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The lightning came closer

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The lightning came closer

poems by

Janis Elizabeth Rodgers

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
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Advice

*Be prepared to run from killer bees
when chimps crave honey.*

*Know how to ask 'who's that' — se quo?
when memorizing names.*

*Learn to squat behind a bamboo wall
and pour water over your head,*

*to feast on canned chicken
sliced on bread.*

*At day's end— listen
to children's voices
lit through darkness
under stars
and mosquito net.*

1

After a USGS map of the Kedougou Region, Senegal

Like treasure seekers she unfurls the scroll, we get down on hands
and knees in her university office, to trace our fingers for miles—

through deep purple forests and glowing mountains, dashed
boundaries between the western Sahel's rise to the foothills—

great expanse of phosphate orange, then a little green jewel
at the bottom, about to be swallowed by mines and bridges.

I hold in my hands a glossy country, satellite imagery marks
a national park, Niokolo-Koba, and where the Gambia arcs

down toward Guinea-Bissau. We try to make sense of this—
three strikes in the earth where no gold appeared. Only 300

chimpanzees left here. She runs her fingers across the base
of mountains whose tops are destined to be blown clear off—

and stops at the Fouta Djallon, where she's found evidence—
nests, scat and pant-hoots— what the map fails to show us.

A Permit to Mine

Dakar, Senegal, July 2011

Tear gas and rubber bullets from the parliament's iron gates
where thousands fisted stones and shouted *No!* the Constitution
cannot be changed by your hand. On their knees

youth chanted: *Free Senegal!* Bullet-proof vests, barefoot women
in flowered dresses dodge car fires, peddle loaves of bread.
The miner's tell us, two American anthropologists, lock

your hotel door. Behind high walls, graffiti-sprayed, we drink
sunset-colored cocktails and speak of the forests we study,
which chimp has sharper teeth, who's who on the food chain.

Our balcony overlooks sailboats cluttered into the shore
slender as a waning crescent. Buildings crumble into the sea,
but we're be safe here, the miners tell us, with a bottle

of white wine and running water. *After the meeting we'll take you
to the island across the way, they promise, before switching to Afrikaans
and locking us inside. Order anything, put it on our tab, they say.*

And we do. More drinks before they return, then stronger ones
while they pat each other on the back, a sealed deal, permit
to probe the earth for gold. *Can you see the island?* They point

to a hump in the sea and we set off in their very own sailboat.
Dakar swallowed by the sun, the riots disappear. On a patio
facing open ocean, drunk and hungry we eat fist-sized prawns,

our table laid with hand-made jewelry, stone, animal bone, painted
or raw, shell or vine, our choice, at any price. Another bottle of wine
and I wander down the spit, to feel water, the salt on my face.

Three Moroccan girls smoke and smile. *You're beautiful!* We say
to each other, a dentist and her cousins, they invite me to swim. I strip
off my jeans and stumble down the chipped cement steps.

All I can see are the green spears of their eyes, the wet dark curls
drenched, around their necks. The cool Atlantic rushes up my nose,
saltier than I ever remembered.

The Genies of Kharakhena

Hot breeze between Saba trees
on the old road to Medina.

I can tell a pathway only from absence
the crumbling walls of what was

the sacred bush, *lamptigos*
in the form of giant pythons

who eat night's darkness
chase men back to the villages,

lights move through the forest
lightning detached from the sky.

Mining roads have razed
truck corridors, explosions

erupt everyday across the border,
genies extinguish from the mountains,

topaz blades shake off
the ground and make for the bright

regions of burnt rock plateau,
that which makes the tongue speak

but cannot be spoken, a swelling
in the python that will not be digested.

What Happens in the Rainy Season

Bulldozers leave the mountains and rust
in their chain link compounds, guarded
by sleeping men and scrawny dogs,

for the razed roads flood, sticky mud will not
let go of a tire's thread. Mining will cease.
Lightning will menace the people of town

and village alike, laughing doves, wives
who bring the bowls and fire inside,
with the dirty tea glasses, laundry and TVs.

The winds pick up, the earth falls silent,
our sheets coated in layers of dust, our dreams
chiseled open by thunder, rain, mountaintops

framed in electric charge. Descend the open-
faced mines long after the machines have
turned their lights off. Pour sugar in the engines,

rummage piles of rock still hot with sun, rock
that sings to be broken with a breath of mercury.

My Country's President Speaks of Death (weeks before I leave to study chimpanzees in Senegal)

Good evening. Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden. May 2, 2011.

A charred helicopter lost in the ruins of a mansion in Abbottabad, Pakistan, concrete walls topped with barbed wire, ramshackle buildings in need of paint, a well-kept garden with cabbage, potatoes, some 100 chickens. My lover runs obstacle courses, swims the Pacific, all in preparation for war (Lover, tell me of the barbed wire, the rope course, the river boats, the bullet scars on your neck) Inside the compound, whiteboard, markers, textbooks for children schooled in Arabic. My mother raises her arms, a flash of radiation enters the tissues around what was once her breast (Mother, tell me how it feels the hard scar tissue on your chest) Nestle milk, good-quality soap, Coca-Cola and dried meat in the kitchen. My president describes a terrorist who murdered thousands of innocent men, women and children. A person who once lived in what is now rubble, where poplar trees and wild cannabis grew tall against privacy walls (President, tell me the reason for death, war, razed intestines, shredded legs, disfigured hearts) This is the ocean I will cross, from New York to Dakar. Only a day's drive from the capital to forests where chimpanzees do not know my lover, my mother, my president, the value human place on death, on gold.

Two Monuments: in Bronze & Bark

Through alleyways in the outskirts of Dakar, women sweep debris from outside their front doors into the sea. We leave the city, the white haze of water that rests under the African Renaissance

statue atop the twin hills of Collines des Mamelles, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean— bronze, muscled man, wife in one arm, her head tilted back in submission, their child balanced on his bicep.

Dusted in orange— sticky, sun-bleached curtains on the windows, prayer beads hung from the taxi's rearview mirror, the driver's long, thick eyebrows threaded with dust, his eyes the color of sand.

Il fait chaud, says the main in front of me. He examines my face, red and oiled with sweat. Hot air seeps up my body like phantom flames from holes in the rusted metal under my feet.

The smell of bush fire and goat fur turns sharp in the savanna where women fold against the orange earth like wilted seedlings, the world turns upside-down with emptiness.

Along the roadside, enormous baobab trees emerge from the dead grasses— magnificent wonder— mammoths with thick, bulbous trunk. These trees are said

to inspire poetry. Storytellers are buried within these swollen wombs of warm ocean, these gentle giants whose crinkled flowers harbor fruit bats then die. I will never fail to be mesmerized

by trees that rise with such audacity— her branches that know soil, her roots that claim sky.

Bon Chance

I

In the village, men wear leather sacks of magic
tied to muscled biceps. They call it *gris-gris*.

In town, miners wear stiff polos, blue or green,
and sit at their laptops. This won't bring luck.

At *Le Bedik* Hotel I find Paul, a geologist,
who scans maps at a table in the back, a bottle

of Jameson beside him, glass filled with crisp
ice from the bar's cooler. We have a drink,

he complains of the heat, how many more
months he'll be stuck in this horrid country.

Tama, the bartender, admires my wide-brimmed
straw hat. *Like the Queen of England*, he says,

And with a diamond on her finger! Like Viviane,
the president's wife, a French woman who also

wore hats under the African sun. *Il fait tres chaud!*
I say, using the little French I know, and both men

can agree, loosen buttons on their collared shirts.

II

I ask Paul about the mines, what happens after,
and he recalls trees he's saved from bulldozed ruins,

just because they were old or rare or beautiful.
What he remembers most is Angola—another

place he hopes never to see again—
the handless boys, wrists severed

by a machete's blow, or the less fortunate
beaten to death, thrown in the Congo,

blood still coming from their ears, nose, mouth.
I twist the ring on my finger, and can almost feel

the heat, magma shot through ocean floor,
something glittering in sunlight, held briefly

in thumb and forefinger— a red spill in the mud.

Attaya (afternoon tea)

Attaya made by two boys
in a little blue *forada*
over charcoal fire

with *warga*,
shot glasses
on barely red coals.

From glass to glass,
the snake liquid
stirs and froths.

Guests are served first—
the taste, *amere comme une mere*
(bitter like a mother)

our mouths coated
in tea leaves and mint
for the rest of the evening.

The boys drink second—
sweeter this time, *l'amour d'un ami*
(the love of a friend)

nursing mothers wait
for more sugar, *doux, comme le souffle*
de la mort, (sweet, like the breath of death).

Bofeto

I hike a cow path to a plateau above the village.
No one is ever alone— I hear roosters, arguments,
women pound millet. The hunting dogs come bark at me,

the sky lowers its purple gaze onto rocks that promise gold.

A child throws stones at the dogs. They yelp and run toward
the bush. I notice Barack Obama's face beaming out
of the boy's ripped t-shirt, the generator's *whir... whir... whir*

the chatter of men in shadows who try for cell reception.

In the village, Damfakha's first wife serves a steaming bowl
of rabbit. I didn't think I could eat it— I remembered
how they slept with their eyes open, freshly dead—

eyes bare and brown as dead earths that stopped spinning.

The only primates in the burnt forests, we left bones
in a pile on the dirt floor and made coffee. Damfakha
took us in circles below the mountains shaved by mine roads—

no chimps to be found.

Le Marabout

I will always be Senegalese,
the young man said, I will
bring my culture wherever I go

but I cannot pick up the land,
take our cemeteries,
our ancestors, our skin.

Let me tell you a story,
the old man said.
In 1975, the people of Damantan

were forced to leave their village
the people of damnation
the white cousin

of the president's wife
wanted Le Parc National du Niokolo Koba
to be pure and golden.

The magic man, *le marabout*
fortune teller, spiritual teacher
did not want to leave his grandfather

and great grandfather, all the ancestors.
The military feared *le marabout*
and he was arrested.

The people were taken
from the land, the gold, their skin.
Anyone who touched him,

who stole the *marabout*
from his grandfathers,
died within three months.

C'est vrai, the young man said. *C'est vrai*.

Dinner with Gold Diggers

No vegetables in the restaurant tonight
only peas and potatoes, the waiter says.
Anything green, I beg, and please,
no more rice. I feel like a queen
as I eat my chicken thighs, swat flies
from the table with a cloth napkin.
She shows him a map, blue swath forest
where chimps build nests. *I've never seen
a chimp there*, he says. She persists
with camera trap photo, a curious
fur face pressed to lens. *They're here.
Right here.*

Outside, lightning strikes the ashy hills
behind the river. Blackened bush melts
to blackened water, the sky blinks dim
purple light on the shrunken fish,
scales glitter with star, moon, fire.
He pushes his plate away. Light retreats.
My mouth still full of greasy chicken,
rolls crusted with fly carcasses. I savor
the taste of meat. He pours more wine,
and asks if we'd like dessert. I refuse
the sweetness.

Ardi

*... Ardi, a 4.4 – million – year –old female who shines bright new light on an obscure time in our past. Her discoverers named her species *Ardipithecus ramidus*, from the Afar words for “root” and “ground,” to describe a ground-living ape near the root of the human family tree. -- Science, 2009*

An aerial view of the Middle Awash, rolling hills, layers of sediment spotted with shrubs. On a projection screen pulled down over the white board, I show my students

a land with heat strong enough to kill. A fossil hominid tooth was found in this reddish-brown earth, a cracked story of our ancient beginnings, when we first stood on

two legs. None of them would set ever foot in Ethiopia, none of them, many from corn or bean farms in Iowa, would think about fossils after this course. But today

as central campus hums with snow, my students see land rovers and billowing trails of dust across the desert, fossils hunters in search of the rare evidence of early

human life. Some sleep, but others witness the discovery of finger bones, a pelvis broken to pieces, the base of a cranium, lower jaw, ankle bones— a partial skeleton,

riddle, miracle, tibia so fragile you couldn't even breathe on it.

The Primatologist

Under a yellow moon rubbed to fuzz by bushfires, we enter *la brousse*, black wisps on our pant legs where the burnt grasses felt us. Above, The Seven Sisters, hot blue and luminous, companions to Artemis. She regrets she does not know stars,

but I follow her to *des forets*, toward *les chimpanzés*, mosaic woodland where mud huts disappear as if they never existed. Last night I slept under smoky heat and mosquito net, my belly full of wilted baobab leaves, my pillow drenched in sweat. Chimps come

down from their nests in the trees, branches snap, white flowers fall to the forest floor like clusters of stars. Their muscled shoulders, tender greetings, aubades to ripe fruit and kin. *Natasha*, she points to the first female (who cups a hand over *l'enfant's*

pink-eared head). *She's a little nervous with her newborn*. If not for the sweat bees, weaver ants biting my legs I would fall asleep under this knotted tangle of vines, bed of leaves. The first male, Mamadou, squats atop a *Saba* tree, hooked white scar on his lower back

like a crescent moon blazed into his body. Her binoculars follow him closely. At him she aims not bow and arrow, but notebook and pen. It's more than this ritual of dawn for her, this chimpanzee with dark, arched eyes, as if Mamadou were the only man

she would ever love.

Metallurgy

A scattering of broken kilns, clay pipes,
crumbled furnaces of charcoal fire,
born of heat, shoots, womb—

we women who do not know magic stumble
upon ruins above a verdant pool
guarded by dwarf crocodiles—

out in the bush, far from villages where stoves
cook morning bread, iron ore once
melted from rock, song, prayer—

secret grove of furnaces forbidden to women,
but adorned to resemble them,
bore pots, tools, jewelry—

at the end of the day, men go home hungry,
fires die, metal cools, only a female
can deliver meat, blood, bone.

Underwater:

A Mynwerker's Story

Offshore, trapped in the ancient beach terraces of the Diamond Coast, he left the militia to crawl across a seabed with sensors and suction cups. In a slurry of gravel and sand, he felt for gems through extinct black smokers, volcanic vents in the deep sea floor. With diving mask and debris, he left the world behind to collect precious stones on Mercury Island, steep, rocky, without vegetation. He remained in scuba gear so as not to disturb the eggs of gannet or crowned cormorant, jackass penguins that bray like donkeys in their huge, noisy colonies. Through the suck and sigh of compressed air he left the land covered in thick layers of bird guano, riddled with caves.

“Spear-Wielding Chimpanzees Snack on Skewered Bushbabies”

-- *New Scientist*, February 22nd 2007

Take a living branch, remove the leaves, peel
away bark, sharpen the edge with your incisors.

What do you call this— spear, dagger, bayonet?

Make a point, taste the wood but imagine blood
how fresh meat would make your tongue throb.

The Chief

We are taken directly to see him—
a near blind man with silvery eyes,
two burnt stones for feet.
From his bed, he welcomes us.

Bats come from the thatching
the panes of corrugated steel—
they hear our voices and move
from the rafters, from under

the chief's wooden bed. Like leaves
in shadow, bats stretch down
his walls, beneath his worn body
and thin sheets. I smell the sweet

rice porridge with crushed peanut
and mint the chief's wives cup
in their fingers as they laugh at us—
white people, *toubabs*, come for monkeys.

At the end of the day, I pour water
over my head, squat naked below
stars so hot I could almost feel them
prick my skin. The village is peaceful,

fire-warm, and I imagine the old chief
sleeping, while the bats leave his hut.

To Go Dancing

Toss our field clothes—
the colonial cream
buttoned shirts
and quick-dry pants
in exchange for lipstick,
tight fit jeans,
the rare piece
of jewelry—
Red blown glass
earrings
that match my Chanel-
Mickey Mouse shirt.
Metal of her ring
zipper
bra strap
one mountain behind
the other
smoked in a season's
dry heat.
Whiskey
on our lips,
dust from the mines
powders our faces.

Women I Know

She who studies lions leaves home
with a dart gun, a woman who forgets
to eat— ribs like harp strings, nipples

glued to the bones of her chest. She who
pounds millet, her back stooped over
the mortar, breasts drag against dirt,

a woman whose body comes parallel
to earth when she plants peanuts.
I know a woman with so many mosquitoes

on her bed, she could never sleep, her fever
spread like bush fire, a woman who picks
her fingers with a porcupine quill and feeds

crocodile eggs to her children. She who
wakes before dawn, determined, eyes shrill
as a bird's, a woman with a botfly

in the fat of her arm, she waits the full forty
days for it to burst from her skin. She who
sleeps in the forest, clandestine as a leopard

her laugh, like the baby-wail of a hyena.

2

Ode to *Sterculia appendiculata*

Without effect, I tried to love trees
until I fell for the tallest woman
whose shoulders reach above
the rest— The Sexy Tree—

those grooves and curves
on that slender frame,
her body grows measureless
in the illuminated day

her small yellow flowers
fall like beatific stars
to entrance the forest floor
in earthy cinnamon.

She breathes in outer space
rubs checks with the moon
her creamed face, soft
easy to work.

After discarding tawny velvet
skin of her children,
bright bones sprout
from an elephant's footprint!

She may appear inviting
but her neighbors say
her fruit is dry and short-lived
her canoes not durable,

others say she is so beautiful
envious sun will burn her
if she does not hide her face
in green veils.

Her limitless tanned arms
sway when she wind-dances,
those impossibly long legs,
I can hardly see the tops of.

On the Road to Fossils

Truckers from Congo fill the closely clustered bars and women,
they will not make it from Nairobi to Mombasa for petrol.

All along the roadsides lorries wait for an overturned bus
to be righted. There are no streetlights, but lanterns perched

upon speed bumps where women with babies on their laps
sell bananas and onions. Their voices disintegrate in fire

as welders' sparks startle the freshly settled night.
My heart shakes like the cargo in our trunk— canned

corn beef and tins of Nescafé. We're ready for the field
but have to get out of the city first. Rubber burns, sisal fields

spring from the earth. We enter Kambaland— charcoal, baskets,
wooden spoons, coarse-haired yellow baboons eat garbage

under giant baobabs. Emali tosses and turns among dead crops,
darkness hemmed in by black rhinos and rich Americans

with their gated homes in the Tulu Hills. Impenetrable stretches
of lava. White chai and samosas' green oil stain my pant leg

at a truck stop in Voi. Palms come up as we near the coast—
bushels of mangoes, carved coconuts and wooden bed frames

slender papayas and abandoned freight, a sign for a youth group
selling flowers. Bombolulu— ripe tomatoes and sandals

for sale, bright *kanga* cloths, people on bicycles and tuk tuks.
Tires deep in mud, flooded roads impassible. Somali men

tend small roadside fires beside their lorries. We put up our tents
to sleep, our breath of petrol and tea, dreams of the great rift valley.

Angafou

Chimp remains in a tree one hundred meters
from Maja's mango garden
planted in 1984, she remembers exactly—

shade littered with cigarette butts, dung
from the Djakore cattle with their long horns
and fulvous coats.

If you hear someone washing clothes
in the night, you know it's the Devil.

Her husband knows this too.

Dug up skull and hand bones
from within a goat enclosure—
too dark to see what we were doing.

There are places we shouldn't be,
the stream at dusk where I dreamt us,
who sought love or escape from the heat

beyond a courtyard, stone swan fountain,
three papaya trees.

Velvet curtains keep out the desert,
claw-scratched barrens, plastic flowers
melt in their vases.

I want a bath, to float in the saline
of our bodies, but the faucets are bare,
under the floorboards, the bleating of goats.

Evil eyes tear at our foot soles.

Under their hooves, a dirty skull
knocked to pieces, a diamond cut in two.

Children huddle over the shallow grave,
pick up what might be
phalanges or stones—

Maja holds the jaw, the upper palate broken
neatly in half like God's lips
parted and the universe poured out,
the mango garden's seed, firmly in place.

A tooth fell into Maja's small, warm body.

Her son strikes the iron fence, bewitched
screams from his father's mouth
for his mother's silver pail, the dirty
ape bones.

Lifeblood

I

O Land of Commiphora!

Crocodile eggshells fall from the dunes,
jade water slinks from the stone path.
Elisabetta, with a brain tumor now,
hums as she bird watches on the spit:
great pelicans, spoon bills, a white flamingo
with a gimp leg. *There are stories to tell*, she says.

II

The Dassanetch must think it's funny
how much we anthropologists like the fish.
Fish are for poor men, they laugh, crouching along the shores
of Lake Turkana in the mornings to catch
and scale our tilapia. They throw pale ones for the crows.
This lake is the purple tint to their eyes
the warriors' scars braided across their chests.

III

Elisabetta has an apartment in Rome,
a terrace garden where she grows pomegranates.
She tells me to come visit.

IV

A jackal slinks across the beach at dusk,
hunting crocodile eggs through wispy reeds
while we drink wine under thatched *bandas*,
lament a dam being built to divert water
away from here. We shiver to imagine this
arid land, the cradle, keeper of fossils.

Here on Tiwi Beach

Low tide, walking on a billion starfish
one *mzungu* cries, she realizes her murders
and must be carried from the water
by beach boys who laugh and look
for treasures no one cares to buy—
conch shells and coral critters,
says a rich man, robbed from the reef.
He sips a gin and tonic and tells
the beach boys to fix their country up.
Instead they try to sell us many things—
snorkel masks, fish or sex, a fair variety.
Their pleadings and the rich man,
both voices ring, through vacant
hotel rooms, chlorinated pools,
a spread of oysters gone untouched.
A British girl orders sodas, *please,*
with ice, and complains to her pasty
boyfriend— *the beaches baked with seaweed*
have not been raked in weeks!

Le Moto

In Kedougou, I get on the back of Josh's *moto*,
 the seat like a pool of black sun I slide my thighs
 over. My skirt, supposed to cover my ankles,
 absolutely to cover my knees, is always too short.

There is always something wrong with the bike,
 Josh or I. "Bastard," Josh shouts. "Cheap piece of
 shit!" A flat tire, blown inner tube. Or a pus-filled
 fungus on his feet, my inconsolable fever.

Too sick for the bush, but well enough for town
 we make special trips to the boutique for cold
 vanilla yogurt, the pharmacy for codeine,
 the pretty flowered box of Chinese slimming tea.

Lightning in the distant mountains of Fongolembi
 portends a night of wind and rain, a night
 we will spend inside the house, where concrete
 walls throw heat to our thin mattresses on the floor.

Light from Chez Blandine's tumbles
 into Kedougou's streets, *le moto's* headlights,
 a vague guide, slanted and dim as Blandine's
 smile when we leave her behind the counter

with a handful of coins, the face of an antelope
 pressed to shiny bronze. We leave before the rains
 with our cans of beer and hard-boiled eggs,
le moto huffing beneath our weight.

Johnny's House

Kedougou town

In the morning, concrete walls crack and yawn for paint.
I used to live here, Josh mumbles from the floor,
 another east coast dream, mirage of American city.

I wake up when he opens the storm shutters—
 too hot already and he believes in the purifying powers
 of sunlight, the goodness of humanity, or maybe

that he'd open the red metal to Brooklyn,
 the parrots outside the windows of his high school
 warming themselves on electric lines.

Outside, Johnny's mother pats a thatched mat
 beside her, beckons me nearer or into the shade.
 She never sleeps inside regardless of weather

and refuses to use the western toilet installed
 at the end of the hallway in the large, hot house,
 still without running water. Undisturbed by flies

that crawl up her fingers, onto metal bangles,
 her bare breasts. Her son puts on Dockers,
 rides his motorcycle into town for cigarettes.

Nene, his wife, pulls water from the well to heat
 for coffee, to bath their children. Last night,
 Josh and I watched Indian soap operas with villagers

come for the nightly round of news and sitcoms,
 we vowed to visit each other back in the Midwest.
I'll drive to St. Louis, I say, lighting more incense

to keep the mosquitoes away. Josh will ride back
 to Fongoli before long, with a backpack full
 of canned meat, biscuits, the small tasteless apples

from who-knows-where. Food like that is a luxury—
like stores on Madison Ave., Josh says, *most New Yorkers*
don't actually shop there. Nene serves us rice and fish

with tiny bones, oily orange cabbage, a spicy seeded
vegetable Johnny calls eggplant, looks like a green tomato,
but tastes like neither. Josh will leave and I will stumble

over my poor French with smiles and gestures— *Merci,*
merci! when someone carries water inside for my shower.
Ça va? when I see Nene in the morning. Whether or not

I feel well or malaria ridden, I will always say— *Ça va bien.*

Sickness

Like the little boy outside
the nurse's office, a swab
of cotton the size of a snow-
ball stuck to his inner arm,
we don't know what to do,
we could not understand
the doctor's language
and the slip of paper
was all wrong. The boy,
his legs are pins, plastic
sandals covered in blood.

The Husband

I

Pop and I leave Maja to her botany—
 she collects figs from the fruit-on-the-trunk
 tree while we follow chimps into Senegal's
 short stretch of mountains. Pop gathers data
 for his wife— what they're eating, where
 they're sleeping.

II

Rocks on the plateau, still warm at dusk.
 We put our notebooks away and drink
 water, the sky bare lavender across the border
 where money hides in every indent, every
 contour and carved space, every sewn
 pocket and shoe sole, all the bush mine's
 secrets glitter
 from a manhole's depth.

III

Children run over the orange earth
 with Arabic lesson tablets
 shaped like headstones
 clutched into their armpits.
 The star and moon
 above each minaret rises
 from the center of town—
 Men leave boutiques
 to wash their feet in the market
 side streets and pray
 for buried treasure.

IV

Pop rides into Guinea with duffel bags
 of gold. I can imagine that smile
 he shows the red-eyed women
 before he fucks them—
 their hot prickly skin
 that makes him sneeze
 their baby goat breath.

He must forget Maja's braless
wisp of body, her back drenched
in sweat. Out of breath
and smoking in the mango garden's
shade, she shows me the place
dogs ripped a baby chimp to pieces.

V

In Guinea, Pop never enters
the bush where teenage boys
descend mine shafts, dim
flashlights like broken vulture wings
strung around their necks.

VI

Maja buys from a shop in the village—
canned chicken and eggs, cashews
for her son. A truck comes through
carried on its black diesel cloud,
cartons of cigarettes and bright
yellow jerry cans, dirtied vessels
of money, sun, disease—
poured into the burning pockets
of her husband.

La Fete du Bantata

We drink wild honey wine
from plastic water bottles and taste
the phosphate earth of this
long-parched country, the soil newly
red with the first taste of rain,
virgin no more, the dry season
ends as spirits emerge from forest,
ancestors take over the bodies
of husbands and fathers, masked,
legs wrapped in bamboo, faces
covered in leaves. Women who
wear bead and shell headdresses
bring wine to the dancing men
whose leaves drip with water,
pleasure, wish for fields of green.

The Ant Queen

I

Like a light rain they come for me
 every shadow of tree branch catches
 my eye, though cracks in the cabin walls.

Overnight, Sobralia flowers blossom
 on the sides of trees, long white petals
 wither, then die in a few short hours.

After a quarter century on this planet,
 am I really alive? The ants know
 I am in my prime, bloody and in need

of food, they come. Through the musk
 of snake stench and damp leaf litter,
 my body floats above the ground,

shrouded in mosquitoes who whirl
 over rotten fruit. The ants' lymph tube
 hearts beat against my back, they carry me

deeper. They cannot feel love, I am warned
 but the efficiency of their smooth
 black bodies moves me. My birthday cake

with fresh whipped cream, so cool
 in the rainforest, pineapple chunks and cherries
 on top, beckon me to stay in this terrestrial

world of sunlight and bright blood,
 with homeothermic bodies covered in skin.

II

Cutter ants are called farmers—
 they climb trees and collect bits of leaves
 on which to grow a fungus that nourishes

their endless families, endless rivers of insect life
 roping in vein-like processions through the forest.
 Each female mates with many males to collect

the 300 million sperm she needs to create
 a colony. My cake came in a plastic box
 that now contains little red frogs who secrete

poison, snakes that could end my life.
 There are things to be scared of in the jungle,
 other humans tell me. I am just as moist

as the frogs. Their slime fogs the plastic
 like my skin, slicked with oil, sweat. The ants
 are clean and greased as a machine,

their orange mounds tunnel into the earth
 where fungus grows in the cool dark
 of their busy limbs, the leaves no longer green,

no memory of wind, of sun. How will you feel
 without light to warm your skin, the tangy sweet
 of mangoes on your tongue, the love of a man

with hard flesh muscles and a fist-sized heart?
 Other human wonder.

III.

Subterranean— no need for eyes or hair,
 but that comes later. First, I must let my blood slow
 to a whisper and lick loose soil from my lips.

I must not squirm when their tiny bodies march
 across my face. Learn from their soft wires— instinct,
 process, determination, and I teach them what is skin,

what is human, what is desire and destruction.

The Devil's Stream

Pop collects chimp feces in little plastic bags—
under every sleeping tree, up and down

the steep gravelly banks of the Devil's Stream
he examines fruit and leaves, delicately

as he would touch his wife. He hands me the shell
of a tea flower, fragile as bush baby bones.

He stubs out his cigarette in the mud dense
with rotten mangoes and abandoned clothing—

*The stream runs even during the dry season, he says.
The devil needs water to do his laundry.*

I wash my hands and mouth, sticky with yellow
pulp in the oily water and think of parasites,

the Devil's hands, reptilian and red, monkey-like
with short whiskers and a turquoise scrotum—

like vervets who threaten us from behind
a viney thicket. White eyelids flash hotly

as they lung toward us, the human intruders.

July 4th in Kedougou

Josh and I ride his *moto* from *Le Bedik*
where we feasted on cornichons and vodka
in the miners' air-conditioned suite,
to the Peace Corp House
where barefoot Americans dance
and wrestle in the dirt. The girls
ignore Josh's advances— a man
from Brooklyn who studies chimpanzees
will not satisfy their desire
to save the world, starting here
in this poor town, where they pass out
in tangled heaps, on hammocks
without mosquito nets.

Maralel

Dust-covered and travel-swollen
we enter this foreign land of green
grass and pines. The dry riverbed

and stretches of bare-boned desert
stick to us, the dust in our hair,
the bloated bellies of drought.

In Maralel I want to forget
their watery eyes, the steel rattling
roof of the church where they sing

to a God who must not hear them.
We enter Samburuland after the rains,
honeysuckle and cold, the petrol

smell of lorries stranded on mud-slick
mountain roads. At least the dust is gone
the air fresh with trees and water.

Under tarnished camel derby plaques
that hang from the guest house walls,
I sit and wait for the liquor to come

deeper into my head. After weeks bent
over pits of pottery shards and fossils,
all we want are cheeseburgers, whiskey.

Outside, a Samburu man plays a song
over and over again, on his *nchamuke*,
a song birthed from the monotony

of stars and camel harnesses, spitting
and neck flailing, out of a sadness
he keeps like a small treasure, bronze

serpent jewelry laid out for us to buy.

The Lion Darter

She eases her hallucinating lion to sleep
for a new radio-collar, DNA, a snip of ear,
and some advice— *give the tail a yank first,*

don't ever approach toward the mouth,
that's the sharp end! Her skeletal frame
animates as she shows off her gun,

ribs and nipples emerge under a thin
camisole— *lions aren't just the dumb*
blonds of the savanna. With a ketamine

concoction— *it's a bit cowboy, we're guessing*
the weight on these animals. She pulls a barbed
dart heat from the lion's coarse skin,

stroking his main, she pushes the claws
out, *just for fun.* Her upper lip curls
to expose mouth and teeth. I notice

she is all skin and bone, as she takes off
her sunglasses, lays down her gun.

What to do With an Elephant's Tusks

They shot an elephant who broke its leg, Ollimellie tells me,
forest green uniform starched, with shoulder pads too big
for his narrow body. In the distance, trumpet of their mourning

song like the cry of gods. I follow the scent of rotten blood
through savanna at dusk, where clouds fall like knives into acacia
dripping their black shadows. Ollimellie's long arm, ivory rings

on his fingers, extends slowly, like a marabou stork's wing.
The carcass, a heap of rubber, white vulture excrement frosted
down the ribs. I stare into the open belly, breathing through

a handkerchief so not to choke on the decay. Flat round feet
stick into the air like tree stumps. Locals took the intestines—
purple coils filled with damp grasses and broken flowers. Blunt

ends of ivory the rangers lopped off to deter poachers, tusks
that once unfurled into points sharp enough to peel bark
off a baobab to eat the pulp inside, to dig for roots, water, salt.

The Day Mangosteens Ripen
for Tracy Youngster

A change in light
drew us outside,
a knife still in your hand
from slicing mangoes.

The blade glinted
with sticky juice
from fruit as orange
as the sky, sky
as orange as your hands,
the knife, our tiger kitten.

Something happened that day
a still point in mid-summer
when mangosteens
in the tree by the greenhouses
started to ripen
their imperial purple.

We lay on our backs
sky mirrored against the blade
in puddles beside
the bird of paradise,
orange petals
like concentrated sky.

We'd waited so long
for that moment,
mangosteens' rind-skin like wet
paint, the inside citrusy
and peach textured, as white
as polished bird bone
placed upon the altar
of our northern tongues.

3

Heirloom

A buck walked here, his hooves pressed to wet sand,
like the brittle skin of my grandmother,
she who has become the spoiled milk in the fridge
the canned ham, piles of pine cones
her children have left at the back door.

In the half frozen creek bed, a shard from a green-
rimmed plate that belonged once to my great-
grandmother. The buck's antlers could be gnarled
wood, yet these are velvet and branching, they breathe
faster than any mammal bone. Calcified, they clear
snow to eat the vegetation beneath.

My grandmother planted a garden every spring,
before her fingers became stiff and white,
and all of her things, now ours.

Physics
for Marcos

I

When we were younger, he wanted three things— a pinball machine, a mansion, a quetzal. To pay the rent, he keeps his desk job instead of returning to school

this spring— I've moved away and left him to the city where his mother is buried, where his brother comes home. Memories keep in a blue tin under his bed—

Guatemala— birthplace of his parents, somewhere far away from Bayonne or New Brunswick, a true Eden floats between three volcanoes, the quetzal

with its fuzzy green head and red breast. Side by side in his apartment, I note how dark hairs puncture his cheek and chin, how this makes him look older.

II

It is my mother now with a scar across her breast, and I cannot even call him through the points of stars, the flowers I meant to send to his mother's hospital

bed— they would have been roses, pink and yellow, like the ones she wore in her dark curly hair before his birth. Will there be emptiness on the other end,

will I hear the budding of trees in his city's park, the burst of my brother's eardrums, or the fire extinguisher our professor used like a rocket with roller

blades on, to teach us a lesson about physics that I've forgotten. Even on Saturday mornings when the groundhogs would scuttle across the lawn at Busch,

and I begged him, *Let's go outside!* He made sure I studied, he made sure I passed. Now, not even the windowless buildings keep us, where he taught me how

to solve problems— the incline plane string and pulley negligible mass.

Time and Distance

Driving with a fellow anthropologist
through the flat land of central Iowa—
starved for forest and screech of wildlife,

she wears Africa on her face, the orange dust
upturned from parched roadsides colors
the creases on her forehead, around her eyes

even when she declares, *There's something to say
about soil this black*, a fragment of wetlands
where red-winged blackbirds rise from cattails.

They gleam white against a corn silk sun,
above wooded ravines, Coralville Dam's
spillway apron and flood-torn limestone.

She takes me to a desolation of exposed rock,
fossil gorge where students nail silver place-markers
next to brachiopods, crinoids and sea lilies,

worm burrows from shallow Devonian waters—
375 million years ago crystal sank and slept
through topsoil and sediment, prairie and tillage.

She shows me the evidence of something different,
now I can touch these coral head colonies,
even as my oiled fingertips rub out their existence.

What Veronica Told Me

Birdsong and engine firing up
 the clouded sky, the trees stripped
 of color, we've lost everything.

Nothing is gone. Nothing is permanent.

I can see what is sweet, like an earring,
 or tiny bone
 not the diamonds but the frames.

incus, malleus Listen.

I drink not my own sweat,
 but something on the moon.

*When the mind dissolves and can come
 rest in the heart
 is when truth can be told.*

I close my eyes as water rushes into me
 I will remember to breathe

before breath is gone.

Winter, Summer

Eucalyptus smoke burns below Mt. Kenya clouds
while I shiver in my tent, dream of our bare shoulders.

Sun freckles splash your skin, and the tattoo heron
that cranes its neck over your back, its eyes primitive

rings that always seem to find my eyes when our bodies
entwine on another continent. And like the elephant,

who marches in the valleys below this mountain
searching for food, I will never forget the taste

of something edible, salty and scaled, a fish down
my gullet. Our shoulders reflect in cloud, my cold hair,

the mountain winter. Dreams catch in wild olive trees,
the shaggy caped fur of black and white monkeys. The heron

drinks and dives with you on its back. My tongue sticks
to the roof of my mouth. In the distance I hear trees

crash and fall, uprooted eucalyptus that the elephants detest.

Theories of Fire
for J.W.K. Harris

Did lightning strike this red earth?

Here is your hearth (come in under the light
of this red earth) share with me a hot meal
safe from predators in a fire-lit cave.

Chew the burnt flesh, like silk in your stomach
to fatten your brain. Bask in recent culture—
on a leopard-drawn chariot— a poet, an artist,

a sculptor. Crocodile footprints committed
to the shore's vast memory, along the heat-
cracked river, a digesting python, your wild

plums and pounded bone, quartz and ocher,
a handful of berries, some flaked stone.
Even chimpanzees do not run from fire.

Field School with Kate

I

We drove into town
some nights
to dance
with cobblestones
under our feet

fennel seeds stuck
in your smile
from a heart-shaped
pocket of paan.

You passed me one,
the white tablecloth
glowed like a sea
of light between us—

we'd been used to
eating in our laps.

II

We laughed in a tent
of two men
who wanted
to be doctors.

You were drunk,
a quadruplet of voices
played in waves—

ours the swell
theirs resolute,
a crash against
the shore—

echo and suck
of a purple ocean.

III

After sunset, Muslim men
dressed in white emerge
from wooden mosques
to eat dates.

On the ride back
to camp, I pretend
to sleep
as you stroke my hair.

I think of vervet monkeys
who roam the beach
smart enough to unzip
and raid our tents.

Reading the Bhagavad Gita in Senegal

We pray before eating,
pick our spoons
off the silver lid
fill our hearts
with tamarind seeds,
a meager sardine bone—
what we think of as refuse,
another casualty of war,
preparation of peace, real
as the mound of red rice
in our bowl,
the baby I hold,
a hollow beating place
in the crown
of her head.

Study Day with Kate

We float near the shore,
two small islands, nipples
turn up toward the sun,
volcanoes rise from the sea
bed. Moonscape beyond
sand, but near the spit
Topis gallop to the water's edge.
While the other students
are busy memorizing teeth
of bovid, skull of hominid,
we've chosen to bathe
in the sweet alkaline,
to forget the calloused bones,
to float in the Jade Sea.

stuck

in dark brown clay.

Chapped lips around a gourd
of boiled coffee husks, sorghum mush.

Beware the thorny acacia thicket
that leaves white scratched skin.

Heaps
of
snail
shells.

W i d e l y
spaced time
stained with ancient charcoal.

Offshore,

Nile perch

sink

in

jade.

Motherland

Everything is brighter here—
the night stars, Atlas's burden
at the root of our skulls, the essence
of prickly pear, the nests
of ancient bone, where lightning
struck the earth and man knew fire.

Where human eyes first watched
in awe as the scalding bulb of sun
uprooted from the salt-licked horizon
rose like a God through low-lying
mammoth clouds, algae-covered
over Lake Turkana, begging
to be worshipped.

What Lightning Sings About

I

Every ten seconds I could see the glow
of tomatoes in the garden and grasshopper
silhouettes on the walls of my tent.

The lightning came closer, took on the voice
of a man who sang of crystal and wine,
his mother, the brick walls of their home—
I could imagine his childhood this way

the kinds of pictures on the walls, colors
dulled by late afternoon sun rubbed against
two women in white cotton dresses.

I tell him secrets too.

II

The lightning came closer— I wait for the sound
the crunch of boots on dry grass, alfalfa
ravaged by grasshoppers, the brittle heads
of coneflowers like bouquets of bone.

The grasshoppers clear a way for him
under the shelter of a locust tree where I draw
each different type of grass. He talks about music
with the same insistence as my father, slumped

over in the dark, wine spilled on the carpet
my mother would clean in the morning
with a cold, damp kitchen sponge.

My Brother and I

listen to rain start and stop as we play cards. Ants crawl
single file or by twos, threes across the center of the walls

in the unfurnished apartment. Corpses gather everywhere.
My brother hates it, the ants and cockroaches of the tropics.

I have grown resigned to wipe water from the kitchen sink
they flock to like antelopes around a watering hole.

When my brother is gone, my nest will empty, me alone,
floating in a city, floating on an island in the great Pacific

Sea. We lived nine months in the same warm womb, only
two years apart. The umbilical cord strangled me, but he

was less fortunate. As an infant his seizure-jolted brain
never had the chance to recover. Our dangly limbs and long

fingers, blue eyes and blond hair— it could have been me.
Still life: my brother and I sit above a florist shop, outside,

a giant peeling warehouse with broken windows, a towering
coconut palm. Trap door on the roof, there are still secrets here,

remnants of things old as stone. My center of balance wobbles.
The pull of Earth, the pull of home, the pull of my brother.

I want to be of this place, I want to be elsewhere. Stark lava fields,
slick mossy gulches. The love and loath of Pele and Kamapua'a.

I look out our window toward the lovely towers of a Buddhist
temple, framed in layers of green hills, out beyond the city,

the floating hills of Kamapua'a.

Moon, I Salute You

who knew of the stones
in my mother's breast—
a billiard ball in the right
one, you who are not full
tonight, my fear is enough
to color your dark side
orange when you sink
into the sea, your face
mottled with the suction
cups of squid. Dissolve
beneath diatom meadows
as we reach depths
where your luminosity
means the absence of loss—
Follow lantern-headed fish
and release glass worms
from their granite prisons.
We will fight like women
unafraid of our enemies.

The Custard Apple

After weeks of canned and boiled foods,
a produce stand on the road from Mombasa
is a happy sight. I point to a bright green
heart-shaped fruit and a man splits open
the quilted skin. Soft white flesh melts
in my mouth like a cure, a million year old discovery.

Bone Flower

As wild plums ripen on the periphery,
I will tell you— do not try to dig me up
among layers of pressed prairie and flower

fermenting petals and fossil pollen
thousands of years beneath your feet
layers of spirit, the smell of nectar.

Time for you to tend your own soul,
sharpen blades, test the soil, ache for me.

Once I give back what I've borrowed
the promise of life and marrow,
my body will be bounteous again.

When the creek thaws and mussel shells
burrow out of the sand, when prairie returns
dropseed and little bluestem,

I will be one of the smooth asters that grow.

When the land lies fallow, I will be ready
for you, the flower with bones in its stem.

AFTERWORD

The rainy season was just beginning when Kelly and I arrived in Bofeto village, green and glistening against the forest after a midday shower. Mud-slick mountain roads sent our land rover fish tailing through fields of cattle. We slid past bicyclists and into the neon-green savanna, just sprouting with new grasses that seemed to glow in delight of the sun. After the dry season had left the country barren and thirsty, the rain added fresh color to the once dusty landscape. Wooden fences, cattle enclosures, and mud hut compounds with thatched roofs lined the roadsides. This seemed like an idyllic village, surrounded by pristine forests where chimpanzees could make a home. Then Kelly pointed to the hills. They looked lumpy and shaved in places, like they'd gotten a bad haircut. The hills— which contain caves where chimps rest when temperatures rise in the dry season— had been mangled by mining roads.

We crossed a bridge wide enough for construction equipment, leaning heavily to one side over the murky river. A hand carved wooden canoe tied loosely to a tree on the shore appeared as though it would be swept away if the current picked up. Bulldozed roads replaced vague dirt trails, and 'pristine' forest, became infiltrated by heavy machinery and mining camps. More and more chimp habitat is destroyed each time Kelly returns to Senegal to conduct her research on habitat use and ranging patterns, and there is seemingly little she can do about it. Everything changes and everything will come to an end.

The impacts of mining in Senegal, and throughout West Africa in general, became a reality to me not only when I saw large scale mining operations that left huge gaping holes in the earth, but also when we dined with the individuals who worked for these companies. When a mining company wants to start a new mine in Senegal, they make a contract with the government, typically declaring that after the mine has been

exploited, they will be responsible for reclamation. Mine reclamation is supposed to mean that the gaping hole will be filled in and the landscape rehabilitated— topsoil put down and trees planted. As a geologist disclosed to us at the bar in *Le Bedik* Hotel, Kedougou, this step is often overlooked, and mining companies say they've surpassed their budget, pay a fine to the government, and quietly leave the country. The ArcelorMittal mining camp is adjacent to Kelly's field site. Due to the rains, the chain-link fenced compound seemed deserted aside from a few guards and their dogs. Dump trucks would get stuck in these muddy roads.

Humans are sometimes considered to be the only animals capable of morality, the ability to differentiate our intentions and actions between those that are good and bad. Yet our identity as moral beings seems absurd amidst the environmental catastrophes our actions have triggered, actions that have inflicted harm on both ourselves and our fellow inhabitants of the planet. How will we describe great apes to our grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, when these creatures are no longer around, except maybe in zoos? How will we explain to them that once, hairy creatures whose expressions resembled those of humans lived in the wild, but then went extinct? We won't read them scientific papers. We'll tell them stories, and hopefully, read them poems.

Kelly monitors this distinct nook of Senegal in an attempt to determine the effects of mining on chimp habitat. Here, the forests are not only home to chimps and other wildlife, but to some of the world's most desired minerals. ArcelorMittal is the largest steel producing company in the world, and in the Falémé region of Senegal, they've made a contract to mine for iron ore, a key ingredient in steel. On Forbes magazine's 'Most Powerful People' list, Lakshmi Mittal, chairman of the company, is number 47 of the 70 individuals named. His daughter's wedding was the most expensive in recorded history— a 60 million dollar affair.

Mineral mining is a key aspect of economic growth, as Mr. Mittal and the company website advocate, but it is also extremely dangerous and destructive. ArcelorMittal's website claims that they are concerned with sustainability and safe working conditions, but what they don't show are pictures of the open pit mines left to erode and mar the

earth. They don't show pictures of children washing gold in mercury with their bare hands. They don't show mines long since abandoned, a resource vanished from the African earth.

In the village, we were greeted by our host, Smiti Damfakha, his four wives, and eighteen children. One wife was displaced from her hut at the center of the compound, and our bags were shuttled inside, assembly-line style, by the children. Donald Duck sheets were tucked into a wooden bed, worn linoleum covered the dirt floor, and stacks of bowls were kept on a small table. There was even a motorcycle out front, all indicators of the small amounts of wealth local people make mining. Damfakha was extremely proud of his motorcycle and always asked Kelly for gas. Many local people work artisanal gold mines, small-scale mining that often relies on rudimentary and toxic methods, like mercury washing, to extract metals. Despite Damfakha's efforts as a cattle herder, hunter, and part-time miner, which makes him rather affluent in his small community, none of his daughters will ever have a wedding that costs anywhere near 60 million dollars. Most often, he won't even have enough gas to ride his motorcycle out into the bush to hunt for dinner.

Damfakha welcomed us with bowl of sour milk and sugar, a delicacy in the village, the consistency of thin yogurt with cottage cheese chunks. Our empty stomachs gurgled in delight. The children peered into the narrow hut opening. They examined our backpacks and equipment— Toughbook computers, GPSs, camera traps— and shoed chickens from trying to enter. It felt absurd all that we had brought for only a few weeks. Despite the rains, it was still extraordinarily hot, and animals that were kept in the housing compound attracted a plague of flies. We fanned ourselves with thatched mats and greeted Damfakha's large family. They gathered into the crowded hut, eager to see why the *toubabs* were here. This is the village Kelly calls home during her stay.

The next morning, I pulled a mosquito net off the rickety wooden bed Kelly and I shared, and looking for my boots, found two dead rabbits on the doorstep. Damfakha's first wife came inside the hut and smiled at me. She gathered some cooking utensils and lifted the rabbits by their ears. The sky was still dark with a few lingering stars as I watched her light a fire outside the hut and start to boil water.

Kelly and I quickly dressed by the light of our headlamps and prepared our packs for a day out in the bush. We filled our extra water bottles, put sunscreen on our faces, and made coffee. Kelly checked the batteries on her GPS, and decided on a few nesting sites she wanted to visit from last year. One site she listed as *la place du baobab geant*—the place of the giant baobab. There she had found over 40 chimp nests, old and new, and determined that this was a nesting site they had been coming back to for years.

Damfakha arrived in a sweat-worn button-up shirt and knit cap and took us into patches of woodland forests below the shaved mountains. We shared handfuls of peanuts and little bags of biscuits for breakfast, as the sun rode up over the mountains and washed through the savanna, making the grass appear translucent. Dew soaked through our boots and socks within minutes.

We navigated stretches of savanna pocked with mushroom-shaped termite mounds and clusters of white flowers, petals long like lilies. Every so often we stopped for water or a bathroom break, but Kelly was eager to get to *la place du baobab geant* before lunch and the heat of midday. We spoke little, but occasionally Damfakha would ask for new boots (he only had sandals), or new linoleum floors for his wives' huts. Kelly agreed to bring him work boots the next time she visited, but demurred about the new floors.

Kelly spotted the giant baobab—the thick trunk was wide and buttressed, the sparse limbs like an intricate root system tethered into the sky. Male chimps will pound their fists on tree buttresses like these to get the attention of the group. However, beside the giant, no other trees remained. The earth surrounding the baobab was scorched and ashy. Chimp nests, and all the trees that contained them, were gone. What was once a forest that chimps utilized for food and sleeping trees, had been cut down and burned for cultivation. Kelly's mouth dropped open as she stopped in her tracks and scanned the desiccated earth. She threw her backpack to the ground and ran through the 'field'.

A bare-breasted woman in a long blue warp skirt adorned with images of fish bone, planted peanuts amidst blackened tree stumps. She glanced over at us briefly before resuming her work. Kelly started to cry.

"There were 40 nests here last summer," she whispered, hiding her face so Damfakha wouldn't see her tears.

Chimps returned to this place often, a sanctuary guarded by the baobab, now lone survivor in what will become a field of peanuts local people use to make a traditional sauce.

“I know people need land to cultivate, but why did they have to choose this spot? Why here?” Kelly asked.

There were still a few trees left on the periphery, and a number of old nests, but Kelly reckoned that the chimps had been forced to find a new place to go.

She wiped her eyes with her shirtsleeve and pulled out her field notebook. She lifted her chin and diligently wrote down the GPS coordinates and time, then simply: ‘forest gone’. We were seeing first hand the effects of human encroachment on what was previously considered wildlife habitat. Can chimps viably share space with humans? How long can their displacement go on before there is simply no room left on the planet for them?

“They’ve found somewhere else,” Kelly decided, examining the blue swaths of forest on her GPS. “I want to check out the gallery forests to the north. I haven’t been there yet, but I’m sure there’s chimps.”

Despite setbacks like these, Kelly stays inspired. She believes that chimpanzees have a place in the future of our planet. She knows that people need to feed their families, and protecting chimp habitat is not an immediate priority for them. She has hopes of initiating conservation education programs in local schools to teach children the value of protecting forests and the animals that reside there. Conservation is an occupation for the starry-eyed youth. You need to be infinitely optimistic to believe you can contribute to the survival of an endangered species on a planet with limited resources.

“There are losses we just have to let go of,” Kelly said, turning away from the giant baobab. “This year there will be peanuts instead of chimp nests, but many years from now, the forest will start to come back.”

And with the forest will come fruit, and with fruit, chimpanzees.

Another day in Bofeto, I got on the back of Kelly’s motorcycle and we rode through the bush, over the ArcelorMittal bridge, and into gallery forests to the north.

The USGS map promised stretches of dense forest. We hiked through savanna-woodland mosaics purposely not looking for chimpanzees, only evidence of their presence. As Kelly taught me, habituating primates could put them in danger. Besides, we can learn all we need to know from the group of Fongoli chimps habituated by Dr. Jill Pruetz for that purpose. Also, Kelly had recently begun putting camera traps in places where she'd documented feeding activity, and has some wonderful footage of chimps bringing fruit into caves. These wildlife surveillance systems take pictures at even the slightest of movements, and allow Kelly to observe behaviors she otherwise would have missed. She's even gotten footage of a curious lion sniffing the camera lens.

As we crossed the savanna into gallery forest, baboons barked in alarm, those in the foreground statuesque as they watched us stumble through vines and twisted lianas.

"There has to be nests here," Kelly said as we turned on our GPSs, wrote down our coordinates and began looking.

In waterproof field notebooks we recorded the time, latitude, longitude, number of nests in one place, how old they were, and what habitat they'd been found in. Kelly considers nests 'fresh', if they were built the previous night, 'old' if they appeared to be from a few weeks ago, and 'ancient' if they were made months or even years ago. Instead of trying to see chimps, we sought out remnants of their existence—nests, feces, places they'd left discarded fruit, caves they'd rested in.

We descended dense wet green hills and sound seemed to drown away. All I heard was our footsteps, water falling from leaves, birds chirping. A flash of orange antelope crossed our path, and immediately we found nests. Many of them were fresh. Kelly spotted footprints on the edge of a termite mound, and we searched the ground for feces, which were filled with Saba seeds.

"They were here eating just this morning," Kelly said, poking a pile of dung with a stick.

We left the bush late that afternoon with notebooks full of fresh nests counts. On the back of Kelly's motorcycle, wind dried the sweat on my face. We traversed rock studded mining roads that cut through stretches of savanna and forest, making accessible land that had been known only to local hunters a few year ago.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” Kelly yelled suddenly. Damfakha’s motorcycle in front of us had swerved into the grass, and a few yards away, a series of hulking black masses knuckle-walked through a patch of termite mounds.

“There they are! It’s a whole group of them!” Damfakha pointed excitedly.

Kelly and I both jumped off our motorcycle and let it fall into the road.

“Come on! Let’s go!” Damfakha motioned for us to follow him, but Kelly begged him to come back.

She frantically grasped for her binoculars in attempts to get a group count. How many males and females, how many adults and juveniles? How many mothers with infants? Eight black chimpanzees, muscled shoulders poised above the neon grass, walked single file away from us. A juvenile sprinted to the front of the group.

“It would be so easy to follow them,” Kelly said, “but we just can’t.”

Her hands shook as she held the binoculars to her face. I grabbed for mine and got a brief glimpse of the backside of an adult male at the end of the line before they disappeared into the forest. We stood at the edge of the road, silent and breathless, our boots toeing the grass as if some invisible wall were keeping us out of the bush. It’s best they remain afraid of humans, I told myself, particularly now that their forests are being replaced by mines. As much as Kelly would have loved to know where they were going, she was satisfied just to know that they are still here.

NOTES

The Genies of Kharakhena

genies, both friendly and protective of the forests, that used to guard the mountains of Kharakhena before people stopped believing in them, and corporate mining companies destroyed areas of once sacred forest.

Ardi

On October 1, 2009, paleontologists formally announced the discovery of the relatively complete fossil of *Ardipithecus ramidus*, nicknamed Ardi. A research team headed by Tim White found fossil fragments of this specimen between 1992-1994. The fossils were dated to between 4.32 to 4.51 million years ago.

Spear-Wielding Chimpanzees Snack on Skewered Bushbabies

In 2007, primatologist Jill Pruetz reported in *Current Biology* that savanna chimpanzees in Fongoli, Senegal habitually make and use tools to hunt vertebrate prey. Before this time, the modification and use of tools during hunting was believed to be a uniquely human trait among primates.

Motherland

Also known as the Jade Sea, located in Kenya's Rift Valley, is the world's largest "permanent" desert lake. The area is regarded by many anthropologists as the cradle of humankind due to the abundance of hominid fossils unearthed.

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