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The Tall Boy

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The Tall Boy

They were shiny black, supple and fat, these seals, and they basked on the stones looking for all the world like Stevie Wonder, their heads lolling back, eyes closed, rocking and swaying gently to some distant music. He watched them as he leaned over the railing that dug coldly into his belly almost splitting him in two. He was absorbed by the seals, their black wetness and their rhythm. He rocked his own head back in sympathetic imitation but something told him he wasn't the same as these creatures. The swaying of the seals reminded him of other things he'd seen, of films. Dark women balancing jars on their heads could sway like this. It was a rhythm he could almost feel but never quite catch up with. The boy was fascinated.

It was barely spring. Every so often a gust of air, warm and heavy as dog's breath, would puff by reminding the woman that soon she could put her wool sweaters in storage. She stood at the information area studying the layout of the zoo. Every minute or so she would glance nervously back to where her boy stood watching the seals. Her glances had a secretive hooded nature. The boy seemed rather tall for her to be so anxious. The boy was tall but his skin glowed a bit too pink. His scalp showed rosy through the rows of his short cropped hair, the color of a flashlight lit behind the palm of a hand. His face was very round and smooth. It seemed still fetal to her and she worried. She wanted him to never have to be embarrassed. She could see that his beauty was that of a newborn still wet with its mother but she worried that the rest of the world would demand that tall things come out of the tall boy. She called the boy to her and he ran up the paved sidewalk and stood panting, fingers automatically touching her arm, her blouse, as happy to see her as if it were the first time he'd seen her that day. It was always this way, his feelings were direct. He didn't know how to be embarrassed. He loved this woman that was his mother. When he looked at her she filled his life just as the seals had filled it a moment ago.

The woman and the boy walked together toward the long low dark building that stretched quietly through a grove of trees. It said Reptile House on a snake shaped sign over the door. The sign was a green cartoon snake, a caricature of a snake with purple fangs, body curving in a gentle inchworm motion so that the letters had to follow, up and down, a rollercoaster frozen. Nobody screamed inside the house that she could hear. They drifted towards the dark opening under the grinning snake. She kept his attention with her voice, now singing, now talking aloud to herself, to him. He always listened, always wanted to see into her eyes when she spoke, making their walk a rather strange movement — she straight ahead while he crab-leapt sideways trying to see her face. His eyes were the wide open flat blue of finger paint.

She saw a sign on the wall of the Reptile House: there was going to be an interview with one of the snakekeepers. She told him. Did he understand "interview"?

"Innerview" he repeated, very sure of himself. "Pictures of what's inside." It took her a moment to figure that one out. When she spent a long time with him his definitions and his world seemed so right and she felt somehow guilty trying to explain what really was. She agreed that pictures of the insides of snakes would be very interesting, probably much more insightful into the snake world than the zookeeper would be, but that that wasn't what an interview was. He didn't care once he got inside and saw the first snake.

"Huge" he said, without noise, mouthing the round word with respect. The snake was draped heavily relaxed over its piece of driftwood, a sleeping giant. "Huge." The boy formed the word again. The woman encircled the boy's arm with two fingers and then smiling, pointed to the snake behind the glass. "Big as your arm." He made a circle with his own free hand and clamped it quick, tight, smiling, around her arm so that they were locked together, face to face. Then the boy got excited, red-faced, head bobbing, wanting to dance in this circle they had created together. The woman let her hand slide from his warm arm. "Not here."

The building was too warm. She didn't understand how even a snake could resist breaking out in a sweat. But they didn't. They slithered dry and persistent and perfect behind glass walls. Their colors and patterns, clown-makeup, paisley perfect, seemed somehow a mockery of what they were. The deceptiveness of the smiling snakes and the fetid wet heat smell of the other people began to make her nervous. The boy had moved on from the first snake. Now he had his face pressed nose-grease close up to the glass of a cage. On the other side

a boa with a head as large as a fist slept unaware. The boy stared hard, content to stay crouched and nose to the glass for hours, willing the snake to open his eyes, flick his maroon tongue, give him an innerview.

The boy had never shed the wonder of a three year old. There was always something worth staring at, asking about. The whys and whats could sometimes be overwhelming. She had fooled him once. Tricked him. She had the garage door opener in her pocket and she told him to say the magic word. When he did, she pressed the button, sly and smug with her own humor. The door folded open as the boy's lower jaw flopped down in amazement revealing the wet black cavern of his mouth. A perfect joke. He said the magic word again and she pressed the button again closing the garage. The boy's eyes were wide open, almost painfully wide. He turned them, blue and flat, to look at her expecting her to share his awe. The woman closed her own eyes feeling somehow shamed. For weeks after the boy had stood talking to the garage door, coaxing the blank wall to move with the sound of his voice, soft and unceasing and patient. It should have worked. The woman eventually had the electric opener system removed. She couldn't stand to use it.

"Go now." The woman spoke soft and shallow standing behind the boy's back. She put a powder cool hand on the red exposed skin of the boy's neck, prying him from the snake's cage as if plucking at a delicate tree frog. "Go?" He turned to face the woman. She nodded, lips tight, suddenly very insistent that they leave. To relieve the bewildered look on his smooth face she promised that they would go to the Primate House next.

"Primate House" he echoed with wonder and trust. They stepped into the fresh air outside the heat of the Reptile House. She felt as cool and clean as if she had slipped between fresh white sheets. She would have liked to stand in the air without thoughts but the boy was touching at her, clinging with his white smooth perfectly formed fingers. He wanted to see the apes and she had promised.

The Primate House was warm in a different way. The heat seemed to radiate from the apes themselves rather than the heating system. The odor was browns and reds, warm and charged with a lingering sexuality. The woman ran her finger between her turtleneck and her throat to relieve the disturbing heat. It didn't help. The air was the temperature of blood and her eyes stung. The boy suffered none of the woman's discomfort. His face was lit yellow white watching the monkeys gyrate in their cages.

Children were all around clustered in front of the cages, pushing and pulling and squealing, coiled tight, tense with excitement watch-

ing the monkeys leap and tail grab so close to them. The apes seemed to hold some special magic for the children, inspiring them as birds and tigers and arctic foxes never would. The boy joined a group of children in front of a cage filled with very long tailed monkeys. The tails were so long and able they seemed like an extra paw. Their tiny faces seemed mean to the woman, the eyes glittered like dark African jewels. Her boy's eyes were so blue and so pale and clear. She shuddered. The boy was with the other children. A rainbow of t-shirts, they all stood close feeding off of each other's excitement as they imitated the antics inside the cage.

The woman moved to another cage keeping watch on the boy from the corner of her eye. She turned to look into the face of a much taller ape, a female. The face was almost comical, as if drawn on by a crazed captor. But the eyes seemed sorrowful to the woman, ashamed. They were the eyes of a woman forced to dance naked in front of her kidnappers.

These taller apes moved quietly, shoulders rounded, casting shy embarrassed glances at the blank walls. Their fur looked soft and sparse like the downy hair of an old man with the same pink skin below. But it was the hind ends of these apes that made them different, grotesque, drawing some people near and making others turn away. The rumps were inflamed angry pink and swollen out of proportion to their bodies, skin bumpy like a gourd. The apes walked toe-in to accommodate for this condition. The woman, watching them move behind the glass wall, was reminded of large-breasted girls in gym class and the shame they all shared.

She broke her gaze when the boy touched at her elbow asking why. "Why are those ones different?" She didn't really know. But she did know that she wanted to leave the building. "It's too warm in here for Mommy. Let's go to the petting zoo?" She asked instead of telling and he nodded, up and down, too much, wanting to see the black eyes happy. The woman took the boy's sticky warm palm into her dry worried hand and wove the fingers together until they were comfortable.

"Ice cream later?" She felt a little guilty. He had been having fun watching the monkeys. They walked out of the Primate House into bright light, like coming out of a daytime movie. At the side of the building a small girl was throwing up into the bushes. Her mother stood next to her, one hand holding a swollen pink balloon and the other hand stroking the girl's back. The girl was down on all fours arching with each retch like a cat that has swallowed too much of its own fur. The woman kept walking with the boy, hoping he wouldn't

notice. He would notice. She knew that he would; he noticed everything around him. And he wouldn't know to turn away from something like that. "Don't stare, please don't, don't ever stare," she whispered to him and began to move quickly, half running, fingers clamped tight around the boy's arm.

Lauren Williams