

*Alida Winternheimer*

## Wild Animal

The signs on our cage say WILD ANIMALS. This is a tease, since I and the other bear were both born in captivity. We have only ever known enclosures. This one is my least favorite, the Observation Pen where we can be easily viewed.

The other bear and I have passed many hours in here discussing which side of the fence is in and which is out. He seems to think the *Homo sapiens* parade past our bars for our amusement. To what end? I ask. They stopped amusing me long ago. My reasoning is sound. We are in. They are out. We are kept. They are free. In my view, we are simply caged and displayed. The other bear's view of things is, admittedly, the more optimistic. Of course, the other bear doesn't trouble himself with signs. He doesn't even care to distinguish himself as *Ursus americanus*, the black bear.

When we are not discussing the differences between in and out, we sleep.

The *Homo sapiens* today are dressed in very little fur. It is hot, which I have noticed corresponds to the exposure of more and more of their hairless flesh. I have seen them add and remove furs at will of all sorts and types. This baffled me for many years. I cannot say I as yet understand it—we never get very close to our Handlers, unless we are made to sleep—but I have grown tired of trying to understand them.

“Suzy-Q! Suzy-Q! Look at them Teddy Bears,” one of them shouts. A male, tall, with gray whiskers along his jaw and a long dark mane tied together at the back. He has a meaty belly, the sort that indicates a good season. I lift my chin off my paws to squint at him through the bars of the enclosure. He has writing on the black fur across that ample belly: Harley Dav—something. I have seen this before and believe it is the mark of a clan.

The female is skinny, barely clad in any furs, a yellow mane piled high on her head. She holds the hand of a cub, tiny and pink, the age I mostly see being pushed in strollers. I don't understand it; if

a cub can't walk on its own, then it should not leave the den. The female leans over to point at us, to show the cub where we lie. This sort of exchange amongst the *Homo sapiens* occurs constantly. I rest my chin on my paws again and close my eyes. The cub squeals and claps her hands together.

The male pulls a can out of a large box he has been towing in a wagon. He opens it and I detect a quiet *shhk!* that precedes the scent of malt. He and the female pass the can between them. Many *Homo sapiens* come to gawk and move on, but these three remain. We bears loll in the sun, doing nothing. Eventually, the male says, "Let's go. They are the dullest bears I have ever seen."

You too, mister, I think.

The cub hollers as they turn away from our Observation Pen. I have heard many a tantrum, but this is different. This tiny cub is crying with a true yearning. I sit up and shake my head, then lift it to sniff the air, to locate the odor of this little one. My lips part so that I can taste and better discern whatever scents I find there. The female points at me and cheers to rouse the cub. It amuses me the way *Homo sapiens* take delight in the most banal of movements. I sit blinking in the sunshine for a while longer, then shake myself from head to tail. The feel of air ruffling through my coat as I move is delightful. The cub and the female cheer again. The male starts to walk away. "Come on," he says.

"But, baby, the show's finally on!"

"You call that a show?" the male says. "Well, maybe if you shook like that it would be a show." He claps his hands on his female's hindquarters.

Perhaps there will be a show. Desire is often in the air, so often that I gather the females are continually in heat. And yet, in all my years, I have never seen a *Homo sapiens* courtship. The Handlers, however, are always eager to watch us breed, and some species, like *Equus quagga*, the zebras, will mate in their Habitat before any spectator happening by.

The male pulls a long, narrow piece of meat from the box in the wagon and waggles it at the female. "Want a show?" he says.

The female swats him with her hand. "Don't be dirty! We got my grandbaby out with us today." She laughs, despite admonishing her male, and takes the meat stick from him, then puts the cub's hand into his. "Watch the show, now, honey," she says to the cub,

though her eyes never leave her male.

The female steps over a low fence that separates the tar path from the grass. She looks behind her as she does so, a big grin revealing her inconsequential yellow teeth. The other *Homo sapiens* on the path either rush away with their cubs or stand staring with their jaws open. Her male hoots to encourage her. The other bear rouses himself to sit up. No one has ever approached the fence before.

“Here, bear,” she calls. “Look what Granny’s got for you.” She comes right up to the enclosure and sticks her hand through the fence to wave the meat stick at us.

The other bear stands and yawns, then sniffs the air. The female smells of malt and old smoke. Her smell is strong, coming off her furs, flesh, and mane. Atop her scent, the air carries the interesting smell of a new kind of meat. I do not trust it. The other bear takes a step forward. “Don’t do it,” I say. He shrugs and lumbers toward the fence.

The male, the cub, and the others standing around hold their breath, creating a change both subtle and distinctive to the air. The other bear stands slightly back, sniffing, his nose tilted up, his lips moving as if to usher the scent into his mouth.

“Nice bear,” the female coos. She glances over her shoulder at the cub, only for an instant, and the other bear lunges.

She screams. Her scream is shrill, distinct from the cries of panic surrounding her. Her male rushes forward and tries to grab the other bear, who shakes his head to loosen his prize. The air fills with the scent of blood. This is not the moist odor of meat delivered to our pen, this is hot, wet blood. I move in, close to the other bear and growl.

They break apart then. The female stumbles back, away from the enclosure, her hand red and diminished by two digits. Her male is screaming, “Oh my God,” and “Holy crap,” over and over. She whimpers, clutching her hand to her chest, red everywhere. More *Homo sapiens* come, running and yelling. I do not appreciate commotion, so I bellow my displeasure at the crowd before turning to seek the farthest corner of the pen where I hide myself.

The other bear is already lying in the ferns. He uses his tongue to wash his upper and lower lips, repeatedly licking them, with a drowsy look on his face. “Well?” I say.

“Well what?”

“You ate *Homo sapiens*.”

“Yes.”

“You aren’t supposed to eat them. You were born in captivity!” I do not mean to shout, but I cannot fully believe what has happened.

“Haven’t you read the sign?” he asks.

“The sign?”

“According to the sign, I am a wild animal.”

I sit down next to him in the ferns. A dreadful screeching comes from the path, an Emergency Siren that I have heard once before. “Well?” I demand.

He tilts his head to look at me. “Yes?”

“How did it taste?”

*Alida Winternheimer is a native Midwesterner known to feed all sorts of fauna. Presently she is training a service dog to pick up objects, close drawers, push switches, and crawl under tables. She writes about writing and her service dog-in-training at [alidawinternheimer.com](http://alidawinternheimer.com).*