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All Day I Dream About Sex

by Bill Osborn

The first animal you saw when you entered the Kapitol Zoo (sometimes stolidly chewing, almost always swishing his tail to rid himself of flies) was the hippopotamus. This midday, however, though he did whip the tail, he was not going to move his mouth. In fact he’d refused his food for days, to the point where the responsible parties worried; he was the entrance attraction, the one in all the ads, the Kapitol Zoo’s very emblem.

Feeding time for the hippo was regular, at noon. An attendant would spray him until he shone, and then, on the ground in the middle of his kraal, dump out a bag of kibble. The public added half-eaten ice cream bars and too-salty popcorn. In the prior week, even an athletic shoe appeared. To this, of course, the hippopotamus rumbled over immediately. He picked at its laces with his cylindrical foreteeth until the knots came loose. He tongued the Persian blue nylon until it was clean. Then he separated the pinked edge of one of the three white stripes from the nylon upper.

All that evening, on into the night — long, long after he ordinarily would have begun to make his rounds — the hippopotamus played. He shifted his bulk to the left and to the right, gradually turning a circle at the center of which was this lightweight footwear. He nibbled the ankle padding. Sometimes, with a toss of his crepuscular head, he gave it a flip. He could also be seen to charge it, only to pull up short.

The moon rose. It was a few turns before full, and its light wept down so you could plainly see the hippo’s behavior — which abruptly changed. He picked up the shoe by the laces and bore it to certain crevices — jammed the suede toe under a gap in the fence. It appeared he was attempting to cache it. There was one place he hadn’t tried.

Late that afternoon, all of his waste had been made a mound of. The hippo placed the shoe on the side of this pile, brought up one of his elephantine forehooves, and then mashed until it disappeared.
The following morning he must have been full of something, because as the material was loaded on the dump truck, he bit the bulldozer and, when the zoo opened, vegetated at the rear of his quadrangle, neither swishing his tail nor rotating the flies from his ears. It wasn't possible to notice the turning down of the lips or the glistening of the eyes; he was too far away to see. So, hardly pausing, most visitors strolled down the macadam to watch the elephants, then went on to the rhino. Those who insisted on longer than the perfunctory moment were distracted by the colorful clothing of foreign visitors, or by the wares displayed outside the souvenir shop. Some idly read the hippo's sign:

NILE HIPPOGOTAMUS
RANGE: AFRICA
AGE: 640
LIFESPAN: UNKNOWN
BORN AND NURSED UNDERWATER.
IN THE WILD, REMAINS IN WATER DURING DAYLIGHT,
ONLY COMING ON LAND AT NIGHT TO FEED.
MAY EXCEED 4 TONS IN WEIGHT
AND 25 FEET IN LENGTH.
BEST VIEWING:

But vandals (perhaps) had torn away the rest, deformed clamps rusted to the fence showing where wood was missing.

The hippopotamus stood there all day, moving only to eat and be bathed, then returning to his corner. Few noticed his slouch (he was slung low anyway) or the furrows he left in the earth, and no one thought about gender. It was just a hippo, projected here sans egg, fertilization, gestation, birth, growth, or maturation.

A breeze rose, the visitors left, the temperature dropped, the flies buzzed away, and the sun fell down. To the accompaniment of arking seals and the intermittent hurrah of a peacock, the staff checked the animals, locked the feeding entrances, swept the asphalt, performed small repairs, and finally, as their duties expired, resigned through the one-way gate.

Sounds faded. It was very dark, and you could hear the crickets cheating. Then the moon rose, oblong and white and large, and the dark became mottled, and the view foreshortened, and there was your hippo, moving silently over the pavement — hooves off the
ground — a bulbous balloon floating down toward the cats, his shadow following behind and a little to the side.

He stopped at the lions’ den. He kicked the wire waste barrel until it tipped. Out on the pavement fluttered paper. This he mouthed up, and it was plain to see afterward that he didn’t care a whit about sneaking, for as he cantered back, he made a goliath clatter.

He spread out the document on the pebbly mud of his kraal. Unfortunately, his shadow got in the way of his properly seeing it. When he thought to move himself to a different angle, it said, quite clearly:

ΩΩΩ

He tossed his massive skull. There had never been a message in a foreign alphabet; what was the sense of it? The more you looked, the more symmetrical the three characters became — a sort of eight-like figure separating two identical others that were almost N’s. Perhaps the message was not normal language. Perhaps it was arithmetic.

The moon sailed on, and his shadow covered the formation up again, so that he had to step across it. From this angle, it read:

UBU

He went still. Again the message appeared symmetrical — a capital B separating two capital U’s — but now, you see, you had it in your own alphabet; now you could do things with it, such as allow the letters to form an acronym. UBU might thus stand for Unisexual Beasts Uninteresting or for Umbilicates Bear Udders. The trouble was that without a verified context, you couldn’t really know. He looked at the message with his left eye, then with his right. What was really required was a whole different stance, and so here the hippopotamus collapsed his hindquarters to sit dog-fashion.

Well, you also saw that the figures identified phonetically with words: you or yew or ewe for the U’s, and be or bee or Bea for the B. The combination making the most sense was you be you, an aphorism so balanced that he took four celebratory laps of his perimeter . . . before abruptly halting again and cocking that gigantic head sideways. Of course! The lions had spent a year in Provence. The
message must simply be *Ubu* — slang for the eminently useful French word, *merde*.

The hippo ground those pestle-like nippers and looked at the sky. Then he sailed down the macadam and tethered himself again at the lions’ den, where he peered across the moat — for the two phantoms performed wind sprints, gnashing at tails and napes, and bouncing all over. They seemed to take him no notice, but soon enough another paper skittered out on a gust of wind, and he chunked down a forehoof and picked it up to carry back. It said:

AKASAKA

He studied it upside down and from the sides, then tried the messages together.

UBU AKASAKA

Hmm. Each alternated vowels and consonants. Each began and ended with a vowel. Each had that unrepeated consonant in the middle. Maybe only the middles pertained.

B.
S.
Ah, *BS*!

And since the leftovers in the latter missive were the repeated AKA, you surmised that the lions reiterated the earlier message with one that adroitly integrated both. You had to admire them, didn’t you? *Ubu, also known as merde, also known as BS*, ha ha ha.

The following noon he stood marching in place as his keeper, a new one, hosed him down and scrubbed his back with a chimney brush, then fetched from his scooter truck a large sack of feed. He razored this open near the spectator area and lifted, leaving on the ground a cone of kibble. But what? The emblem above his shirt pocket had upon it the familiar symbols, A-K-A-S-A-K-A. The hippo’s dancing stopped at once.

Despite his befuddlement, however (or because of it), he began to munch. But compressed into the usual brown kibble on the ground were particles of blue, and when you looked more closely you identified the shade as *Persian*, and then you saw that the particles were not crunchy good like the rest, but soft . . . like strands of synthetic fiber.
The hippo backed away. He rolled in the mud. Then he hauled himself to the farthest part of the kraal and became so nearly invisible that visitors needed to use their binoculars to see him. This upset them; the reasons for coming here were best perceived at close hand — the way the ends of his lips turned up sometimes, for instance — which, for anthropomorphizers, was proof that he was content.

Word must have filtered back to the management, because one hour before closing, six attendants arrived. They patted the hippo, and they poked. They looked up his nose and down his ears. They ran in an embarrassing thermometer and tried to open his mouth (the hippo would not let them). When they got into a slit underneath and dumped out his treasure, the crowd swelled. Then Akasaka arrived, and with him, extra potential: the giant and the loner; your bull, your matador.

He carried a thin canvas bag. He placed this at the hippo's feet. He spoke in a soft voice and patted him behind the ears. The visitors squeezed close, and the skin above the chief attendant's khaki collar went red. Now he cajoled, now he threatened. Your hippo, bless him, stood fast.

The kick got no reaction from the hippo, but it did from the crowd, which changed sides at once. They raised so many voices in protest that you could make sense of none of them. Things were about to get nasty. It was lucky, then, that it was time to close. When the announcement came over the loudspeaker, Akasaka leered, then turned and showed the knobbly bottoms of his muck boots — an obscenity to which the most flamboyant response could be only a barely heard muttering, for people knew well enough that in the Kapitol Zoo you behaved by the rules or paid the piper.

After they'd gone, the keeper held before the beast's eyes an instrument from the dirty pouch. It looked like a plastic dowel, on one end of which was affixed a disk of serrated brass. Metal contacted flank. A switch was toggled. Smoke wafted, and you smelled electrified flesh. The attendant touched the tenderest parts in this way, but though the hippo's ears trembled, he still wouldn't budge, and finally Akasaka went away.

* 

When the hippo next sailed down the asphalt, all the animals stood near the road and followed him with their ears, noses, and eyes. For a time it got quite dark, and you couldn't help seeing his
shadow slink away, and that he seemed too preoccupied to mind.

But at the lions' den, the moon became pineapple, and the shadow skulked back. The cat with the mane bit the other at the nape; she attempted a reversal, but he stilled her with a roar. Tackling, slashing, gnashing, thrusting. When the show was over, the hippo retrieved his message and thundered on home, where he flattened the crumpled paper by sitting on it.

Dennis, Nell, Edna, Leon, Nedra, Anita,

Rolf, Nora, Alice, Carol, Leo, Jane, Reed,

Dena, Dale, Basil, Rae, Penny, Lana, Dave,

Denny, Lena, Ida, Bernadette, Ben, Ray,

Lila, Nina, Jo, Ira, Mara, Sara, Mario,

Jan, Ina, Lily, Arne, Bette, Dan, Reba,

Diane, Lynn, Ed, Eva, Dana, Lynne, Pearl,

Isabel, Ada, Ned, Dec, Rena, Joel, Lora,

Cecil, Aaron, Flora, Tina, Arden, Noel,

and Ellen sinned,

it said. Well, what the . . .

It didn't have vowels at the ends and consonants in the middle, and there was nothing excremental. You noticed, of course, that some names were derived from others: Denny from Dennis, for instance. But how did this lead toward a satisfactory conclusion?

* 

The first arrivals caught the hippopotamus asleep in his tank. When he climbed out, they marveled at what he'd displaced, for remaining was only an inch of green slime. He stood in the sunlight to warm up. At noon, he let Akasaka brush him. Again he nosed his
food but wouldn’t eat. Again he removed himself to a far corner, and
again came the attendants.

You noticed, suddenly, that all about were people attired in white
jump suits, the legs bloused over shiny black boots. In the group
were men and women, some accoutered with scarves and bandannas
tied at the collar, but each with an oval above the breast pocket,
stitched with a red outline, and embroidered, Lynn, Lynne, Ada,
or Nell.

The hippo lowered his head. He looked up at these visitors, some
of whom were already turning to leave. On their backs, in large red
letters, you saw:

PUP CO

Then you observed their leader, a woman holding up a portion of
one of the kibble bags, and you realized that your first impression
(that this was a convention of dingo breeders) was false. PUP must
use a long U. It was a fair translation of Ubu!

The blue athletic shoe, the fastidious collection of droppings. . . .
the particles in the food. UBU. Akasaka. The list of names. The kibble
sack held aloft. Dios mio, it appeared there was a company that
recycled waste — one that meant to feed humble animals their own
end-product!

*

The hippo sped back down the macadam. The ostrich was bright;
you’d want to compare notes, discover whether she was given such a
substance too. Unfortunately, her intellect was (for the moment)
buried in sand.

The four elephants danced a rondo, their step so light you knew
you mustn’t interrupt.

The rhino leaned against the wall puffing a cigarette.
The tigers made butter around the baobab.

But the message was under a bench. For a moment the hippo
faced its authors, the paper hanging out the side of his mouth. Then
he went home, where, with some difficulty (he’d done this all too
often lately), he hove it out to read.

Lewd I did live [it said] & Evil did I dwell
— interesting philosophically; poorly spelt. As for its relevance, well
the current puzzle seemed fairly solved. Perhaps it was a clue for the next one.

He sank himself until only his nostrils remained above the surface, and after a moment, when the waves had settled, the surface went oil-smooth, reflecting the starlight. Submerged he remained the entire night, unaware that a black crane was being positioned in the parking lot just outside the zoo proper. But when he woke before opening time, he couldn’t have helped noticing the large, flat rectangle dangling in his kraal. If he bent his neck back, even myopia couldn’t have kept him from seeing some version of those girders, that cable, those great steel pulleys.

Akasaka came in, made the rectangle a sling, and spoke into a radio. The sling tightened around the hippo’s middle and he left the earth. He was lifted up higher and higher and still higher, until he was as high, possibly, as a condominium.

In a moment there came clinking and clanking. It was almost opening time, and the service vehicles were making last-minute rounds. Below, delivering 90-pound sacks at the rear of the enclosures, was a Pup Co van. Attendants were replacing the sign on the hippo’s kraal. Incredible as it seemed, there inside for all to view was a dazed-looking, pigmy-size new hippo.

Any arriving visitor noticed — dangling and turning at the end of a very thin line, suspended from an extremely tall boom — some large object or other, and perhaps speculated that it looked, hmm, almost animate.

But you, you were shielded in a different kind of ignorance. You couldn’t know it yet, but oh — oh! — you would miss that old brute! You’d come to spend entire days hoping he’d been taken to a less mysterious place, where the clues fell like obedient leaves needing only raking up and assemblage, or that he’d been sent to ski Albania with abandon or to sun himself in the equatorial splendor of ancient Crete, or that he’d been pensioned off to the little shack he’d always wanted in Alabama, where he’d spend his humid nights rocking on its slatted porch.

Then, after an eon or two or seven, his dominion would abate, and only now and again would you catch yourself thinking of him, creating these eccentric reminiscences — but always, and always, in the most generous and loyal of possible ways.