

SAMPLE
TEXT

THE ROME ZOO

PASCAL JANOVJAK

Translated by Stephanie Smee



‘A gorgeous, dream-like
fable of Italy’s past
and present’

Ceridwen Dovey

Born in Basel in 1975 to a French mother and a Slovakian father, PASCAL JANOVJAK studied comparative literature and art history in Strasbourg before working in the Middle East. His works include *Coléoptères* (*Beetles*), *L'Invisible* (*The Invisible One*) and *À Toi* (*To You*, co-written with Kim Thuy). He now lives in Rome. In 2020 he received the Swiss Literature Award, the Prix Michel-Dentan and the Prix du public de la RTS.

STEPHANIE SMEE left a career in law to work as a literary translator. Recent translations include Hannelore Cayre's *The Inheritors* and *The Godmother* (winner of the CWA Crime Fiction in Translation Dagger award); Françoise Frenkel's rediscovered World War II memoir, *No Place to Lay One's Head*, which was awarded the JQ-Wingate Prize; and Joseph Ponthus's prize-winning work *On the Line*.

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The man's name is Chahine Gharbi, born 18 April 1970, of Algerian nationality. This is what he wrote in the reception register, five minutes earlier. Here, he'll be known simply as number 324, by reference to the room he'll be occupying from 28 December to 16 January, breakfast included, and this new identity suits him just fine.

There he is, standing in that room, in the grey dawn light. He has not yet removed his coat. He's facing a man who's wearing the hotel's uniform: the man brings his wrists together, like a prisoner's but with thumbs interlaced, and his long fingers unfurl gently as his hands rise up, his fingers fan out and fold back in against the sky of room 324 – two great black wings with pale palms that climb, hover and float back down in the grey dawn.

The Algerian admires the noble wingspan of the hands, but he doesn't seem to grasp the meaning of this charade, nor see the enormous structure that is visible through the umbrella pines outside, and which the bellboy revealed when drawing back the curtains. It must be said that he's tired, that he hasn't asked for any of this. But the bellboy persists, he starts clawing the air, baring predatory teeth and rolling the whites of his eyes – a tiger, or maybe a lion, Chahine thinks, it's hard to say, and now a monkey: the man is swinging his long arms, moving back and forth in room number 324, and while this does have the effect of being even more dramatic,

it is also equally and entirely uncalled for. Chahine is relieved when the door closes behind the hotel employee, who has nevertheless done his best. These foreign languages really are such a drag, thinks the bellboy as he returns to his post, which is exactly what Chahine is thinking as he sits down on the bed.

He still hasn't removed his coat. Next to him is a suitcase he is reluctant to open, and a telephone which could do with recharging sooner rather than later. His gaze drifts around the room which feels so familiar, because it's identical to so many others, in other places. A room that's a little larger than it needs to be, just enough to give an impression of luxury. An armchair upholstered in a fabric that's almost certainly red and gold, a picture swallowed up in the half-light, the details of which Chahine struggles to make out.

Outside, the umbrella pines trace their silhouettes against the lines of the great metallic structure. It stands tens of metres tall, the half-sphere, a monument composed of air and steel, of almost equilateral triangles growing ever smaller as they ascend towards its apex. A minor miracle of geometry, even more beautiful now as the first rays of sunshine caress the tubes, causing ridge-lines to glow, giving the half-sphere a new depth. Quietly the dome assumes its position in the surroundings, amongst trees that are gradually colouring up against the deepening blue of the sky. But Chahine is not admiring the spectacle. He has fallen asleep, fully dressed, palms upturned to the ceiling, mouth open. There's no reason to rush. Let's leave him to sleep, he has had a long journey.

As the twentieth century dawns, there is no metal sphere to be seen, no umbrella pines, nor is there any hotel. Just an unmarked area on the edge of the city, wild grasses and a few ill-defined and poorly cultivated plots. A farmer and his ox turn over the fertile soil, under the eye of a small group of dignitaries in patent leather shoes, gathered around a man who is sizing up the area.

Karl Hagenbeck is sporting a large beard in the style of Abraham Lincoln, but white, which underlines his natural authority as an animal tamer and dealer. This is a man who brings in vessels loaded with tigers and cannibals from the most inaccessible of lands, a man who bears the scent of Africa, who behind him has a continent of growling wild beasts, of infinite expanses of savannah and hostile jungle. And Rome is entranced, with only its yellowing statues as reminders of the epic battles between man and beast – marble lions and broken-winged eagles, an entire mythology in the process of crumbling away. Rome, too, wants the sound of roaring as evening falls, wants fangs and knives, the muffled, feverish sound of drums, and the flickering of a campfire on black skin. It's all the more pressing now things are not going so well in Africa, for the Italians. They're annoyed at the sight of their neighbours carving up the world between them, while they themselves are still busy building a country. But first things first. While they wait for the return of their empire, they will at least have a zoo.

Now here's a man who can deliver them Africa on its knees, ankles and wrists bound, along with Asia, the Amazon and both poles. The Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimation in Paris will pale by comparison with Hagenbeck on board – that's what they told Ernesto Nathan, the mayor, and Ernesto Nathan has no reason to doubt that assessment upon seeing the tall German man smile as he scans the vast construction site, the battalions of labourers now busy digging, packing down, levelling, against a procession of Percheron draught horses hauling loads of earth. Nathan himself is not smiling. He is wondering how much all of this is going to cost him, because he is already busy building law courts, an Olympic stadium and a monument, of ample dimensions, to Vittorio Emanuele which will be visible from a great distance, like the Eiffel Tower. Now all of this is an expensive exercise, he confides to Hagenbeck, and Hagenbeck contents himself with a smile, gracefully stepping over the puddles of water which the other man is forced to skirt. Without pausing too long to consider the financial details, the German sets out his unwavering vision for this zoological garden of the modern age, much like the one he has already built in Hamburg. It is not enough to plant trees and map out promenades. The entire area must be landscaped, the terracing reconstructed, hills fashioned, which will provide the theatre for animal life. Moats, imperceptible to the onlooker, will be excavated, and then Inuits can be positioned in the foreground, Deer behind them and Polar Bears right towards the back – or Nubians, Antelopes and Tigers, as you wish. Most importantly, there'll be no walls, no bars: visitors will be able to take in all these species with a single, admiring glance, it will be a vision of

perfect co-existence, an illusion of utmost freedom. Nathan well appreciates the beauty of this vision, even if there has never been any question of exhibiting Inuits here – the only ones, in his view, deserving of a capital letter. No matter, says Hagenbeck, we can install seals in their place, the important thing is to afford a modicum of respect to the notion of climatic coherence. We'll put the amphitheatre over there at the back, two thousand seats, where we'll exhibit the trained animals, and then, over there, the main restaurant where people will be able to have a Wiener schnitzel.

Hagenbeck is smiling because never has he had so much space at his disposal, nor such a budget: while the little mayor of Rome counts his pennies, he, Karl Hagenbeck, is re-creating Paradise on Earth.

When he leaves the hotel, Chahine is a little more alert: on waking up, he even thought to slip his magnetic key card into the box next to the door, thereby illuminating the whole room, and the screen of his telephone. Now he has everything he needs, a phone that is more or less recharged, a black briefcase that makes him look professional, a clean shirt and a freshly shaven chin. He is also very late: it's already 1.00 pm, they're waiting for him in a restaurant, the address of which he enters into his phone as he goes down the front steps.

Chahine doesn't have to think about anything else, he just has to do his best to keep the little blue dot that represents him moving forward for as long as it takes to complete the map's precisely calculated journey: go left, then take the first street on the left and continue straight on to the red pin. Child's play really, a route of seven hundred and forty metres, but one during which Chahine narrowly avoids bumping into a poorly parked car, then a dog, then the dog's master, because he's walking with eyes glued to the screen and to the hesitant progress of the little blue dot which is turning left at the same time its flesh-and-blood double is heading up a raised pathway, lined with railings. On the screen, this path crosses a large grey featureless expanse, because the zoo does not constitute public open space – but Chahine is not aware of this.

Is he also unaware of the smells brought out by the humidity? The strange cries emerging from the vegetation, the calls that tickle his eardrums? Who knows. For animals, every significant perception results in a physical reaction even if it is, itself, insignificant; it's more complicated with humans, their subconscious occasionally interferes – not to mention the fact that humans love nothing more than to pretend not to notice things. Perhaps that's what Chahine is doing now, with some considerable effort: he's focusing on his screen, certainly doesn't notice the monumental aviary rising up on his left, doesn't see the fake rocks appearing on either side of the path, or the administrative building, the old entrance to the Reptilium, the balloon-seller or the balloons in which he now entangles himself, getting caught up in their strings, struggling in vain to extract himself from their ridiculous snares, stifling a curse.

Chahine resigns himself. He's standing at the zoo's monumental entrance. It's difficult to pretend otherwise. It's even engraved in capital letters on either side of the gate:

GIARDINO ZOOLOGICO

– and a furious elephant, mounted above one of the arches, looks down on him, along with a roaring lion, crouching on top of the wall.

The forecourt is deserted this early in the week, and time has stopped. No wind in the acanthus leaves on the columns. The lion roaring on its pedestal no longer moves, the elephant's trunk is fixed in stone, the allegories atop the building have frozen, and Chahine too: he is perfectly immobile,

a statue. Only the little balloon-seller bustles about, doing his best to untangle the strings as he circles the careless man and his briefcase. By the time he's finished, the clouds will again be slipping across the December grey, life will have reasserted itself, and a little blue dot on the screen of the telephone will enter, hovering, into uncharted territory.

The majestic neo-Baroque entrance to the zoo is not the work of Karl Hagenbeck, who sighs when he sees the model submitted by a certain Brasini: he would have preferred something more Jugendstil in design, something similar to Hamburg, and his team of architects and landscape designers, German and intransigent, are of the same view. But with them is a man who quietly admires the roaring lions, and the Italian savoir faire. There's something unsettling about the fellow, always standing at the back of photographs taken at the time; he wears a big black hat, has a prophet's beard and a gaze that pierces the lens if it isn't wandering out of frame. It so happens that he's Swiss, and an animal sculptor too, he could have been entrusted with the statuary on the entrance gate. But he is not sufficiently talented, probably because he is too fond of his subject matter. They say he breeds hyenas. That he eats the meat, bones and all. That he roars, at dusk. They mutter, looking at his nails, that he paces the streets of Zurich by night in the company of a lioness. It is all entirely true, but it should be noted that the lioness is leashed – and that if he only walks it at night, it's because the Zurich police have requested he no longer do so by day.

It is not for his love of big cats that Hagenbeck has had him come, nor for his skills as a sculptor. Urs Eggenschwyler is an expert in *Zementrabitz*, timber framework dressed

in metallic mesh and covered in cement: it is now possible to construct grottos, pyramids or cliffs at relatively little expense. Eggenschwyler has already created the polar landscape at the Hamburg Tierpark, and Hagenbeck is relying on him. For it is the fake rocks, more than the animals, more so than the plants, which make a zoo. Escarpments that suddenly appear out of the ground, mysterious crevices, entire icebergs which seem to have slipped right into the otherwise unremarkable plains of a city: it is this, too, which people come to see, though they may not realise it.

Urs Eggenschwyler travels less, however, than his icebergs, and he is so excited to find himself in Rome that he is not sleeping, or at least is sleeping very poorly. The day after his arrival he dreamed of his friend, the artist Arnold Böcklin, dead ten years earlier. Dressed in a long white shirt, Böcklin came into Urs' bedroom, sat himself down at his bedside and, without moving his lips, ordered him to build a full-scale reproduction of his most famous painting, *Isle of the Dead*, in the zoo's central lake.

As Urs recounts his dream, with trembling voice and eyes ablaze, Hagenbeck gives him his full attention. He nods his head, puts a hand on Urs' shoulder. He understands the significance of this vision, of Böcklin's wish. Yes, of course, the isle of the dead, right there, in the middle of the lake, with its peaks and its caverns and its cypress pines – he brings his face close to the haggard features of his friend, his sideburns merging with the other's bushy beard – between you and me, yes, I quite understand how it might seem imperative, to recreate the landscape of that mythical painting here, right here. But the Romans ... I already know what they're going to say.

They'll tell me their city has more than enough tombs to be going on with. They're not like us, Hagenbeck adds under his breath, *sie können die Geister nicht hören*, we are the only ones able to understand such things. But fear not, says the German, delicately detaching his whiskers from the Swiss man's beard, we shall see, let me speak to them, I'll take care of it. Urs leaves, eyes shining, heart pounding, while Hagenbeck regrets having put his collaborators up in the same hotel as himself.

As he has done every morning since his arrival, he hunches over the sketches strewn across the desk in his hotel suite. He starts by running his finger over the future restaurant, at the elevated north end of the site. A large restaurant, a generous terrace overlooking the gardens. Then, as he has done every morning, Hagenbeck sits down on a wrought-iron chair which does not yet exist, his back to the building which does not yet exist, facing his dream. He starts by placing his right elbow on the back of the chair, as if turning to the west: there in the distance, the tip of the iceberg is shining in the morning light, a brighter splotch sparkles in its crevices, a white bear, above the sea lions' pool – closer to him, five kangaroos hop about along the shores of the lake where pink flamingos, red ibises and a few sultan chickens plump and ruffle their feathers. Hagenbeck stretches his legs now and looks straight ahead: the sun plays on the still water, a pair of mandarin ducks takes flight, passes over the lake, flies over a group of gazelles and some zebras grazing in their field, under the watchful gaze of the big cats dozing in their shadowy caves in the midday heat. If you're lucky, you might even see the peculiar horns of the Nigerian giraffe slip between the lions' crag and the tigers'

rock. It's magnificent, Hagenbeck tells himself, a postcard landscape. And there's Eggenschwyler, who would ruin all that with his isle of the dead, who would block out the entire view. He'll have to make sure the man doesn't mention it to anybody, you just never know, the Romans are quite capable of agreeing to it. They've already insisted on building a neo-Baroque entrance gate, which just goes to show – and Hagenbeck, shifting a little to the left and towards the east, spies it behind the ostrich enclosure, next to the elephant house. It has been days now that he has been telling himself that something is needed there, something to hide it entirely, that entrance gate. A little something should be built so the goats and chamois can gambol about over there, as the sun goes down. It would be pretty. It would provide a counterpoint to the iceberg, and would keep Urs occupied too.

She had raised the collar of her coat, it had started to rain and the occasional drops pattered on the green water of the seals' basin. There was only one, as it happened, turning circles, its oily rocket-shaped body brushing past the cement edges – it lifted its head for a moment to yawn, surprising her with the astonishing red of its maw against the dirty grey of its body, a set of pointed teeth standing out against the bright, gleaming red; she hadn't thought seals would have such sharp teeth. But it closed its jaws and resumed its monotonous round, and Giovanna continued with her visit. She followed the gentle slope down to the little lake and to the Oasis Bar, where nobody served her a coffee, despite the counter in the hut being illuminated. A few ducks were paddling at the lake's edge, and over everything could be heard the pump gurgling as it tried to recycle water thick with dust. Beyond the picnic tables, two swings, condemned by plastic tape, were creaking in the wind. A wooden bridge led to the other side of the lake towards a path strewn with dead leaves. The daunting vegetation muffled the noise of the city, creating a brooding, thick silence shot through with the sound of cries and rustling. She felt increasingly oppressed by her solitude; from time to time she caught a glimpse of a keeper's face, behind a barrier, and she had the disagreeable sensation that somebody was spying on her. The zoo's director had, however, suggested he accompany her, she had

declined, but she realised now that to have come incognito did not mean she would go unnoticed. The ash blonde of her hair perhaps had something to do with it, her slender figure – that said, her femininity had no effect on the creatures: the only animal gaze she encountered was the oblique, uneasy look of a peacock as it crossed the path and a camel who watched her, chewing its cud, from its shelter. In fact, perhaps it was a dromedary, only its head was visible, in any event Giovanna had never been able to remember the hump rule, she would hardly have been surprised to see it had three. She then encountered a *Tamandino africano* and a *Casuario elmato* depicted on information panels telling her that the first was a sort of anteater and the second an ostrich from New Guinea, both species under threat of extinction which would have been interesting to observe, had these specimens not preferred to remain invisible. Giovanna then looked for the bear enclosure and its much-vaunted refurbishment, and then finding herself trapped on unused paths cut off by barriers covered in yellowing signs, she found herself simply trying to work out where she was. The visitors' map was truly hopeless, or had somebody remodelled the zoo overnight? She ought to have been in front of the Tigers' Rock now, and not at the foot of the steps leading to the Great Aviary. It must be said, Giovanna did not have much of a sense of direction. It is possible she was also a little anxious; it wasn't the first time she had visited the zoo, but from now on she was responsible for it. The announcement had not yet been made, but Giovanna Di Stefano had just been appointed *General Manager and Head of Marketing and Communications* – and this double-barrelled title said as

much about the state of its finances as did the broken steps she was now ascending.

Every one of her observations amounted to the beginnings of a file which would need to be dealt with, whether it concerned infrastructure upkeep or management of sales outlets. But even more disconcerting was the inertia of the place. Its lack of highlights or drawcards. How could she sell the spectacle of that stork standing there, immobile, amidst a constellation of bird droppings, of that ibis asleep on its branch? None of these animals appeared to her to be any more alive than in a documentary on a plasma screen. Did people even watch animal documentaries anymore, Giovanna wondered, as she considered the balding, limping marabou. A voice crackled over the loudspeakers, announcing closing time, and the message drifted, echoing, along the deserted paths. The institution was heading for disaster. The private companies sitting on the board were refusing to invest another cent and appeared indifferent to the imminent catastrophe. It was a vicious circle: no public, insufficient revenue to cater for them appropriately. There was no point deluding oneself; she would start with the little things, make a list of urgent matters, check the basics, answer the most pressing needs, thought Giovanna, following the sign pointing to the nearest restrooms.

The toilets were not as dirty as she was expecting, but were still too dusty for her liking. There was no toilet paper, every corner had its spiderwebs, and there was no mirror. The men's room couldn't be in any better state: but to satisfy herself, she took a deep breath and pushed open the adjacent door, only to find herself face to face with a fellow leaning

against the wall next to the basins. I just need to charge my phone, mumbled the foreigner, the first thing he said, as if he were the intruder, and she, caught by surprise herself, started stammering foolishly as she closed the door again, perhaps also because the man had very dark eyes, or perhaps because he had spoken in French. But scarcely had she taken two steps when she recovered her composure, reminded herself of her position and, probably prompted also by a hint of curiosity, did an about-face in order to let the man know that the zoo was about to close. He'd not had time to move or to wipe away his sheepish smile. He nodded and she noticed then the incongruous cord emerging from his trouser pocket, attaching him to the power point in the wall. Giovanna pursed her lips at the sight of this man recharging himself. On reflection, perhaps this job would be more entertaining than she was expecting – this time, when she closed the door, it was to hide an irrepressible smile.

Hagenbeck's sketches are passed around. They're fleshed out by the architects: the elephant house will be a sober, pharaoh-esque Art Nouveau affair, they'll build a mosque to scale with the giraffes, with carved mashrabiya lattice-work and a dome, and for the ostriches, a small Moorish fort, with a Byzantine cupola atop alternating black and white stonework. The entire behind-the-scenes aspect also needs to be designed: the fake rocks are hollow, with service corridors, storage areas, cages slotted into them. Plans go backwards and forwards between design studios and hotel rooms, the landscape designer plants a few trees, conifers near the Nordic settings and palms everywhere else, shrubs, bushes and ferns to hide the infrastructure, so these other-worldly temples will blend into an ancient scenery of plant life. And corrections are scribbled, embellishments added, behind the big cats' rocks there'll be bas-reliefs initially imagined as Sumerian, then Inca, before opting for something subtly Babylonian-Aztec. On paper everything is progressing well enough, but things become complicated when the drawings are to be transferred onsite and become solid structures. Things aren't always clear, there are walls heading off in the wrong direction, moats cutting across pathways, the orangutan pavilion rises askew, the reptile house is punctured by windows which shouldn't be there. The Italians start doubting the Germans' common sense, the Germans

start doubting the interpreters, there's arguing, hats are dashed to the ground, contradictory plans are brandished – and then eventually they are turned back up the right way and everything works out, or almost everything. The finishing touches are applied. Centuries of erosion are drawn onto rocks that are not yet dry, some Somalian huts are added for the American bison, an Indian setting for the cervids, there's no longer any time for splitting hairs. There's still a small corner, over there, for the brown bears and the wolf packs, it's a bit tight, it'll do.

No fewer than five Italian engineers have come, Ernesto Nathan has been waiting for them in what's to be the administration building, he listens to their heavy, anxious steps on the stairs – when they come in they look carefully right and left, making sure they're alone, and then they start: nothing is on track anymore, *signor sindaco*, it's a disaster, too many delays, they're all speaking at the same time, they're gesturing with their hands, fingers steepled, they raise their arms heavenwards, they point to the floor. In the end, Nathan is made to understand that the lighting needs to be rethought, which he knew, but also that the sewer system needs to be revisited, which he did not. Hagenbeck has priorities, everything at eye-level, landscaping and animals, everything either above or below has been neglected. Now there really isn't a lira left to be had, they have insufficient cement, they have insufficient everything, especially time: *un disastro, signor sindaco*.

The mayor of Rome clasps his hands behind his back. He takes two steps across the parquet floor which is still covered in sawdust, but is already creaking. He knows they're

right. He turns his back to them and moves over to the window, he looks out to the Matterhorn which is backlit against the sun. It's impressive, the Matterhorn in Rome. It's where Hagenbeck has chosen to have the ibex frolicking. And it has some appeal, the outline of scaffolding against the shapeless mass of the mountain, with its saw-tooth relief. A figure is moving about up there. He recognises the man by his abundant beard: it's the Swiss sculptor, Eggenschwyler, who is skillfully slashing into the cement, in a frenzy of high spirits. He, for one, looks happy.

Nathan unfolds his hands. Behind him, the five engineers still have their fingertips pressed together, they're waiting. Then the mayor of Rome turns to them and speaks. It's just a rough version of the speech he will give on 20 June 1910 at the Teatro Argentina to the audience of backers of the public company, but it is already very convincing: where there's a will there's a way, basically. With the result that it's five men, brave of heart, who head back down the stairs, their step a little lighter now, taking with them every ounce of his remaining energy. Nathan turns back to the Matterhorn, he's thinking back to the stories he heard as a child, of Babylon and the ziggurat, fables he sweeps away with an impatient hand.

Almost a century later, a little bald man was standing at that same window, at the same time of day. The outlook may well have changed but he was not interested in the outlook, or in what the zoo's director was telling him from his seat in the big leather armchair behind him. He had stopped listening a long time ago, he had even been forced to turn his back on him just to tolerate his presence. Guido Anselmo Moro was more interested in this woman walking back up the path. He was observing her closely, over the top of his little round spectacles: she had just emerged from the underground passage, her gait was smooth and determined, a little too hurried – she stopped reluctantly at the pygmy hippopotamus pool, a keeper had just called out to her. What bad luck! The only chatty keeper in the place, sixty-three years old, forty of them spent within the confines of the zoo: he always had a tale to tell, never missed an opportunity, especially if it involved a pretty woman. From up at his window, Moro admired the keeper's tactics; he was going to leave his hose to approach his victim, never taking his eyes off her, so he could ensnare her in some endless saga. Moro loved observing any creature: he held a doctorate in ethology and was also the zoo's chief scientist. He knew all its inhabitants and every one of its staff, and he also knew who the ash-blond woman was. It was how she now reacted which interested him. He saw her white hand

come out of her coat pocket to signal some other objective, an excuse, but he also noticed the hesitation, her chest struggling to follow the direction of the movement. No doubt she feared rubbing the old keeper up the wrong way; she would be his superior. But on that point she was already mistaken: it was he, Doctor Moro, who was responsible for the keepers, for recruiting them and for their well-being, just as he was for the animals. But that she would learn soon enough. What bothered him more was her hesitation. Moro doesn't like people who hesitate. It's dangerous. Take the keepers, for example: they hesitate just a fraction, in a cage, and they'll lose a hand. Animals don't hesitate. They are wary. It's a very different thing.

The woman had just turned her head: another figure had appeared on the path, grey coat and briefcase, short hair olive skin about forty. Not somebody Moro recognised, just a visitor, but he took note of his step, a little too short for his height, and one shoulder lower than the other, as if the small briefcase were weighing him down. The man straightened up, however, on noticing the woman and the keeper, he walked past behind her – and for a moment she made as if to fix her hair, so she could follow him with her eyes. The games we play, thought Moro. Humans might well have built the pyramids and split the atom, but how desperately predictable they still were; none more so than the director speaking behind him, a well-meaning fellow, social and fleshy, an expert in banalities and Calabrian wines. To begin with, Moro had observed him as he would a rare specimen, fascinated by the profound stupidity of a man who nonetheless had acquired responsibilities – and then he had discerned in him that blend

of opportunism and mental laziness affecting so many of his kind, at which point he had stopped listening to him. It had its advantages, a superior fool: Moro had only to put forward an idea for the director to repeat it to anyone who would listen, which explained, moreover, why he was still there despite his track record of poor figures.

Outside, they were closing the gates behind the sole visitor of the afternoon, as the woman with the ash-blond hair finally put an end to the keeper's chatter: her shoulders already turning away, she listened to one last comment, shifted a foot forwards, nodded again and ended up extracting herself from his clutches to resume her route towards the administration building, accelerating as she walked, now it had even become a little race, she was approaching and you could hear the clicking of her heels on the bitumen and on the front steps, below, exactly two floors beneath Moro who removed his spectacles and rubbed his nose.

'You'll forgive me, won't you? I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. You were saying?'

'That she should be here any moment now. You'll see, I've heard only good things about her, she really is just the person we need.'

Moro smiled. The director didn't need anything, it was he, Moro, who had needs, and plans.

'See, what was I just saying, I can hear her on the stairs...'

Yes, thought Moro, but she was going to stop by the bathroom first. Relieve her pressing need and then look at herself in the mirror. Perhaps take the time to redo her make-up, if she was wearing any. Finally, he was going to be able to observe her from up close.

The animals arrive in the capital in the middle of the night, on the 2nd of November 1910. They number a thousand or so. The usual smell of a goods station, soot and grease, is suddenly charged with the heavier stench of other odours, firstly the smell of straw and excrement and the slurry that is pouring out from the open goods carriages, sweeping ahead of it the smallest of the cadavers. Numerous animals have not survived the journey, various of them were already unwell on leaving Hamburg, the carriage floors are strewn with bodies, nobody knows which bodies or how many, they'll have to wait for dawn to do a detailed inventory. For all Hagenbeck's experience in the transportation of wild animals, he expected losses in the order of at least twenty per cent each move. That was an average. In any event, everything will have been replaced in a month or two, the most important thing is that the big animals have made it, the ones with the trunks and the long necks – the truth of it is that visitors rarely come to admire a lemur. That night there are dozens of curious onlookers, and those who are not horrified by the smell or put off by the late hour experience the delight of seeing crates, cages and cinched-up pachyderms swinging through the skies above them at the station in the beams of acetylene lamps, hoisted by small cranes into wagons, and in the confusion of off-loading, rubbernecks are keen to fight their way through, to get a better view, inspect the bottom

of cages, make out the breathing. All that can be heard is the sound of slamming doors, the puttering of motors and men shouting, men giving orders and waving their arms about in the crazed flashing of lantern beams.

They had two months to settle the animals, to distribute them into their settings, to check the locks on the cages and go over the restaurant menu. Astonishingly enough, the deadlines were met. A quick sweep of the paths. On the 5th of January 1911, Rome's Zoological Gardens were opened. It was the first event held to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Italy's Unification.

Chahine looks at himself in the photo booth. He'll soon be forty, as will the face on the screen. Yet he's struggling to recognise himself. Truth be told, he feels as though his hair should be a little longer, his skin not quite so pale. The absence of shadows under his eyes surprises him too, notwithstanding the weight of the fatigue he feels has settled there. Right at that moment, alone with nothing but this face in front of him, he could probably still change the course of events. Return to Algiers. His business partner was irritated, Chahine had claimed a plane delay, an issue with the taxi, he was feeling faint, and the meeting had been pushed back. Yes, perhaps it would be better to return. But not today, today nothing would distract him from his objective. There was certainly no shortage of diversions, he could visit Saint Peter's Basilica, or the Piazza Navona, or the Church of Saint Charles at the Four Fountains, or go to swoon before Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* – all things on which the receptionist's zealous pen had landed, insisting on writing down distances and bus routes, covering the paper with such a tangle of lines that Chahine could not have followed them, even had he wanted to. The foreigner had been happy to listen to the fulsome instructions, before asking once again, this time perhaps articulating a little more clearly, where one could take photos – no, not photos of the city, photos of himself, a machine that would take photos of him.

All the same, there is little room for doubt; the face on the photo booth screen is his. When he stretches his mouth to one side, the face on the screen does the same, and when he closes an eye too – but if he closes his right eye, the other face closes the opposite one, the left one. So it's an anti-Chahine being displayed back to him by the machine, an inverse Chahine. Or, more simply put, a reflection. But for Chahine nothing at the moment is really simple and even the countdown catches him unawares, perhaps because the numbers are reeled off in Italian, or because he's wondering if the shot will be taken on 'zero' or right afterwards – regardless, the flash takes him by surprise, as does the sight of the ankle boots that appear under the curtain. Just the boots of somebody waiting their turn, but it's annoying, to be bothered like that in such intimate circumstances. They ought to have had a curtain that fell lower, Chahine thought, hesitating to draw it back: 35, 40 centimetres, that's all you'd need. Of course, if you were to do it, you'd have to allow, say, closer to 30 centimetres, so the bottom of the curtain didn't get dirty, he thinks, looking at the ankle boots that are now inside the booth, it being not entirely clear how that bodily exchange took place.

In the bus, Chahine inspects the four shots, one by one. They are completely identical, and he recognises himself in none of them. They dropped into the photo booth slot like any can of fizzy drink, but without making the slightest noise. It weighs nothing, a man's face.

From its first year of life, the superb Rome Zoo has been struggling. When it opened, people beat a path to its gate, and then, well, they had seen it. The general public are like sheep, and there's nothing more distressing for Romans than finding themselves in a place where they don't know anybody; their whole reputation is undermined.

The wind is blowing across the deserted restaurant terrace, and not a soul is there to enjoy the view across to Paradise. It really is a pity, particularly given the considerable cost involved in the upkeep of Hagenbeck's landscaping. The lions are suffering from their northern exposure, while the polar bears struggle to find any shade. Under the hyenas' watchful gaze the zebras are trembling, refusing to eat, and the antelopes are terrified too, stumbling and falling into the moats. They're just details but adjustments need to be made, ideas revisited. Sacrifice the clarity of the setting to ward off the sun's intensity, plant some plane trees and acacias. And so the perfect landscape is already changing, subjected to the dictates of the teeming life it shelters, and the vagaries of the climate. It took only a breath of wind to bring the Matterhorn down: a timber frame erected in haste, a minor defect in the cement ... It had trembled a little, then collapsed, generating a huge amount of dust; nobody was there to witness the formidable spectacle, the terrified bleating of the izards caught

in the rubble. It won't be rebuilt, there is just enough money to clear it away.

It cost 1,477,147 liras to build the zoo, and there's really nothing to know about exchange rates in the year 1911 that would render that sum any less intimidating, an amount, moreover, which exceeded budget predictions by a good third. There would appear to have been forecasting errors. With an entrance fee of half a lira, it's suddenly apparent that it has not been paid off, and is unlikely to be while the city numbers only 542,123 inhabitants – not all of whom are wildlife enthusiasts. It's small, the city of Rome, in 1911, an oversized village on the banks of the Tiber, and while these days the zoo might look like a blemish buried in the capital, at the time it constituted a second city, a city of animals located an endless commute from the centre. For want of any better idea a tramline is built, a brand spanking new tram that rattles along from the centre of town to the northern outskirts, where it sets you down like a flower at the gates. It's not enough to bring in the crowds but it's quite practical nonetheless – it's the same tram jolting and clattering along that Giovanna uses to get to her office where she greets some staff whose names she still doesn't know, and opens account ledgers which, a century later, are no closer to adding up.

*Winner of the Swiss Literature Award, the Prix Michel-Dentan
and the Prix du public de la RTS*

‘ROME, TOO, WANTS THE SOUND OF ROARING AS EVENING FALLS ...’

The Rome Zoo: a place born of fantasy and driven by a nation’s aspirations. It has witnessed – and reflected in its tarnished mirror – the great follies of the twentieth century. Now, in an ongoing battle that has seen it survive world wars and epidemics, the zoo must once again reinvent itself, and assert its relevance in the Eternal City.

Caught up in these machinations is a cast of characters worthy of this baroque backdrop: a man desperate to find meaning in his own life, a woman tasked with halting the zoo’s decline, and a rare animal, the last of its species, who bewitches the world.

Drifting between past and present, *The Rome Zoo* weaves together these and many other stories, forming a colourful and evocative tapestry of life at this strange place. It is both a love story and a poignant juxtaposition of the human need to classify, to subdue, with the untameable nature of our dramas and anxieties.

Spellbinding and disturbing, precise and dreamy, this award-winning novel, translated by Stephanie Smee, is unlike any other.

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