

INTRODUCTORY NOTE; Charles Siebert often writes for Harper's magazine. The following passage is adapted from an essay published there in 1991.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ANIMALS GONE?

I tried to visit my neighborhood zoo one afternoon last year but found it closed for renovations. According to a sign on the chain-link fence where the front gate used to be, Brooklyn's Prospect Park Zoo, first opened in 1935, is being converted into a "cageless natural habitat." This was a claim I at first thought preposterously bold, considering that most of the world's remaining natural habitats are, in fact, caged or fenced to keep us out and the animals in. Clearly, whatever was being planned here in Brooklyn was to be as unnatural as the previous arrangement of cages and pens; it would just be rendered more naturalistically, the animals more subtly contained--better, perhaps, for the animals and certainly for our consciences. But for some reason, as I turned and headed back along Flatbush Avenue toward home, I was thinking only of the old black rhino, wondering whether he'd be back.

He used to be, if you turned left upon entering and walked up a brief hill, your very first encounter--standing there on his small, enclosed, grassless patch of park the way rhinos everywhere and for millennia have stood: two eyes wearily looking for some way out of that dirt-caked armor, the horned head heavily drifting an inch above the earth. Judging from my numerous visits he was never a very big draw, being, I suppose, entirely too unanimated. And yet I found him the most attractive, the most challenging to draw near to for that--stillness to be outmatched by, a breathing part of prehistory, sensate stone.

His name, it turns out, is Rudy. The park administrator I phoned said that the new Brooklyn zoo will be primarily for children--interactive exhibits, walk-through prairies and aviaries, and smaller animals, more easily kept. As for the old animals, the big ones won't be back. They've been "placed" in more spacious, suburban, "safari-like" facilities. Rudy, I was told, is now living happily somewhere in Michigan.

Rudy and the others are gone now, and with them a way of looking, literally and figuratively, at animals. I do not believe that people go to zoos to learn about the imminent disappearance of species or to see habitats better viewed on public-television nature shows. People visit zoos, I think, to have some telling turn with the wild's other worldliness; to look, on the most basic level, at ways we didn't end up being. We are, by definition, such fleeting observers of evolution's slow-moving work that visiting a zoo and staring at animals can somehow stay us awhile, reinvolve us in the matter of existence. What the old city zoo did was to arrange such visits on completely civil terms--which is to say, our terms alone and unabashedly. Little effort was made to recreate natural habitats. We were to conjure up images of each animal's home by virtue of its starkly arrested presence in ours.

The old city zoo was designed, as a visit to an art museum is, to invite our immersion in the works and have us be edified by them in some way. The fact that the objects in this particular museum are living creatures and that most people's curiosity about them has always been less than scientific is part of what makes old city zoos so "public" and, in their way, profound. By

pitting us so closely, one-on-one with the animals, they confronted us with our own strange need to look at them in the first place, to sidle up to their apparent blankness and project upon it, however divergent our projections might be. In a sense, the old zoo's arrangement was an open invitation for us to find in animals analogies to our own lives, there being so little detail about theirs to interfere. And yet the crudeness of their confines was, paradoxically, a reflection of the great regard we had for them, as though the keeping was enough, just getting them into safe view. Somehow, those old cages seemed to shout at us: "Hey, that's a goddamn lion in there, can you believe it?" And it wasn't just the lion, but that the lion-or any wild animal--was the messenger of an extant, limitless wilderness, or at least our notion of that.

Somehow, the strangely affecting dynamic of a day at the old city zoo was that while it began with us standing starkly, face to face, with an animal, it always seemed to end with us confronting some slightly confining truth about ourselves. It's a curious mixture of emotions we feel standing that close to a wild animal: yearning, pity, embarrassment--for it and ourselves. There's an initial sense of exhilaration that allows us to forget our momentary overpowering of the animal in order to represent its power again, and then an incipient sadness that grows out of the moment and fills us with some vague measure of existential gloom about our need to spy on animals, to displace them in order to help place ourselves; about our one privilege over them, which at a zoo seems a curse--of being the only animal capable of looking back at all the others and calling them names.

TOPIC: For what reasons does Siebert believe people look at animals, in zoos? What do you think of his views? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading--including "Where Have All the Animals Gone?" itself.