Animality as a Catalyst for Processing and Surviving Grief

Myfanwy Jones


Myfanwy Jones’s novel *Leap* sets the processing of human grief alongside an interesting exercise in pushing a nonhuman animal motif towards a deeper engagement with animality. Set in contemporary Melbourne, it follows the efforts of Joe and Elise to go on with their lives after the death of Jen, Joe’s girlfriend and Elise’s daughter. The “leap” of the title is for both characters a “death-defying leap” of trying to come to terms with grief and loss, and ideas about animals and human animality play a significant role within this process. Despite dealing in some familiar tropes—the healing bildungsroman, the coming-of-age tale, the midlife crisis—the novel does not feel clichéd. Similarly, although she deploys tigers partly as metaphorical and therapeutic to the human characters, Jones nevertheless seems wary of reductive anthropocentrism. The result is at once an immediately relatable and moving tale of surviving loss, and an engagement with humans’ animality and the lot of real animals.

“You Make Yourself into an Animal”

The novel’s structure is divided into three parts, labeled in accordance with an opening epigraph which defines the sport of parkour: running, climbing, and jumping. These motifs map onto Joe and Elise’s progress through their grief. They apply literally in the case of Joe, who teaches himself parkour, training
mind and body in precision climbing and jumping. At times this risky pursuit makes the reader suspect that he harbors a death-wish occasioned by his loss, Jen having died in a fall: “He pauses there, looking down, and things become so beautifully simple: you live or you die…. How would the falling feel? Would it go fast?” (p. 43). However, his training looks increasingly like deliberate defiance of that fatal gravity, and human animality is often evoked through the feline terms Jones employs to describe parkour. Specific moves are already termed “cat balance” and “cat leap.” While practicing, “He is barely there, barely human” (p. 10). He makes landings “soft as a cat” (p. 44). He tells his colleague, Lena, that parkour is:

> About the beauty and precision, the fear and the implausibility. About moving forwards and overcoming with grace. Never giving up—especially when it’s hard. Coming to trust your body and your mind so that when the shit comes down you will be ready. (p. 316)

She succinctly concludes, “So you make yourself into an animal then” (p. 316). For Joe, then, the literal leaps of parkour or, appropriately, *l’art du déplacement*, match his self-displacement in moving on from Jen’s death, but also in pushing the physical abilities of the human towards the nonhuman.

“‘At One’ with the Tiger”

Jen’s mother Elise, meanwhile, negotiates the allure of different danger, again involving the feline. Struggling with her daughter’s death and her shaky marriage, she takes inspiration from Jen’s interest in tigers (surprisingly undeveloped in the novel aside from a reference to wanting a tattoo of tiger stripes). Elise becomes fascinated with three tigers at Melbourne Zoo, particularly a female named Indrah. Part of her interest is that like Joe, she is tempted by a threat, which they potentially represent. She visits often and finds herself compelled to represent tiger-human predation in her art (she is a graphic designer): “On this most recent canvas, the cat in the tree has coalesced with its prey”; “The limp human form is hanging now from a branch, bent in the middle like an acrobat. And from between its splayed legs Indrah’s gaze burns out” (p. 300). Elise notes occasions when others have experienced a similar attraction to tigers, and repeatedly contemplates what it might be like to give in to it:

> She can feel the tigers stalking her, at a distance, and she is entertaining a return to realism in a portrait of the Bronx man jumping. It must have