

Ciaran Berry

THE DEAD ZOO



Gallery Books

The Dead Zoo
is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 24 October 2013.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

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ISBN 978 1 85235 568 5 *paperback*
978 1 85235 569 2 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.



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for my parents and grandparents

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'I can hardly bear to leave any animal out.'
— Diane Arbus

The Silent Reader

To Augustine, newly arrived in Rome,
it must seem almost a miracle. Hunched
over the letters of Saint Paul, the man
with the rough bowl cut, in the washed-
out blue robe, is busy 'lowering himself
into himself.

Consider how a bucket will hover
over the dry mouth of a well
before the callused palms of some aged villager
take up the rope and lower the vessel
towards the dark. There's weight
and measure

to the gesture, just as there's weight
and measure to the way the Bishop
scans the saint's letters, the words
like water raised into daylight, where
the world of objects begins to disappear.
Courtyard, olive tree

suddenly barely there, even the bench
on which he sits obscured, so that
if you tapped Ambrose on the shoulder
to ask his place of birth, his mother's
maiden name, he'd have to pause
a moment

to remember what he was and is — heart
and lungs, belly and genitals, a man
reading without moving his lips,
his pupils flitting over the characters
the way a bee will lift its striped body
from flower

to flower, the art for him completely ordinary,
though, to Augustine, it must be spectacle
beyond any chained bear set upon
by howling dogs, or the gleaming spurs
of any prize rooster he might once have lost
a coin over,

and perhaps it's this he half means later
when he writes of the exquisite delights
savoured in a secret mouth, of the wind
that can blow through our house of straw.
Does that same wind blow through
my grandfather's house,

I wonder, as he reads 'night hangs upon
mine eyes; my bones would rest, that have
but labour'd to attain this hour',
leaping slightly in his favourite chair
as the cuckoo clock above his head erupts,
the bird shot

out into the room on its tense spring,
Brutus about to run onto his own blade,
and the blackness in my grandfather's lungs
beginning to settle into something final
as the darkness near the bottom
of a well?

Soon he will become his books, the reek
of ash trapped in a rack of pipes, a shape
I can only half discern, yawning, rolling
his eyes before he settles back into the line.
'I do not know whence I came into
this life

that is but a dying,' Augustine confides,
'or rather this dying state that leads to life.'
And I picture him a year on from this scene
as the doctors, in their blue robes, hack
through one of his feet to stop the spread
of gangrene.

I think of how last year, at an exhibition of bodies,
the smiling intern placed onto my palm
a shellacked human brain, its sections
the peeled flesh of an orange, its heft
about the same as that small volume
he cradles

between his palms. How strange the way
we become the objects that contain us,
the way we are contained in what persists —
a tea-stained copy of *Julius Caesar*,
the gold-trimmed pages of the letters
of Saint Paul,

or the arrangement of light and colour
in Chardin's *Le Philosophe Lisant*
where the painter's friend, of whom
we know almost nothing, bends forever
into his chapter, the sleeve of his lush
coat brushing

the hourglass where the sand has settled
in the lower bulb, the quill at his elbow
pensive in the pot of ink
with which he'll make his own small plea
against extinction, meeting the dead still living
on the living page.

At Ballyconneely

'On 2 August 1908 a mirage of a faraway city was seen at Ballyconneely, on the Connemara coast. It was described as a city of different-sized houses, in different styles of architecture, and was visible for over three hours.'

— Foster's Irish Oddities

Who knows, if you look long enough,
what might blossom up out of the spume?
Dead man's fingers, gutweed, Neptune's necklace,
plastic bottles from Vladivostok and Gdansk,

or an entire town, floodlit at midnight
and, it appeared, floating out there beyond
the range of cormorants, the black
and whiskered buoys that turned out to be seals,

while the whole village gathered at the pier
puffing on clay pipes, consoling grandchildren,
until someone said it must be New York
and someone else Boston, from where

her stunned sister had just sent, folded three times
over a lone dollar, a letter home
describing the taste of a Bartlett pear
and the man from Clare she'd met at a church dance.

The red-haired Conroy twins stood holding hands
as if their drowned father's return
were imminent, as if his upturned currach
had just beached somewhere out there

and not gone down broken among whale
graveyards, wrasse and mackerel shoals.
While the widow Lynch dropped to her knees,
fingered her beads, and swore the Saviour

would walk soon again upon the water,
come ashore here to black tea, brown bread,
sean nós singers, a landscape stone-
pocked and strange as the red face of Mars,

or the dirt floor of that half-made heaven
in Signorelli's painting where, legged
and armed again, naked and toned,
the dead welcome one another into an afterlife

that looks much the same as the one before.
No one said mirage. No one said a reflection of the moon.
No one said Shangri-La. No one said Xanadu.
That's not the sort of people that they were.

And because those gnarled, barnacled rocks lurk
just below that broken stretch of coast
no one dared take a boat out there before dawn.
For the meantime, for their own separate reasons,

those Maddens, Mealys, Gorhams, and McLanes
waited for something, not quite sure
whether they were waiting for the seraphim
to fill their dimpled cheeks and blow their horns,

the groan of thole pins and the splash of oars
that might welcome some hero out of folklore home,
or the propeller drone as a biplane bearing
Alcock and Brown came down out of cloud,

swooped shrike-like towards heather and gorse,
the whiskey that kept them warm still wet
on their breaths, and on their tongues
news of the new world, salt from Atlantic foam.