



The Writer and Nature

Jonathan Edwards

MANY YEARS AGO, I WAS in Seattle when I saw an octopus. Or, to try that sentence again, many years ago I was in Seattle, when an octopus saw me. For further clarification, I should point out that my altercation or interaction with the octopus happened in an aquarium. It wasn't as though I was walking through the streets of Seattle when I saw an octopus, driving a taxicab, smoking a Cuban, wearing a fedora. As I believe is widely known, octopi tend to prefer bowler hats.

My experience with the octopus was illuminating, extraordinary. My family quickly moved on to the shark tunnel, the tuna tank, the number one attraction of the mollusc enclosure, but I kept standing there, eye-to-eye with the octopus. What I couldn't get over was the nature of its body, constantly shape-shifting, a bedsheet hanging from a washing line, billowing in the wind, a slow-motion slipstream it dragged there behind it, a body that was really part of the water. *How weird*, I thought, *for you to be over here, and your body over there, somewhere you'd been, your body your own past*. That your body could be anywhere for all the hell you knew, that there were bits of it you'd forgotten. But in the middle of all this, the eyes of the octopus were there, and met mine. And they were human eyes, in the midst of the craziness: they were the eyes of an old man on a park bench in a leaf-swirling autumn, throwing bread to ducks, leaning his chin on his stick, thinking his thoughts, saying *Ah yes*. He knew me, the octopus, he saw me, right then.

Ever since, at times of imaginative lull, I've rushed to aquariums, I've



rushed to zoos, safari parks. They're otherworldly places: so many things there have clearly just landed from outer space. So many things there are clearly us. In enclosure after enclosure, tank after tank, I find poem after poem, roaring, swimming. I spent a day once with the penguins in Bristol Zoo, the way they stood round, pointing their heads this way and that, ruffling their feathers against the cold, taking a run-up, launching the torpedoes of themselves into the water. I spent a morning with the crocodile who lounged in its pool, or else on the edge there, rock-like, stock-still, all coiled, all potential. Its little eyes, its spiky suit of armour. Half of it was mouth.

When I can't get to the zoo, I fall back on accidents. A hedgehog on a summer night in my village, pitter-pattering down an abandoned road, ignoring one-way signs, its footsteps loud as footsteps in TV whodunnits, the prickly joke of its body. Or coming into my study one summer to find a bat which must have got down the chimney, swirling round the ceiling like the fan in Martin Sheen's drunken room in *Apocalypse Now*, finally coming to rest at the top of the bay window, dangling upside down there like some weird fruit.

Animals, when you find them, or when they find you, more than anything, are this: astonishingly themselves. In this way, they're like true poems when you write them, sneaking up on you from nowhere, suddenly there, in a way that seems like they've been there all along. But if animals are like poems, I like to think that poems are like animals too, and this thinking puts me back in front of that octopus tank. I know what I saw there, in that otherworldly life form, separate from me forever, but looking at me with those eyes which sized me up, saw through me, knew everything about me, which connected in a way that was entirely human. There, behind glass. He was an octopus. He was a reader.