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This essay, "Cages Past and Present" is for the July 2017 Word Theme, "The Zoo," for prisoner express.org

It has a funny ending, so read it!

Camille, please post this too on my facebook page

Okay you freeloaders, —not you Camille— pay me for my work by ordering me postage-embossed envelopes from JLMarcusWisconsin.com

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You can write me too.

"Cages, Past and Present" by Nate A. Lindell

Before prison, and before college, which I was in before prison, there was always some kinds of animals around me: cattle (when I was a child, briefly living on a beef farm), dogs (family pets), frogs and tadpoles (captives of mine I'd observe with amazement), salamanders, toads, birds, fish, bats, snakes... and over 12 turtles of various species I caught while in 4th grade and kept in several kiddie pools in the backyard (being allowed to do that was one of the benefits of

my mom partying too much to supervise her kids). From that young age I adored reptiles, which fascinated me with their often bright colors. I felt they got a bad rap for being cold-blooded.

Animals, I learned, generally aren't impressed by humans. They don't think, "Damn, I'm an animal—wish I was human!" Some are justifiably scared of us, but none are impressed...well, maybe dogs—but I think even an omega dog is happy being a dog. Species chauvinism is not limited to humans.

I learned that they have complex personalities too. Even a couple of "simple"-brained snapping turtles I once had were starkly different in their personality. One was a female, the other a male. The female was so mellow that I often petted her snout; even when I poked her nose, experimenting, the worst she'd do was open her jaw and back her head up into her shell, threatening me. The male, on the other hand, clearly had ADHD—he was always scrambling around, biting anything alive I put in his pool.

Mammals have more complex brains, with a more or less hefty prefrontal cortex, which, when heftier, such as in primates, enable us to, ideally, control those male-snapping-turtle impulses and reflect, like I'm doing here. Cetacean and elephants too have very complex minds, but, since I've only dealt with primates, it's on primates that I'll focus.

As a teen, in my hometown of La Crosse, Wisconsin, I often visited Myrick Park Zoo. They had a "Monkey Island," populated with a species of monkeys that looked like snow monkeys, but probably weren't. A moat surrounded their island, filled with various species of turtles. On their island a couple of dead, nude trees were propped up; there were a couple concrete mounds, a cave, and not much else. The monkeys often looked miserable or pissed.

Sometimes, as a teen, I'd stare at those monkeys, imagining what they were thinking. Sometimes one of them stared back, held my stare, looking pissed, thinking, I thought,

"Yeah, I'm stuck on this turd-covered island, surrounded by water! You damn humans know we're scared of bodies of water, won't try to cross it. Turds everywhere—I don't even try to avoid stepping in 'em anymore. And these idiots I'm surrounded by! Those two are fighting all the time. That guy over there, yawning while he jerks off at you gawkers, that's his schtick. Most o' the rest just sit around looking pathetic..."

"Don't ya got something better to do than stare at me human? Get the fuck outta here 'fore I chuck a turd at ya!" I felt bad then, that those monkeys had such limited lives, which zoo workers didn't give a second thought to as they went about their rounds, feeding the animals, occasionally cleaning cages.

Maybe the monkeys didn't care; I don't know.

But, from inside this barren supermax box, without a T.V. or radio, with only a pen and paper allowed for art supplies, in a cell that has had multiple past occupants smear shit on the surfaces of, more occupants who jerked off at gawkers, I can relate to that angry monkey's imagined thoughts.

Now get the fuck outta here 'fore I chuck a turd at you!

personalities

new paragraph

new paragraph graph

