

## ZOO CITY

PHOTOS André Sanchez

WORDS Lisa Hilton



“Oh, I can’t wait, I can’t wait!”  
said Giraffes.

“Well, we’re finally going to see them”,  
added Elephant.

“Will they be tiny?”

“Will they be pretty?”

“Will they do tricks?”

“Can we feed them?”,  
said all the animals together.

When they arrived in the city, the animals were uncertain what to do. No-one said so, but everyone missed Lion. It had been comforting, somehow, when Lion was in charge. Now everything had to be decided together. But this was the place where it had all begun, so despite the acrid tang of the air, which made them all, separately, long for the free breeze of the veldt, they tried to be excited. Lion was gone, and everyone was powerful now, not like the bad old days, Eagle reminded them, Now everyone was free to choose, which meant that the best of everything was shared. Gazelle had never liked to get too close to Lion, but still, it was a shame for him to miss the city.



Eagle flew up to the rooftops. Surely there would be some here? But there was nothing, only wire trees and curious humming boxes puffing stalely. Eagle scratched her claws, and the sound disturbed a rat, which scuttled across the crumbling, rain-pocked plain. Eagle ate it meditatively. At least the snacks weren’t bad. It was a shame, Eagle thought, shutting them up like this. They were sheltered, but a cage was still a cage. Eagle stretched his wings to their utmost limit, flexing the fine fabric of calibrated bones, feeling his freedom.

Giraffes swooped and peered into the little tunnels in the sides of the buildings. For breathing, they supposed, though all the tunnels were sealed shut. Inside were whirring boxes and heaps and heaps



of black and white leaves. Giraffes tried some that rustled in the street, but they were acrid and pulpy. Giraffes spat them out of their stained mouths in disgust. Oh, for a nice juicy vine! What did they give them to eat? Brightly coloured boxes were splayed about the streets, but their scent was noisome, fit for rats.

Gazelle looked underground, where iron tubes whizzed through the darkness. Mice skittered in the steel roots, and Gazelle turned up pretty noses. "None here", they called. No wonder they hid, thought Gazelle. The brightness of the air might harm their eyes. Perhaps they were happier, shuffling down here in the dark.

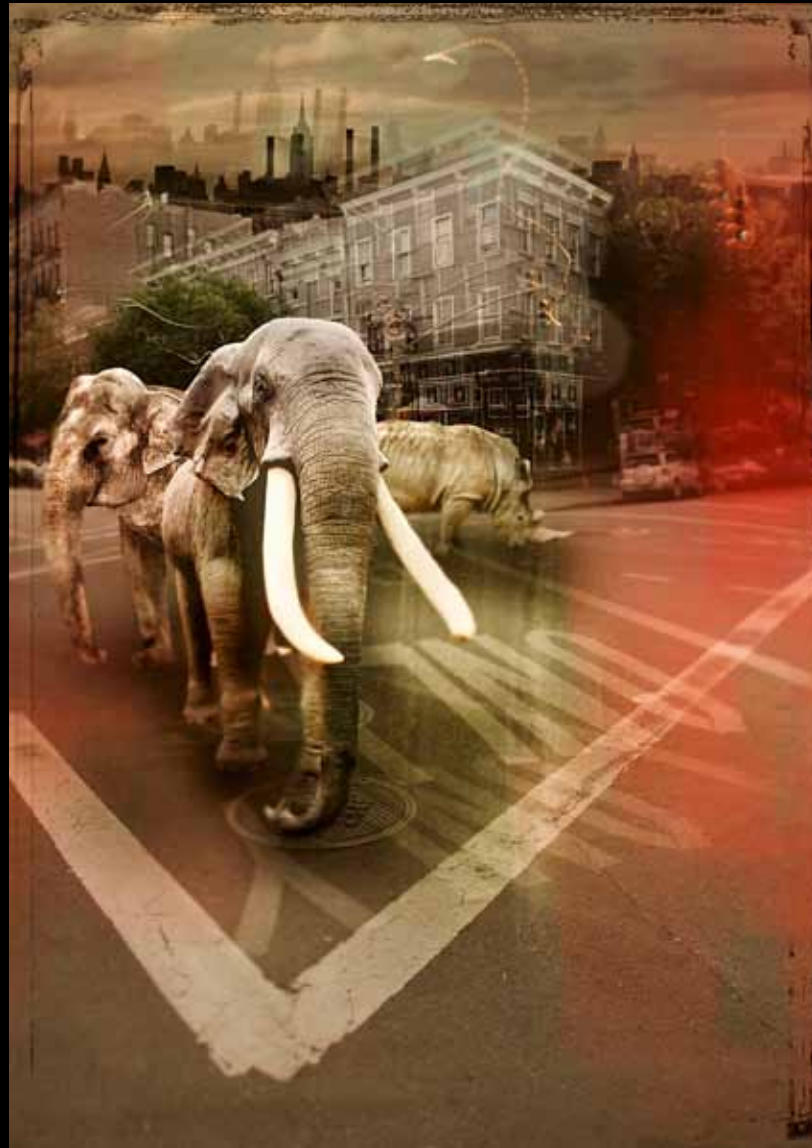
Rhino and Elephant found a garden. At least there were trees and flowers, crammed between the brick boxes. Everything looked garish



and sickly, straining feverishly for the sky. Rhino tried to push one of the boxes over, but Elephant reprimanded her. "We mustn't frighten them", he explained "they are very shy". "They like it here, really", snorted Rhino, hooking a wheeled cube on his horn. Zebra found shadows, strips of light and dark. "Look!", said Zebra "It looks like you" "Like you, you mean", answered Giraffes.

They wandered about, seeing nothing. Everywhere were coloured pictures, with red lines barring them over like ivy strangling a tree. The animals were thirsty and hungry and bored and disappointed. It seemed a nasty sort of place. Everyone wanted to go home but no-one wanted to disappoint the others by saying so.





Elephant took the lead. "There's nothing here but rats," he said "we must have come to the wrong place, after all". "Look!", said Giraffes. "I'm sure I saw one, look! Over there!" The animals followed Giraffes's gaze. The creature skulked in a doorway, hunched, its fur greying and shredding. Stinking crumbs mumbled from its mouth. "Never mind", said Elephant kindly. "Just another rat. A big one, though". "We'll try again tomorrow".

Sadly, the animals picked their way through the debris towards the river. Night was falling, and one by one the tunnels began to glow.

"Was that it?" asked Eagle. "Was that the democracy?"  
"It can't be", said Elephant. "We made a mistake".  
"They said it was pretty", said Gazelle mournfully,  
"...they said it was wonderful".

