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JAMES THURBER

The Beast in Me and Other Animals

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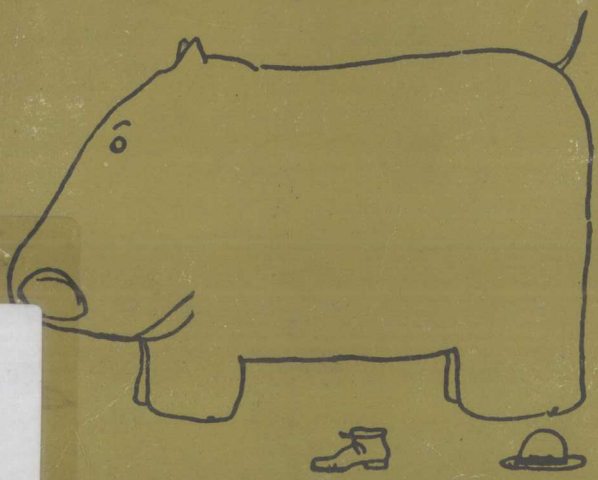

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THE BEAST IN ME AND OTHER ANIMALS

James Thurber was born in 1894 at Columbus, Ohio, where, as he once said, so many awful things happened to him. After university (Ohio State) he worked at the American Embassy in Paris from 1918 to 1920, and then turned to journalism. From 1927 onwards he was on the staff of the *New Yorker*, and first published much of his work in it.

Thurber's art was easy to recognize but hard to define. He created a world in which mournfully sagacious hounds loom over frightened little men who are trying desperately to master life's problems. His drawings and prose alike were marked by economy, wry humour, and an inimitable blend of precision and fantasy. Perhaps his most justly famous character was Walter Mitty, whose *Secret Life* gloriously makes up for the shy young man's failures in competitive real life. Thurberites – and they are many – hardly need reminding that the classic Thurberisms are preserved in *Thurber's Dogs*, *The Thurber Album*, *Thurber Country*, and many more like-minded collections.

In later life James Thurber became increasingly blind. He died in New York in 1961. In an *Observer* appreciation, Paul Jennings wrote that 'he somehow gave us a sense of revelation . . . He created a *genre* and was a giant in it'

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JAMES THURBER

The Beast in Me and Other Animals

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ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS
AND LESS ALARMING
CREATURES

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For
RONNIE
and
JANEY WILLIAMS
in memory of
the serene hours at
Felicity Hall

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Foreword

A WRITER verging on his middle fifties, when he should be engaged on some work dignified by length and of a solemnity suitable to our darkening age, is a little surprised to find himself coming out with still another collection of short pieces and small drawings. He toys for a while with the idea of a prefatory note pointing out that all this is a necessary and natural rehearsal for the larger project that awaits the increase of his patience and the lengthening of his view. Then, in re-examining his material for evidence to sustain this brave theory, he finds little to support his argument and a great deal to contradict it. Take the imaginary animals in this book, for example. No labour of ingenuity could fit them into a continuable pattern. They emerged from the shameless breeding ground of the idle mind and they are obviously not going anywhere in particular. Faced with this fact, the author tries the desperate expedient of pulling the bestiary out of his pages only to discover to his dismay that it serves as the legendary thread that stubbornly unravels the whole. In the end, abandoning justification or apology, he wisely decides to confine his foreword to small explanations on behalf of clarity and credits.

Most of the things in this collection were originally published in the *New Yorker*, but 'Extinct Animals of Bermuda' appeared in *The Bermudian*, 'Prehistoric Animals of the Middle West' in *Mademoiselle*, 'How to Name a Dog' in *Good Housekeeping*, 'Look Homeward, Jeannie' and 'The Lady on the Bookcase' in the New York Sunday *Times*. 'The Beast in the Dingle' was written for Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*.

The series of drawings called 'The Patient' was published in the London magazine *Night and Day*, and some of the other drawings appear here for the first time, including 'A Gallery of Real Creatures', which was inspired by my cherished volumes of Lydekker's *New Natural History*, brought out in England toward the close of the last century. The Lydekker animals were checked against other sources, and my Gallery is a composite and, I trust, accurate enough representation of the inhabitants of this corner of

the jungle. Nature is ever more fanciful than the artist, and I envy her the invention of Bosman's Potto. Bosman was an actual Dutchman who came upon an actual potto one day many years ago. It was the first time a human being had ever seen a potto, and the first time a potto had ever seen a human being. The shock must have been mutual and equal.

'Soapland' is the record of a year's sojourn in the strange and fascinating country of day-time radio serials. This country is so vast and complicated that the lone explorer could not possibly hope to do it full justice, and I offer my apologies to the courteous people I encountered everywhere I turned in Soapland for whatever errors I may have made of omission, fact, and interpretation. The list of persons who generously aided and abetted these researches would fill a long page, and the weary traveller might leave out one or two by unhappy accident. For their kindness, patience, and invaluable help, from April to April, I especially want to thank Frank and Anne Hummert, Robert D. Andrews, William A. Ramsey, and Robert J. Landry, who must have answered all together at least a thousand questions.

'Time Exposures' is a selection of 'visit pieces' written for the *New Yorker*'s Talk of the Town over a period of years a long time ago. These fragments of the New York scene were the result of random wanderings around the city from 1928 to 1936, and they are reprinted here for whatever nostalgic value they may have for the collector of such things.

J. T.

West Cornwall, Connecticut

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'There is the tiger that lurks in motor cars, crouches in sealed envelopes, and prowls between the doorbell and the phone, ready to pounce upon the dreamer by day, the reveller by night, or any man at any hour; but I am concerned with the beast inside, the beast that haunts the moonlit marges of the mind, never clearly seen, never wholly lost to view, never leaving, in its wanderings, pawprints sharp enough to follow, or strange and promising enough, it well may be, to lure the wary hunter from the surer spoor of bigger game.'

– From
THE TENANT OF THE ROOM
by Douglas Bryce

I *Mainly Men and Women*

8005983

My Friend Domesticus

If, to Man, the cricket seems to hear with its legs, it is possible that to the cricket Man seems to walk on his ears.

Anon., nineteenth century

It has been established beyond doubt that the auditory organs of the Gryllidae (crickets) are situated in their front legs, but it will be the purpose of this article to suggest that, in the case of a certain group of crickets, this morphological oddity may also serve as the sensitive apparatus of a much more remarkable function.

In the country it is possible to be oblivious of a million crickets and conscious suddenly of one. This soloist, whose violin rises so compellingly out of the full orchestra, is *Gryllus domesticus*, the house cricket. He is the cricket on the hearth, but his appearances there are fleeting, for he spends most of the time, when he is audibly in residence, deep in the wall of the fireplace chimney. He is also, as we shall see, the cricket behind the grandfather's clock and the cricket in your lady's blue satin mule. It is useless to pick him up and put him out on the lawn 'where he belongs', because he doesn't belong there at all and he will come in again as soon as your back is turned. He is not to be confused with *Gryllus campestris*, the field cricket, who has a burrow under the grass and is only casually interested in houses constructed by man. The cricket in the grass is bigger, blacker, and shinier than its cousin of the hearth and looks more like a wrecked Buick. If you do put *domesticus* out, it is well to take him up in a handkerchief, because he may bite. The house cricket is companionable, but he resents the taking of liberties. The house is big enough for both of you; he will keep his place if you will keep yours.

Early in September, two years ago, a *domesticus* began to chirp from somewhere inside the chimney of the dining-room fireplace in my house in the country. He took part in conversations at table and joined lustily in concertos for violin, cricket, and orchestra when they were played on the victrola. He appeared to enjoy the special quality the human voice has when it is reading

aloud, but it is probably my imagination that *domesticus* offered, in occasional long silences, an adverse criticism of certain noisy half-hour radio programmes. If he was spoken to loudly and sharply by a voice very close to his winter quarters, he would abruptly cease chirping. It was easy to entertain a friendly feeling for *Gryllus domesticus* even though we caught sight of him only on rare occasions, when, it may be, he was starting off to forage for crumbs in the kitchen. There were never any signs to bear out the common suspicion that the house cricket, like the field cricket, eats carpets, shawls, dinner jackets, and the seats of bathing suits.

The cricket left the chimney in late March or early April, or at least I thought he'd left. All I actually knew was that he stopped chirping. There was silence in the fireplace for five months, but when September came round again the fiddling in the wall was resumed abruptly one night just after the dinner candles were lit. It was like a familiar knock at the front door. We had the feeling that the season had begun, as it used to begin in Saratoga with the advent of E. Berry Wall. The winter passed, and again in late March or early April the chirping in the fireplace stopped.

If my interest in house crickets up to this point had been casual, it has been sharpened into curiosity by the unusual events of the month that has just gone by. The chirping in our fireplace wall this year began several weeks ahead of time, at the very height of the mid-August heat wave. Furthermore, the dining-room cricket did not come alone. He was accompanied by a string quartet of *Grylli domestici*, who scattered gleefully about the house like a detachment of billeted soldiers. One began to tune up in back of the grandfather's clock in the hall, another made for the kitchen, a third hopped upstairs and got under a chest of drawers in the master bedroom, and the fourth began to saw away at prophecy behind a set of F. Marion Crawford on a bookshelf in the living room. They brought with them at least one female. (The sex of the cricket can be determined by the fact that the female has no stridulating apparatus and thus is invested with 'inviolable mutism', to steal a phrase from the late William Bolitho.) In the days that followed she took to hopping up and down the stairs leading to the second floor. There was a wild abandon in her descents which led me to believe she was having as much fun as a skier.

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