

Free Ota Benga

In the Bronx zoo in 1906, they kept a pigmy.
His name was Ota. Ota Benga. His roommate
was an orangutang. The atmosphere between them
was amicable but thick with ammonia.

Because Ota's teeth were sharpened to a point
the anthropologists surmised he was a cannibal.
Samuel Verner, curator missionary, had purchased
him from slavers in the Congo Free State.

They had liberated Ota Benga from the incessant
maracas of frogs and insects in the close darkness
of the forest. Crowds came to the Bronx in their
thousands. The New York Zoological Society

furnished him with a loincloth, bow, arrows
and a target to complete the tableau. To encourage
Ota, the keepers poked him through the bars
with long sticks. Sometimes when visiting children

pulled faces, he dropped the bow and turned his back,
but the management let it pass: Ota Benga was a favourite
with families. The Reverend James M Gordon negotiated
his release into the care of The Howard Coloured Orphan

Asylum in Brooklyn, and on to The Lynchburg Tobacco
Factory in Virginia, where they capped his teeth and gave
him work. In Lynchburg, Ota sang the blues, singing songs
of his home on the Kasai River, of his lost Mbuti wife,

of the light piercing here and there the shade of the high
canopy. One spring day in 1916 Ota stole a handgun, and ran
into the woods. He scavenged timber for a pyre, prised the caps
from his teeth and sang one last time. Free Ota Benga.