

# Petting Zoo

by Gene Wolfe

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GENE WOLFE

Gene Wolfe's body of work over the years is a challenge and a delight to serious readers of science fiction. This year, as in the past, there were several fine Wolfe stories to choose from for this volume, but this one, published in a paperback original anthology of lightweight pieces on the theme, Return of the Dinosaurs, seemed to me just the thing to lead off a Year's Best volume, in a year when dinosaurs on film and TV are in vogue. There has been a fair amount of disagreement in recent years as to what makes a good SF story and in what way such characteristics as plot and action, character or idea ought or ought not to be central to the enterprise of science fiction storytelling. In my opinion, each good story implicitly makes its own statement and influences the argument in its own favor. And so the literature evolves. This is a cracking good story with subtle, and some quite clear, implications. But never mind that for now; read this slick, fast piece for fun and surprises and then stop and think afterward: what might it mean if the dinosaurs came back as Barney?

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Roderick looked up at the sky. It was indeed blue, but almost cloudless. The air was hot arid smelled of dust.

"Here, children . . ." The teaching cyborg was pointedly not addressing him. "-Tyranosaurus Rex. Rex was created by an inadequately socialized boy who employed six Build-a-Critter kits . . ."

Sixteen.

"-which he duped on his father's Copystuff. With that quantity of GroQik . . ."

It had taken a day over two weeks, two truckloads of pigs that he had charged to Mother's account, and various other things that had become vague. For the last week, he had let Rex go out at night to see what he could find, and people would-people were bound to-notice the missing cattle soon. Had probably noticed them already.

Rex had looked out through the barn window while he was mooring his airbike and said, "I'm tired of hiding all day."

And he himself had said . . .

"Let's go for a ride." One of the little girls had raised her hand.

From the other side of the token barrier that confined him, Rex himself spoke for the first time, saying, "You will, kid. She's not quite through yet." His voice was a sort of growling tenor now, clearly forced upward as high as he could make it so as to seem less threatening. Roderick pushed on his suit's A-C and shivered a little.

It had been cool, that day. Cool, with a little breeze he had fought the whole way over, keeping his airbike below the treetops and following groundtrucks when he could, pulled along by their wake.

Cold in the barn, then--cold and dusty-dust motes dancing in the sunbeams that stabbed between its

old, bent, and battered aluminum panels.

Rex had crouched as he had before, but he was bigger now, bigger than ever, and his smooth reptilian skin had felt like glass, like ice under which oiled muscles stirred like snakes. He had fallen, and Rex had picked him tip in the arms that looked so tiny on Rex but were bigger and stronger than a big man's arms, saying, "That's what these are for," and set him on Rex's shoulders with his legs-his legs-trying to wrap around Rex's thick, throbbing neck . . .

He had opened the big doors from inside, gone out almost crawling, and stood up.

It had not been the height. He had been higher on his airbike almost every day. It had not been his swift, swaying progress above the treetops-treetops arrayed in red, gold, and green so that it seemed that he followed Rex's floating head over a lawn deep in fallen leaves.

It had been

He shrugged the thought away. There were no adequate words. Power? You bought it at a drugstore, a shiny little disk that would run your house-bot for three or four more years, or your drill forever. Mastery? It was what people had held over dogs while private ownership had still been legal.

Dogs had four fangs in front, and that was it, fangs so small they did not even look dangerous. dangerous. Rex had a mouthful, every one as long as Roderick's arm, in a mouth that could have chewed up an aircar.

No, it had not been the height. He had ridden over woods-this wood among them--often. Had ridden higher than this, yet heard the rustling of the leaves below him, the sound of a brook, an invisible brook of air. It had been the noise.

That was not right either, but it was closer than the others. It had been the snapping of the limbs and the crashing of the trees falling, or at least that had been a lot of it-the sound of their progress, the shattering, splintering wood. In part, at least, it had been the noise.

"He did a great deal of damage," the teaching cyborg was saying, as her female attendant nodded confirmation. "Much worse, he terrified literally hundreds of persons . . ."

Sitting on Rex's shoulders, he had been able to talk almost directly into Rex's ear. "Roar."

And Rex had roared to shake the earth.

"Keep on roaring."

And Rex had.

The red and white cattle Rex ate sometimes, so shortlegged they could scarcely move, had run away slowly only because they were too fat to run any faster, and one had gotten stepped on. People had run too, and Rex had kicked over a little pre-fab shed for the fun of it, and a tractor-bot. He'd waded hip-deep through the swamp without even slowing down and had forded the river. There were fewer building restrictions on the north side of the river, and the people there had really run.

Had run except for one old man with a bushy mustache, who had only stood and stared }pop-eyed, too old to run, Roderick thought, or maybe too scared. He had looked down at the old man and waved; and their eyes had met, and suddenly-just as if the top of the old man's head had popped up so he could look around inside it-he had known what the old man was thinking.

Not guessed, known.

And the old man had been thinking that when he had been Roderick's age he had wanted to do exactly what Roderick was doing now. He had never been able to, and had never thought anybody would be. But somebody was. That kid up there in the polka-dot shirt was. So he, the old man, had been wrong about the whole world all his life. It was much more wonderful, this old world, than he, the old man,

had ever supposed. So maybe there was hope after all. Some kind of a hope anyhow, in a world where things like this could go on, on a Monday right here in Libertyberg.

Before the old man could draw his breath to cheer, he had been gone, and there had been woods and cornfields. (Roderick's suit A-C shuddered and quit.) And after lots of corn, some kind of a big factory. Rex had stepped on its fence which sputtered and shot sparks without doing anything much, and then the aircar had started diving at them.

It had been red and fast, and Roderick remembered it as clearly as if he had seen it yesterday. It would dive, trying to hit Rex's head, and then the override would say, My, gosh, that's a great big dinosaur! You're trying to crash us into a great big dinosaur, you jerk! The override would pull the aircar up and miss, and then it would give it back to the driver, and he would try the same thing all over.

Roderick had followed it with his eyes, especially after Rex started snapping at it, and the sky had been a wonderful cool blue with little white surgical-ball clouds strolling around in it. He had never seen a better sky-and he never would, because skies did not get any better than that one. After a while he had spotted the channel copter flying around up there and taking his picture to run on everybody's threedeevid, and had made faces at it.

Another child, a scrubbed little girl with long, straight privileged-looking yellow hair had her hand up. "Did he kill a whole lot of people?"

The teaching cyborg interrupted her own lecture. "Certainly not, since there were no people in North America during the Upper Cretaceous. Human evolution did not begin-

"This one." The scrubbed little girl pointed to Rex. "Did he?"

Rex shook his head.

"That was not the point at issue," the teaching cyborg explained. "Disruption is disrupting, and he and his maker disrupted. He disrupted, I should say, and his maker still more, since Rex would not have been in existence to disrupt had he not been made in violation of societal standards. No one of sensitivity would have done what he did. Someone of sensitivity would have realized at once that their construction of a large dinosaur, however muted in coloration-

Rex interrupted her. "I'm purple. It's just that it's gotten sort of dull lookin' now that I'm older. Looky here." He bent and slapped at his water trough with his disproportionately small hands. Dust ran from his hide in dark streaks, leaving it a faded mulberry.

"You are not purple," the teaching cyborg admonished Rex, "and you should not say you are. I would describe that shade as a mauve." She spoke to her female attendant. "Do you think that they would mind very much if I were to start over? I've lost my place, I fear."

"You mustn't interrupt her." the female attendant cautioned the little girl. "Early-Tertiary-in-the-Upper-Eocenewas-the-Moeritherium-the-size-of-a-tuber-but-more-like-ahippop

otamus."

"Yum," Rex mumbled. "Yum-yum!"

A small boy waved his hand wildly. "What do you feed him?"

"Tofu, mostly. It's good for him." The teaching cyborg looked at Rex as she spoke, clearly displeased at his thriving upon tofu. "He eats an airtruckload of it every day. Also a great deal of soy protein and bean curd."

"I'd like to eat the hippos," Rex told the small boy. "We go right past them every time I take you kids for ride, and wow! Do they ever look yummy!"

"He's only joking," the teaching cyborg told the children. She caught her female attendant's left arm and held it up to see her watch. "I have a great deal more to tell you, children, but I'll have to do it while we're taking our ride, or we'll fall behind schedule."

She and her female attendant opened the gate to Rex's compound and went in, preceded, accompanied, and followed by small girls and boys. While most of the children gathered around him, stroking his rough thick hide with tentative fingers, the teaching cyborg and her female attendant wrestled a stepladder and a very large howdah of white pentastylene Wickedwicker from behind Rex's sleeping shed. For five minutes or more they struggled to hook the howdah over his shoulders and fasten the Velcro cinch, obstructed by the well-intended assistance of four little boys.

Roderick joined them, lifted the howdah into place, and released and refastened the cinch--getting it tight enough that the howdah could not slip to one side.

"Thank you," the female attendant said. "Haven't I seen you here before?"

Roderick shook his head. "It's the first time I've ever come."

"Well, a lot of men do. I mean it's always just one man all by himself, but there's almost always one."

"He used to lie down so that we could put it on him," the teaching cyborg said severely, "and lie down again so that the children didn't have to use the ladder. Now he just sits."

"I'm too fat," Rex muttered. "It's all that good tofu I get."

One by one, the children climbed the ladder. The teaching cyborg's female attendant was standing beside it to catch each if he or she fell, cautioning each to grasp the railings, and urging each to belt himself or herself in once he or she had chosen a seat. The teaching cyborg and her female attendant boarded last of all. The teaching cyborg resumed her lecture, and Rex stood up with a groan and began yet again the slow walk around the zoo that he took a dozen times a day.

It had been a fall day, Roderick reminded himself, a fall day bright and clear, a more beautiful day than days ever were now. A stiff, bright wind had been blowing right through all the sunshine. He had worn jeans, a Peoria White Sox cap, and a polka-dot shirt. He had kept his airbike low where the wind wasn't quite so strong, had climbed on Rex's shoulders, and watched as Rex had taken down the bar that held the big doors shut ....

"Now," the teaching cyborg said, "are there any additional questions?" Roderick looked up just in time to see the corner of the white Wickedwicker howdah vanish behind Rex's sleeping shed.

"Yes." He raised his hand. "What became of the boy?"

"The government assumed responsibility for his nurturing and upbringing," the teaching cyborg explained. "He received sensitivity training and reeducation in societal values and has become a responsible citizen."

When the teaching cyborg, her female attendant, and all the children had gone, Rex said, "You know, I always wondered what happened to you."

Roderick mopped his perspiring forehead. "You knew who I was all the time, huh?"

"Sure."

There was a silence. Far away, as if from another time or another world, children spoke in excited voices and a lion roared. "Nothing happened to me," Roderick said; it was clearly necessary to say something. "I grew LIP, that's all."

"Those reeducation machines, they really burn it into you. That's what I heard."

"No, I grew up. That's all."

"I see. Can I ask why you keep lookin' at me like that?"

"h vas just thinking."

"Thinkin' what?"

"Nothing." With iron fists, stone shoulders, and steelshod feet, words broke down the doors of his heart and forced their way into his mouth. "Your kind used to rule the Earth."

"Yeah." Rex nodded. He turned away, leaving for Roderick his serpentine tail and wide, ridged back-both the color of a grape skin that has been chewed up and spit out into the dust. "Yeah," he mumbled. "You, too."