. With graceful, dignified movements you fanned yourself, but otherwise you seemed so rosy, fresh, and calm that this might have been your most natural state of being. I watched as the tip of your pink tongue ran delicately along the edge of your mouth, your telltale involuntary way of expressing erupting pleasure. We were hardly ten steps away from each other, from a volcanic surge of satisfaction. An intense trembling now took hold of my entire body, and I felt unable to cross the remaining distance between us. And when one of my legs finally did seem ready to fulfill my brain's command to step in your direction, all at once a hand slammed down upon my shoulder. "You're coming with us," said a voice, and already they'd turned me around and had begun taking me away. Just before the orchid-lined curve I turned my head: with sad, elephant eyes you watched me go.

By the sea of Borneo, there we sat, and sat, and read. Sometimes we remembered Zion. And then we thought: you will prosper, after all, your oppressors kept at bay, and he who now subdues you will come to rue the day.