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### Zoospeak

*An interview with Gordon Mead*

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## P/A Forum

## Interview

**Zoospeak***An interview with Gordon Mead*

**Introduction:** In *Zoospeak*, Scottish poet Gordon Meade narrates the experience of captive animals. The project was inspired by the photographs of photo journalist Jo-Anne McArthur, shown alongside the poems in the book. The poems describe the – possible – experience of the animal in question from a first person perspective, using repetition to mirror their captivity. They shift the perspective: instead of simply being looked at, the animals tell the human readers how they feel or what they perceive. This adds another layer to McArthur's photographs.

Both the photographs and the poems operate on the border of art and politics. Words and images are used to draw attention to the captive animals' experiences. The poems also aim to capture a state of being – boredom, or simply waiting.

The book raises many questions, regarding the relationship between art and activism, the role of language in our encounters with other animals, the problems with speaking for animals, the human gaze, and animal agency. We spoke with Meade about these and other issues.

*The Interviews / Symposia format acts as a platform for conversations, where participants discuss the original work of an author, practitioner, policy maker, or activist. As such, these entries do not offer an outlet for original research, but instead reflect the personal views of the participants*

P/A **How did you first come across Jo-Anne McArthur's work and how did it inform your work on this book?**

GM I came across Jo's work through her first book of photographs, *We Animals*, towards the end of 2016. Although the images in the book made a deep impression on me, it was not until I acquired a copy of her second book, *Captive*, that I was moved to respond to her work through poetry. One of the first photographs I wrote about was of a Malayan Sun Bear. The photograph shows the bear standing behind a sheet of reinforced glass with one of its paws raised and pressed against the glass.



A Malayan sun bear in a zoo at the Pata mall in Thailand

*Bangkok, Thailand, 2008*

Jo-Anne McArthur / *We Animals*

That single image, in some way, set the tone for the entire series of poems. Here was a creature that, to my mind, was, in spite of its circumstances, trying to reach out, to make a connection with a world from which it had been excluded. Another one of the early poems took as its subject, a Polar Bear, another isolated creature, seen behind a double barrier of sure mesh and electric fencing. This animal seems to not be so concerned with making contact with anything external but rather looks as if it might be in a form of prayer or trance.

The selection of the other poems did not have any conscious development. I found myself just looking through the book and allowing whichever particular image act as a prompt for that day's writing. With regard to the composition of the book as a whole, I decided to collate the poems in the chronological order in which the photographs had been taken.

**P/A Can you speak to you past experiences with captive animals and how it might have changed your views about human-animal relations?**

**GM** Personally, one of the first experience I had of the permeability of the boundaries between animals and humans came during a visit to Edinburgh Zoo when I must have been about four or five years old. I remember my parents taking me to see a variety of different animals that, for some reason held very little interest to me until, that is, we arrived at the Big Cats. Again, although I was impressed by the lions and tigers which, if I remember correctly, were housed in quite large enclosures, the animal that caught my imagination was a panther which, at that time, was kept in a small and quite dingy cage at the edge of the zoo. My memory of this encounter that was both frightening and exhilarating to my four year old self became the subject for a poem I later wrote in memory of Ted Hughes, *A Panther in Edinburgh Zoo*, which closes with the following lines...

....Fazed, at first, I ran from

that look, but slowly, very, very  
slowly, I returned. In the end, I had to be  
dragged away, cajoled with sweets and ice-cream;  
with the promises of pandas, giraffes,

and gazelles. But nothing could touch  
the nothingness I had seen in its eyes;  
and to this day, no darkness has ever matched  
the black-out of its bristling skin.

It was as if the panther's anger and frustration had somehow  
leapt through the bars of  
its cage and entered my head.

**P/A Do you consider this work part of an 'animal turn' in poetry?**

**GM** I think that animals have always provided quite a rich seem of inspiration for a lot of writers in both the past and the present. One of the first poets to make an impression on my own way of looking at animals was Ted Hughes, especially in poems such as *The Thought Fox*, and *Hawk in the Rain*, both of which manage, in their own particular ways, to 'capture' the essence of the creature in question. Other poets whose work regarding animals that have no doubt had an influence on my own work in this area would have to include the likes of Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, Robert Wrigley, Pascale Petit, and most recently, Joanna Lilley.

**P/A Could you tell us more about the relation between visual art and language in your work?**

**GM** Regarding the connection between text and art, I have had very different experiences of this in my two major collaborations with visual artists. In working with the Scottish artist, Doug Robertson, on *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*, although we had many discussions as to how we might approach the work, in most cases, the poem came first, with the visual images arriving later as a response to the written word. For *Zoospeak*, the process was very different. To begin with the photographs, without which there would have been no poems, had already been gathered together and published independently, either in Jo-Anne McArthur's book, *Captive*, or on her website, *We Animals Media*. I began writing the poems as responses to the individual photographs without any idea that they may become part of a book. This was made possible when I showed a number of the poems to Jo and she gave me permission to use her work alongside the poems.

**P/A What role does captivity play in the process?**

**GM** The idea of captivity definitely resonated with my own experience of having been diagnosed, in 2014, with cancer and the subsequent treatments for that illness. It seemed that both myself and the creatures portrayed in the photographs were living through an experience that we had very little control of; an experience which was both extremely limiting and had no measurable time limit; in other words, a sort of life sentence. Before coming across Jo's work in *Captive* I had been working on a book of poems, *The Year of the Crab*, which looked at the diagnosis and early treatment of my cancer. It had been my intention, after writing that book, to return to writing mostly about nature and the environment. However, once I saw Jo's images, my imagination somehow made the connection between my ongoing experience of cancer and the animals' captivity, and I was driven to write the poems which appear in *Zoospeak*.

**P/A Is this collection a way of speaking up for other animals?**

**GM** I am not sure as to what poetry can provide in regard to speaking for animals compared to other mediums. I suppose that visual images are, by their very nature more immediate than words. Language can, at times, give voice to the voiceless in a way that other mediums might not be able to do so. I have always seen all language as a form of translation. I think humans do not necessarily 'think' only in words. I believe that visual images, sensations, colours etc. can arise pre-verbally in the mind and, perhaps, one of the tasks of any writer is to try and 'translate' these into words. One of the differences between say, poetry and analytical philosophy, may well be that poetry is closer to the above sources than any analytical writing. I feel that the writing of poetry is, at least, initially done under the radar of the critical mind.

**P/A Would the poems have been different if you had seen the animals in person?**

**GM** In writing the poems for *Zoospeak* I was very aware that I was working from the experience of looking at a photograph rather than from actually seeing an animal in the physical setting of a zoo. I am in no doubt that the poems would have been very different if the above had been the case. I would imagine that there might have been more emphasis on the other senses. The poems in *Zoospeak* do rely a lot on sight alone. My use of the present tense throughout the book was to try and instill a sense of immediacy to the experience of reading the poems. Hopefully, the poems are not just snapshots of the animals concerned. They are, however, like the photographs themselves, moments in time which do expand into a form of timelessness. They exist in an ever present here and now which, to my mind, the use of the present tense enhances. Hopefully, the use of the first person pronoun and repetition also underline the above.

**P/A Finally, how does this work relate to activism?**

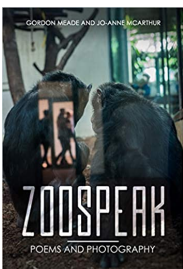
**GM** As I began to write the poems, I was unaware of any impact I thought they might have outside the 'poetry world'. However, as the number of poems started to grow, I did begin to hope that they might be able to have some effect in a less restricted environment. This led me to approach different outlets for the individual poems than strictly literary journals. Obviously, once a book has been published, the writer has very little control as to how it might be received, and by whom, however, it is my hope that it may well do something to raise awareness regarding man's inhumanity to our non-human relatives.

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## About Gordon Meade

Gordon Meade is a Scottish poet based in the East Neuk of Fife. He has been the writer in residence at Dundee District Libraries and the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at the University of Dundee, and has read from his work throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, and in Belgium, Germany, and Luxembourg, with the English poet, Desmond Graham. Meade's previous publications are *The Year Of The Crab* (Cultured Llama 2017), *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary* (Cultured Llama 2015), *Sounds Of The Real World* (Cultured Llama 2013), *The Familiar* (Arrowhead Press 2011), *The Private Zoo* (Arrowhead Press 2008), *The Cleaner Fish* (Arrowhead Press 2006), *A Man At Sea* (diehard publishers 2003), *The Scrimshaw Sailor* (Chapman Publishing 1996), and *Singing Seals* (Chapman Publishing 1991).

## About the Book



**Zoospeak** : by Gordon Meade with Jo-Anne McArthur  
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Zoospeak can be bought directly from the publisher at:  
[www.enthusiasticpress.co.uk](http://www.enthusiasticpress.co.uk)