

A WASTE OF EXPECTATIONS

By Francine Rodriguez

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor CHITRA GOPALAKRISHNAN writes: A narrative that pulls you onto a treacherous space. Where the distinctions between the wild and the civilized world blur. Where the wild carnal frenzy of a lion, its bestiality, fearsome and ungovernable, brushes against mercenary metropolitans whose natures under their well-mannered bodies are as savage. Where the muscle memory of human and beast interweave in the most unexpected of ways. Where rationality battles wilder instincts. Where notions of provider and predator get entangled. Where the expanse of collapse and renewal is out-of-the-ordinary and drags one into a place that is both substance and spirit, matter and mind. And where the language of the beast and human plays out in syntactically ambiguous ways, wary and easy, calm and scary.*

It is this double atmosphere that the story of the Bill the lion plays out at the circus and within the van, he travels with his keeper, attendants and a spirited mouse. Bill is a reluctant protagonist in the story as a creature in a human experiment called the circus whose original but not the only purpose is to loosen the lines between animal and human sensibilities. Money, too, is part of the motive. In a voice that is uniquely his own, wry, clever and philosophical at the same time, he goes below the surface to pull up complexities in the human-beast relationship, the notions of evolution, who is more evolved and to explore what is at the heart of existence. Merely nullity, a waste of expectations or is there something more to it?

Five stars.

Lines I like:

The Big Wild, everywhere he went, and one roar from his gut reminded all that terror and sudden annihilation based the truth of this world in total, stripped down man had no chance against beast. The jungle was everywhere. He sparsely used the roar. Being a showman, he knew the value of infrequency. It deafened the humans and for one second, froze them completely, making them vulnerable to their core, even as a complete unit. They snapped back pretty easy; the logic of their minds

reminded them quickly it was Bill in the cage. The glee was palpable for both lion and man in that split second between the roar and the relaxation.

A Waste of Expectations

Bill, since age 2, understood the circus. The circus counterpoised jungle and civilization. At least the audience believed so. Or accepted that illusion temporarily. Bill knew the jungle might show itself whenever. He nearly jumped from his stool dozens of times, on whim alone even, to bite some passing showgirl or fat man with a whip.

Traveling made sense to Bill. The truck attempted at comfort. His body wanted to create the motion of running by nature but traveling with pillows and red meat had style. An attendant usually stayed on long journeys. Usually a boy or girl not far from college with some basic veterinarian knowledge. They had a radio, then cellphones as changes came, to notify the driver if a health necessity required pulling over to the side of the road.

Over the years the circus cleaned its act. Rarely did a drunk carny come to harass Bill in the middle of the night. These pathetic shells of men. Bill never tipped his hat to any other then the few trainers who entered the cage. And the poor, scared women they sometimes brought with them. That's not true. Melody had courage. She liked Bill even. That a mistake. Even Bill got it that personification of a lion was stupid.

Luckily, Melody married and left the circus. Bill, if he ever did it, mused he would eat someone who contained more joy than fear. It had to taste better that way. No, he had never eaten men. He always danced for the sweaty whip carrying men to depend on food. And he was not ignorant of the fact of guns. He knew the men could get rid of him in an emergency. He saw it happen to Ted the Tiger. The poor slob was doomed by name alone. No, Bill's determination to survive proved strong and compromising.

"You know you don't have much time left Bill."

Bill let a low growl. Bill translated the attendant's words as vibrations with meaning, possibly like telepathy.

"Hey at least it's not the food processor for ya pal. Hate to see that. You're not a horse after all. Most surely some small zoo like Minot, North Dakota, or some God forsaken place like that - cold as hell in Minot buddy I'm afraid."

The young man meant well. The perks of the zoo might be nice. Still, end of days came.

"Here you go Bill, a treat, some of that sweet pudding meat you like."

How nice of the kid. Bill didn't mind. The human read him, sometimes too well. He no longer hated them. He thought them fools. Things that lived by half challenges. If Bill had his druthers his form of circus would hae the crowd coming into the cage with him. There is thrill! Otherwise, all too tame, really. At one point he thought it his duty to wake them up with a good throat removal. It wouldn't matter if it were the throat of a man or woman. Lions did not give more sympathy to one sex or the other. Bill no longer missed female lions. Indeed, this the glory of his disposition. He, born with a

Freudian dislike for the power of female lions. Thank God the circus remained small. One lion only. God, a concept he picked up from the people. Useful and on his side. If something unchangeable came up, then just say "God" and over time the repetition sensed acceptance. No female lions ever came.

Bill also glad as ever a tiger was not introduced to the show. He might have liked the faux competition and comparison, but deep down, even though the stage was small he relished being the fiercest star, and the lone "wolf". When it became illegal to use elephants, it was even better. The *Big Wild*, everywhere he went, and one roar from his gut reminded all that terror and sudden annihilation based the truth of this world in total, stripped down man had no chance against beast. The jungle was everywhere. He sparsely used the roar. Being a showman, he knew the value of infrequency. It deafened the humans and for one second, froze them completely, making them vulnerable to their core, even as a complete unit. They snapped back pretty easy; the logic of their minds reminded them quickly it was Bill in the cage. The glee was palpable for both lion and man in that split second between the roar and the relaxation.

Really, these human entertainers had it all wrong. Making a lion jump from stool perch to stool perch misses the point. Bill's thought they should let loose a live deer for him to devour. Or at least a few rabbits; hell, cages being what they were and rabbits being what they were more than few would escape. Something for the kids to take home.

"They're too queasy for that."

"Hmmm."

Edgar the mouse spoke. He lived in the corner of the big truck, behind the boxes and some hay.

“You’re probably correct mouse.”

“Aren’t you ever tempted to lure this foolish handler toward you, maybe when the truck hits a bump in the road and take a snap at his arm?”

“Why would I do that mouse? He feeds me and says nice things to me. If I did that wouldn’t his associates put me to sleep. Likely so. Ah, are trying to get me in trouble mouse. Maybe I should bite you?”

“Well... first you couldn’t catch me, you’re the one in the cage.”

“The road bumps.”

“Okay there’s that, but you’d miss my wise company. Besides, my jabbering is worth more than small morsel of flavor I might provide.”

“True enough.”

Bill remained distracted by the mouse during travel. Lions are loners, but all creatures need someone to talk too every now and then. Years ago, he knew other lions. He hoped at the zoo that the circus would inevitably someday farm him out to would have some peers. Some did not. The circus used to have two lions until the budget cuts came. That years ago, even before the elephants left.

Perhaps he should pretend to attack Jesse, the circus’s mustached lion tamer, next performance? That might show management he still “had it”. Maybe a more

exciting zoo would then would later take on interest in him based on that reputation alone?

Bill understood management better than any of the employees. If he had had a 401(k) for all his service, he'd be doing great, but money was never important to lions. Carla the woman who can lift two "small people" over her head, was the second smartest of the bunch. Bill thought, with no offense, Ted and Mike (the "small people") were numskulls. Bill had no problem with politically correct talk, but if a people of miniature stature had no brains then he was not about to make any excuses for them. Bill had made the calculations that a circus could only survive with 17% of its staff being dim-witted. Of course, when a company needs fire-eaters, fat clowns, ladies who let men throw knives at them and guys who stand around taking tickets, well then any with sense should expect some dimwits needed hiring.

"Okay Old Boy time for your feeding," said the handler as the raw meat unpacked. Thank God for raw meet Tuesdays and Thursdays, thought Bill, the rest of the weak was smashed gruel. They worried about his teeth, digestion and heart. Those human concerns. He wished they learnt that lions only wanted meat.

One thing Bill picked up being around people, - take one's time. He ate slowly, as one might see on an African documentary, but in addition pausing much more, looking around, breathing, even...

"Have you had a peak at the profit margins?" inquired Bill to the mouse.

"Oh that."

"That bad."

“Well, yes basically, - damn Monster Truck shows, MMA fighting, Reality TV, and Burning Man, - between that sort of crap most have lost interest in the circus.”

“Pity.”

“Tich. Maybe it serves them. If I think back to all those undersized cages, the stinking fire jumps they made me do, the lack of access to a real body of water, no night play, the time I saw Rex eat Reynaldo, well they deserve it, and then there’s my mother.”

“You’ve never mentioned her.”

“Geez I’m being sentimental.”

“No, really I’m interested.”

“Well to be more objective about it, lions need a long maternal bond, and we were separately early.”

“That’s sad.”

“A long time ago.”

“I didn’t know you lions liked water?”

“I know it’s often thought of as a tiger thing, but I always loved a good splash and swim.”

“At least they never housed you with a tiger.”

“Ha!”

“There ya go buddy, let me get that,” Ted the handler interjected. Bill inadvertently peed. It didn’t matter if planned or not. Still, he only peed on his own floor. Ted, and most of the others were nice about it. Quickly the man got a mop, one with an extra-long handle and cleaned up the urine.

“Grrrahh,” Bill let out a slow growl of thanks.

“No problem buddy. I love you guy.”

What? That was nice, even sweet. Man, Bill thought, I am tame as all shit. I even liked that.

The wreck came sudden and unusually.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“He’s alive, but if we don’t do something immediately, he is going to lose that leg.”

“I see.”

“I know there are ethics questions, but you’re our last hope.”

“I understand. And I am willing to help. But you said there was no way to get donated bone, flesh and vein to graft within the two hours life limit we have, and really from studying option in my imagination I have no doubt that it is our window.”

“Dr. Kurani, this is Marathon, Texas in the middle of nowhere southwest Texas. It would take us 4 hours to get a doctor anywhere near your qualifications here even if they were dressed and ready and already at a private airport. The spare parts, no way, that’s a full day’s work, if we can find them.”

“Yeah, your misfortune catching pneumonia in our town on your way to Big Bend was this young man’s only hope.”

“Krishna and Lord Shiva.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, just a myth from my people back in India – the back and forth of things. Well, I don’t have a problem operating to do the replacement and graph, but...”

“I feel sorry for the lion,” sobbed a nurse slightly.

“Lion?”

“Oh yeah this man was the handler for a circus lion, he was in the cargo hold of the 18-wheel rig when it flipped. The lion died. The man lived. The police say they saw a mouse run of the cargo hold unscathed.”

“The perils of body-mass index ratio to gravity and force,” quipped the second doctor.

“A lion,” mused Dr. Kurani out loud again.

“What about it?”

“Well, if we are going to take professional risks, like letting me operate after just getting out of the hospital with the tail end of pneumonia, why not try the Harvard Study. In it the researchers speculated that big cat bone could be used for graphs, and even their veins used as temporary blood flow support, until a human replacement was acquired.”

“Geez a lion’s bone in a man,” said the nurse.

“Exactly,” replied Kurani.

AUTHOR'S NOTE & BIO (as per her email to FOTD):

Dear Editor:

I am writing to you seeking a publisher who shares my enthusiasm in uncovering the voices of women who are generally ignored in women’s fiction.

Based on my research, I understand that you have an interest in multicultural/ethnic literature as well as woman’s fiction. I chose to focus my writing on the lives of a handful of Latina women living emotionally precarious lives on the edges of society, whose voices and stories are under-represented in women’s literature. I have written a collection of eight short stories, (58,041 words), and the stories in my collection are written about women from various walks of life and at different stages of their lives.

The stories of these women’s lives depict conflict in gender bias, experiences of exploitation, violence, and powerlessness, sometimes resulting in pain, and despair in their turbulent world. But these stories also tell of these women’s celebration of life itself that empowers them and gives them the will to sustain. These stories resonate on a deeply emotional level

*I honed my creative writing skills writing appellate briefs for many years, where it was required that you spin broken flax into gold. I also spent some time studying writing with the author, John Rechy, and found that I too, had a personal identity with, and interest, in the themes of Los Angeles’s neighborhoods, and the people who live there. Drawing from the clients I worked with in the fields of law and psychology, who shared their stories with me, I developed a process to put these stories, and my passion for this area and its inhabitants into words with a fresh perspective. I have two self-published novels, *The Fortunate Accident*, and *A Woman Like Me*, on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Kindle, KOBO, Waterstones, etc. My website is: <https://www.francinerodriguezauthor.com>*

EDITOR'S BIO: Chitra Gopalakrishnan uses her ardour for writing, wing to wing, to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript and tree-ism and capitalism.

As a New Delhi-based journalist and a social development communicator for 30 years, she enjoys this career of trying to figure out issues of social development and its impact – or the lack of it – on people. As a woman of color, she hears the voice of women on the margins more clearly than others.

Her fiction has appeared in the Celestial Echo Press, Black Hare Press, Fantasia Divinity, Me First Magazine, Reedsy, Terror House Magazine, Unpublished Platform, Literary Yard, Truancy, eShe, Literati Magazine, Spillwords, Fleas on the Dog, Twist and Twain, Velvet Illusion, CafeLit, Sky Island Journal, Scarlet Leaf Review, Breaking Rules Publishing and Runcible Spoon, among others. Her story ***Bail Denied*** appeared in Issue 6 (Fiction),