

Zoo view, from *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, 2003 (In Touch 7, 2004)

The novel Life of Pi is a story of an Indian boy who gets shipwrecked at sea for 227 days with only a ferocious Bengal tiger called Richard Parker for company. In this extract, Piscine Patel, or Pi [pai] for short, has not yet embarked on the fateful voyage. Instead, he is reflecting on the subject of zoos.

I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion. Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are “happy” because they are “free”. These people usually have a large, handsome predator in mind, a lion or a cheetah (the life of a gnu or an armadillo is rarely exalted). They imagine this wild animal roaming about the savannah on digestive walks after eating a prey that accepted its lot piously, or going for callisthenic runs to stay slim after overindulging. They imagine this animal overseeing its offspring proudly and tenderly, the whole family watching the setting of the sun from the limbs of trees with sighs of pleasure. The life of the wild animal is simple, noble and meaningful, they imagine. Then it is captured by wicked men and thrown into tiny jails. Its “happiness” is dashed. It yearns mightily for “freedom” and does all it can to escape. Being denied its “freedom” for too long, the animal becomes a shadow of itself, its spirit broken. So some people imagine.

This is not the way it is.

If you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, “Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!” – do you think they would shout and dance for joy? They wouldn’t. Birds are not free. The people you’ve just evicted would splutter, “With what right do you throw us out? This is our home. We own it. We have lived here for years. We’re calling the police, you scoundrel.”

Don’t we say, “There’s no place like home”? That’s certainly what animals feel. Animals are territorial. That is the key to their minds. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfil the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and getting of food and water. A biologically sound zoo enclosure – whether cage, pit, moated island, corral, terrarium, aviary or aquarium – is just another territory, peculiar only in its size and its proximity to human territory. That it is so much smaller than what it would be in nature stands to reason. Territories in the wild are large not as a matter of taste but of necessity. In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out. Whereas before for us the cave was here, the river over there, the hunting grounds a mile that way, the lookout next to it, the berries somewhere else – all of them infested with lions, snakes, ants, leeches and poison ivy – now the river flows through taps at hand’s reach and we can wash next to where we sleep, we can eat where we have cooked, and we can surround the whole with a protective wall and keep it clean and warm. The house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A sound zoo enclosure is the equivalent for an animal.

In the literature can be found legions of examples of animals that could escape but did not, or did and returned. There is the case of the chimpanzee whose cage door was left unlocked and had swung open. Increasingly anxious, the chimp began to shriek and to slam the door shut repeatedly – with a deafening clang each time – until the keeper, notified by a visitor, hurried over to remedy the situation. A herd of roe-deer in a European zoo stepped out of their corral when the gate was left open. Frightened by visitors, the deer bolted for the nearby forest, which had its own herd of wild roe-deer and could support more.

Nonetheless, the zoo roe-deer soon returned to their corral. In another zoo a worker was walking to his work site at an early hour, carrying planks of wood, when, to his horror, a bear emerged from the morning mist, heading straight for him at a confident pace. The man dropped the planks and ran for his life. The zoo staff immediately started searching for the escaped bear. They found it back in its enclosure, having climbed down into its pit the way it had climbed out, by way of a tree that had fallen over. It was thought that the noise of the planks of wood falling to the ground had frightened it.

But I don’t insist. I don’t mean to defend zoos. Close them all down if you want (and let us hope that what wildlife remains can survive in what is left of the natural world).