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Cities and Animals

(after Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*)

by Steve Brown

1. It's perfectly formed: dawn in the city of Edyffsa breaks bare, blue and sterile. One single lid of unblemished azure stretches above the wakening city. But there's an absence here, also: no song, no litter of bird call or argumentation of sparrows disturbs the clear air or breaks the crystal silence. The sky is free of tracer-lines of flight; no small lines are scratched into the wainscot; no fine spiderous threads sway in the unvisited corners of rooms.

Surrounded by this historically unfamiliar lack, all the citizens are pressed to their screens. Their fingers work tirelessly, noiselessly on their keyboards, buttons – as if weaving endlessly an endless tapestry. But imagine that tapestry: its margins are empty, no figures of decorative fancy allow relief from or comment on the main elaborating story – which, in turn, has become somehow lonely, empty and echoless. Perhaps some of those citizens have begun to fear, or even hope, that one morning they might wake to find on each screen the same expanse of noiseless blue as fills their windows.

2. In Argentina, the animals have inherited or usurped the homes: wolves lounge on sofas, parrots chatter into smartphones, rats play at stocking larders. It is as though the images of a Grandville or a Bosch have come to fruition. A cacophony of sound spills into the air – with the disconcerting absence of any human word. But in the shadows, down rough, abandoned alleys, a few human figures lurk. There they mumble to themselves alone, in painfully-enunciated, stray, dazed words.

Each is trying to explain or understand whether it was the opening or shutting of doors which caused this reversal.

3. Maggiora is unique among cities in that it is, at once, the capital of two vast, magnificent empires, each distinct and wholly different. It is as though there are two co-existing 'orders', two different planes of reality. The two sets of citizens each sit at the hub of their own ever-growing empire, each historically unprecedented. Yet they each do not acknowledge the other. The matter of scale divides them, moves them mutually out of sight of each other.

In the realm beyond the reach of microscope, they take no account of the clatter of huge steel implements across the table-top, or the large boots stamping on the pavements in those others' endless victory parades. To them, this is not where either consumption or power lies. They are too busy extending their own territory in the small pinches, the dark pockets of their infinite terrain.

They don't measure, or build monuments, or estimate their GDP. They care only for the invisible addition. No cheering crowds – each one is their own commando. Their empire increases in implacable silence: inexorable. No need for waving flags; they own the determined silence of certain victory.

4. In Vezilium, at Carnival, all roles are reversed for two whole weeks: the pets and working animals take on the duties and obligations of ownership, the masters/mistresses shrink into the being 'owned'. Then might you see a human paraded in a large leather pouch around the streets by a pack of Alsatians, or a single human chained, braying at the Moon. A woman might dance for an audience of bears, who will growl their appreciation of the finer points. Men and women clamber over rooftops, howl and desperately mate by starlight; you can observe a fine Burmese wrinkle its nose, and clear the mess left by humans in the streets.

Everyone is relaxed and calls it fun. Apart, that is, from a few voices raised of late, who have begun to question: should we humans really allow the animals access to the keys to clinics, laboratories? There have been recent rumours of the birth of a few flat-nosed, stentorian-breathing human babies, a few with flecked and mottled, all-over body hair.

5. In Rensing, over time, the city zoo has become so extended that it has become as large as the city itself, to the point that moving between zoo and city, city and zoo, it becomes impossible to tell which is which.

In one, lonely creatures move as if weighed down by the glances of others. They tug forlornly at what passes for their food, disabled by boredom and the restricted, over-bright, palette of their acrylic environment. They might live longer than their counterparts in the wild, but they seem to weigh the years more slowly, heavily. Existence seems a long sigh or unstifled yawn. If one was sentimental, you might imagine their eyes filled with swollen, though invisible, tears.

In the other, the exhibits live out their limited routines. They seem dimly conscious of tightened horizons, the conformity of their days. Occasionally, they roar pointlessly or rub their pelts until their skin peels or blood blossoms on their fur.

At the barrier separating zoo and city, the inmates look across at each other with distracted attention or dumb incomprehension. They seem to lack that common language with which to build some shared sense, some thin thread, at last, of solidarity.