

Segue

online literary journal

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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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I Am the Zookeeper

Wild animals don't belong
in domestic settings,
monkeys stick their fingers
where they don't belong,
hungry lions will jump any fence,
& bears stink on purpose.

I am the zookeeper.
My body smells of feces
& blood
& I like it.

I am the zookeeper.
I fell in love with a flea
that lived in a fine
& private place.
My love was deep.
My love was like a man
driving toward distant
mountains, released from time,
& abiding.
One day I scratched myself
under an ancient lightbulb
& caught my flea.
From under my nail she lept
& went toward the cages.
Every wild thing runs for shelter,
every tame thing, too.
I weep
& send her my love.

The Zookeeper's Loss

I am the zookeeper who
fell in love with a flea.
Nobody else knew
how sad is my blood, black
& iron rich
like the tracks
a night train runs on.
With her, how ecstatic
was my scratching!

Now I'm nothing.
In my mouth
is a tongue gone wrong
& my new way is silence.

Don't even listen to these
written words.
I'll not be telling
you anything you
don't already know.
You, too,
have made
adjustments.

Author Notes

Theresa Williams has published a novel, The Secret of Hurricanes, and stories in The Sun, Hunger Mountain, and other journals. One of her poems was a finalist for the Ginsberg Prize. She teaches literature and Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

About the Work

“I Am the Zookeeper” and “The Zookeeper's Loss” grew out of a haiku project I started on my blog. I had been frustrated for some time by my inability to produce writing while teaching. Writing haiku, I reasoned, would make me look more closely at the world I inhabit. Connecting to the physical world is something I have to make a special effort to do. By temperament I'm a dreamer. Physical reality is secondary to me, yet I know how important it is in grounding creative work. I made a goal to write 100 haiku in a year. I have so far surpassed that goal and am close to writing 200 haiku.

One day I ran across a reference to a zookeeper in my reading—I can't remember the source—and I had a sudden insight. For some time, I have been working on a novel about a man who travels the Ohio River in a little boat. What if he was a zookeeper? How would this shape the narrative? I began to think about what the inner life of my zookeeper might be like. So I wrote two or three haiku poems about a zookeeper. They were strange and wonderful haiku; I immediately saw that I needed to construct longer poems in order to discover more about the zookeeper. These *Segue* poems are part of that exploration.

While developing the inner life of the zookeeper, I began to think about a childhood fascination I had with insects and remembered a book from my childhood called *The Golden Book About God*. There were no images of God. The book suggests that God is found in the physical world; this includes the creatures who inhabit the planet with us. This idea led me to the possibility that the zookeeper loves insects, not just in a romantic sense but also in a spiritual sense.

Finally, it occurs to me that the process I just described is a similar process I used while writing my first novel. Often I would recast prose sections into poetry and then shift them back to prose. This process helped me to find images and to condense the writing. Poetry—reading and writing it—is my fuel. This zookeeper is now finding a prominent place in the new novel I'm working on. Once he stepped on the novel's stage, I felt a new energy and a new reason to finish the novel. I want to know what happens next. I mean, I really want to know.