[Review] Gordon Meade with Jo-Anne McArthur. *Zoospeak*. London: Enthusiastic Press, 2020. 126 pp.

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In Ted Hughes' 'The Jaguar', the rage of the imprisoned animal is so primitive and forceful that 'there's no cage to him/ More than to the visionary his cell' (20). Hughes' jaguar is a glorious spectacle romantically portrayed, triumphing over his enclosed space through his imagining of 'freedom', 'the world' and 'horizons' (19-20). In 'Second Glance at a Jaguar', written ten years later, the big cat 'keep[s] his rage brightening' seeking 'revenge… Hurrying through the underworld, soundless' (152). Both poems, to varying extents, comfort human observers. No matter that these big cats are incarcerated, their spirits are not reduced.

The poems in *Zoospeak* by Gordon Meade and the photographs by Jo-Anne McArthur offer no such consolation. Poems and images embellish each other and accrue meaning, insisting that the reader/viewer witness animal suffering just as the poet and photographer have done. In the preface Meade considers the form of his poems (an unusual strategy for a poet) and how they mirror his subjects' zoochosis. Yet all he intended, initially, he notes, was to respond to McArthur's photographs. The repetitive form which 'presented itself' certainly 'underline[s] the monotony and mental stress which animals in captivity without doubt express' (n.p.) For McArthur in her foreword, '[her] images might at first glance fail to illuminate the shadows, [but] Gordon's words complete the task' (n.p.). Both images and poems demand study, not merely glances.

The collection begins with 'A Deer in the City': a young woman carries the stuffed head of a deer, a shop window behind, a phone awkwardly under her ear, as both hands are needed for her purchase. The disembodied deer head is positioned with the animal gaze turned to the

human, while the woman looks at the camera. With the human culpable, unaware, the animal is made to stare, without being seen, at the human who carries him, without seeing. Yet he is made to speak. The ironic title of 'A Deer in the City' points to the fact that 'wild' animals in the urban environment are regarded as out of place, often marked for eradication. How did this deer, resplendent with antlers, die? Why was he stuffed? Why did the human want this macabre trophy, this part of a dead animal? These are mere speculations. The poem, like the image, deals with the present. 'Of course I am not a real deer' (2) the poem begins. Tragically, of course, he once was a 'real deer' like animals in zoos who are never 'real' to themselves.

The poems verbalise this unreality from the vantage of the animals themselves. From the outset Meade establishes the poetic form. It is claustrophobic for the reader, intentionally so. Each stanza repeats the stanza before while adding on a single line. In my initial reading I longed for a change in form, some variation, some evidence of a shift. Meade's poems remind us, again and again however, that such monotony is a life sentence for the animals he imagines. Yet the form, like that of a pantoum, permits some apparent subtle shifts, as in this red panda's poem.

> There are only so many times
> that you can walk upon the same patch
> of snow before it turns to solid ice.
>
> There are only so many times
> that you can walk upon the same patch
> of snow before it turns to solid ice
> or melts; I have walked that path.
>
> There are only so many times
> that you can walk upon the same patch
> of snow before it turns to solid ice
> or melts. I have walked that path
> too many times; of course, I have.

Slight changes in syntax mean that the last line of the first stanza is no longer end-stopped but enjambed as though we are trailing along with the red panda. In the fourth stanza the new line 'access to a slightly higher plane' holds a promise (or seems to) that the red panda, like Hughes' jaguar, is not held by his enclosure. We are soon disabused of any such hope as the 'access' is merely:

> access to a slightly higher plane,
> from where I am able to look
> into another section of the zoo;
> the one the humans call *Eurasia*.

Meade's ethical imagining of the embodied life of the red panda displays an immersive synergy with McArthur's images, so many of which reflect the stasis of an animal's life – in immobility or a repeated, neurotic movement.

When animals do, unusually, apparently attempt to make contact with the viewer the effect is searing. It's as if, in McArthur's words, one has been 'wounded by a bullet, or by love' (Foreword, n.p.). A Malayan Sun Bear, in a zoo in Thailand places the vulnerable underside of his/her paw on the steamed-up glass:

> …… I have
> raised my right paw
> and placed it against the pane.
> Look into my eyes. My gaze
> can cut right through it.

The animal gaze here is a shock – John Berger in 'Why Look at Animals?', an Ur-essay on human-animal connections which included zoos suggests that denizens in zoos never look back: 'They have been immunised to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention' (26). But here is a desperate trans-species attempt at being truly seen, the bear raising his paw like a legal witness being sworn in at a court case.

Many photographs capture animals and birds in cages with murals – painted to please human viewers as though the sterility of their enclosures can be ameliorated by the artificiality of such scenes. Painted flamingos enjoy a lake and foraging; the 'real' birds in the foreground, just as immobile, focus on a feeding tray with no access to their natural habitat. Perhaps the most desperate juxtaposition of animal and art is a solitary Asian elephant in a Slovenian zoo leaning into a mural of a rainforest – merely a hard wall alongside all the other hard walls surrounding him.

McArthur's witnessing of animal suffering, and Meade's responding poems are international, including zoos and aquariums from Asia, Europe, USA. The Tiger Temple in Thailand holds tigers in a quarry, with Buddhist monks parading them on chains. In a traditional Jataka tale (telling of previous lives of the Buddha) the Buddha throws himself off a cliff, sacrificing his body to a starving tiger desperate to feed her cubs. Here the monk's body lacks compassion; hands on hips he dominates the supine tiger who cannot meet his gaze, the big cat's agency non-existent, the quarry wall a backdrop.

Zoospeak repeatedly conveys this death-in-life existence for animals from eagles to elephants, from polar bears to macaques, from minnows to gorillas. Social animals are condemned to solitude. Contrarily, leopards who are solitary hunters are caged together. The empathetic photographs and poems in *Zoospeak* bear witness to the suffering and unending tragedy of these animals' lives. McArthur makes us see them; Meade makes us hear them. *Zoospeak* never offers any possibility that imprisoned animals may live in an imagined elsewhere. They do not.

Works Cited

Berger, John. 'Why Look at Animals?' *About Looking*. Writers and Readers, 1980, pp. 1-26.

Hughes, Ted. *Collected Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, pp. 19-20; 151-152.