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The Fine Art of Monsters in Literature

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**THE FINE ART OF MONSTERS
IN LITERATURE**

Charles Garvin, B.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood
College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Writing

2007

ABSTRACT

This thesis will focus on the assimilation of my life experiences that ultimately result in the creation literary monsters. The following introduction defines my development as a writer through explorations of poetry and fiction. Traumatic life experiences as both a child and as an adult, coupled with an excellent education, has augmented my writing style towards literary horror.

A section of poetry comes after the introduction, which is a serious experiment by me to delve into the finer arts of pattern making. The fictional piece, *Beyond Road's End*, which follows the poetry, is primarily the object of my focus, which is literary fiction. It is a true-life story, made fictional, of my adventure in the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania. In it, I seek to amplify the truth, as I see it, regarding man's relation to nature.

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Charles Garvin, B.A.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

2007

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro, Poet, Chairperson and Advisor, Lindenwood
University

Professor Marly Swick, Novelist, University of Missouri-Columbia

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my brother, David Garvin. He was the only person that ever truly believed in me.

Acknowledgements

I thank the following for their unselfish and kind assistance during my gradual development as a writer: Dr. Michael Castro, poet, Dr. Lynn McMahon, poet, Dr. Marly Swick, novelist.

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The Fine Art of Monsters In Literature

Creators of *Fine Art* are governed by a fleeting consciousness of universals, or what Emerson calls “immortal ichors” which they struggle to extract and translate through the mediums of music, literature, painting or sculpture. Poets painfully glean the image of their revelations and attempt to imitate them faithfully to the page. Indeed, the reading of a great poem is likened to a first love. That love brings the present moment to its exaltation where leaves, birds and our bodies are immersed in the smell, sound, and colors of the *now* better than it had been before, and when it is gone, in its wake comes the dark tides of uncertainty. This is what truly great poetry strives to imitate, to give us that fulfillment of the way life should be in our minds, an affirmation of the possibility of perfection. It takes tremendous courage to push away all distraction and stand naked by the ocean of creativity where winged imagination rules, even at the risk of courting isolation or madness. As writers we must become obsessed with the children of our mind, for they are the universal crying to be born, and after it’s written, let them stand glistening and beautiful or demonic and dreadful.

In the rubble of endless commentary a person is bombarded with through a lifetime of learning, it is somewhat daunting to find an original voice that has anything new to say. The “Why would anybody listen to me?” syndrome freezes many inspired writers into countless years of inactivity, eventually drying up their creative tongues. Every writer must struggle to unclasp the shackles of that insecurity and expose the turning points of their lives; only then can there be exposure to the universal grumblings most likely all of us feel.

To find my particular voice, I had to journey through a lifetime of gathered experiences before a consideration for writing anything that interested me or probably anyone else could occur. For some reason, my mind rustles among the shadows of antiquity, prompting me to walk through the catacombs of Alexandria, to bend brush in the jungles of Africa, and as a US Marine, to endure the hardships of war; all in a search of myself. Only now do I feel qualified to write.

Strange dreams of powerful men and monstrous women throng my unconscious. I hear their beastly utterances behind trees. When I sleep there is always the somber throb of drums summoning me to darkness. I return to the same shadowed glade under swaying oaks where copper cauldrons flicker. Past this, shimmering leaves sweep down a cobbled avenue where two dogs fight in the middle of a road flanked by grass huts. To the right, a woman stands in a doorway holding a slumping infant; dripping fat black arms. I kneel awed before her feet.

I do not know what these things mean, but the challenge is to choose the medium or canvasses that best paints the mind's revelation. For me, literature is the canvass, imagination the paint, and courage the strength. By writing, hidden paths are revealed from what appears to be an impenetrable jungle. Therefore, it is pivotal to choose the form that best imitates the revelation the artist is experiencing. This paper will focus on my poetical inspirations, fictional creativity, and the need to create *monsters* in literature.

On April 18th, 1983 a young freshman at Central Missouri State was browsing the books in the Kirkpatrick library. He was not there to conduct scholarly research. He was there to meet girls. On the third floor in a cozy area known as the "stacks," there were two attractive women sitting at a large wooden table studying. The young man edged closer to get a better look at them and was careful to seem preoccupied, searching for some artificial reference number. His manner was casual, with no hint of predatory leering; he merely had time to spare and was choosing a book from the metal shelf. While pretending to read and hoping to be noticed, he heard the girls giggle. He wondered if they had spotted something odd on his personage. He glanced down, making sure there were no rude betrayals of his sexuality. No, all was in order. So what was the pretty red head laughing at? She kept glancing at him and whispering to her friend who in turn cast freckled glances at him over her shoulder. Finally, the thickheaded freshman got the hint and

observed that the book he was holding was upside down. The girls knew what he was up to. He began reading the book in earnest to avoid complete disaster, turning it towards the end:

And old King Priam was first to see him coming,
 surging over the plain, blazing like the star
 that rears at the harvest, flaming up in brilliance,---
 far outshining the countless stars in the night sky,
 that star they call Orion's Dog---brightest of all
 but a fatal sign emblazoned on the heavens,
 it brings such killing fever down on wretched men.
 So the bronze flared on his chest as on he raced—
 and the old man moaned, flinging both hands,
 beating his head and groaning deep he called,
 begging his son who stood before the gates,
 unshakable, furious to fight Achilles to the death (542).

There was an unnerving familiarity about the scene. He read until his feet hurt from standing too long. He glanced around and noticed the two girls had gone, and indeed, the sun had set.

The title of the book was *The Anger of Achilles*, and as the reader has long since guessed, the young man is the author of this paper. Before that day, I had never read a poem, as I was bent on being a violent fool who took out my anger on the university rugby fields, with little care for literature. But I found a home in the Iliad with its tidal passions and human drama that seemed to match the emotional turmoil broiling inside of me. It was the inspiration of Homer that first prompted me to write and later the voices of Virgil, and Apollonius of Rhodes.

To disseminate my imagination to forms that I could apply to the page, I first read John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, having loved his

book, *Grendel*, feeling the prose in it were superior to any modern literature I had previously read. His honest, pull no punches approach in explaining what good writing was, made me aspire to reach his high expectations. Gardner states:

...most of the books one finds in drugstores, supermarkets or even in small town libraries are not well written at all; a smart chimp with a good creative-writing teacher and a real love of sitting around banging a typewriter could have written books vastly more interesting and elegant. Most grown-up behavior, when you come right down to it, is decidedly second-class. People don't drive their cars as well, or wash their ears as well, or eat as well, or even play the harmonica as well as they would if they had sense. This is not to say people are terrible and should be replaced by machines; people are excellent and admirable creatures; efficiency isn't everything. But for the serious young writer who wants to get published, it is encouraging to know that most professional writers out there are push-overs. The instruction here is not for every kind of writer...what is said here, whatever use it may be to others, is said for the elite; that is, for serious literary artists (12).

His tough-minded approach, while intimidating, is exactly what a serious writing student needs to hear. Stabbing quotes such as: "*Not everyone is capable of writing junk fiction: It requires an authentic junk mind.*" sprinkle his book. Sadly, I never got a chance to meet him before his death in the 1970's. Even now, I consider him my first writing coach, and consult his book regularly. In truth, most writing instructors are too kind when commenting on their student's work. I require a firm but kind

hand to point out precisely where my faults lie so I can fix them.

Although it always hurts to be criticized, if the criticism is done with tact, any writer worth his salt will get over it and continue working. The pressure writers put on themselves to be brilliant can become a problem. Meeting others expectations is a heavy ape to carry and writers must strive to keep that gorilla as small as possible. A certain amount of emotional callousness and even arrogance is needed to forge ahead when encountering criticism.

During the winter of 2004, while attending the University of Missouri-Columbia, my Advanced Poetry instructor, Lynne McMahon, challenged me to confront myself in regards to poetic expression. I discovered an unconscious avoidance to revealing too much about myself for fear of being ridiculed in some way. I was also concerned that what I had to say would not be that interesting. With only nine students in the class, we were able to read our poems aloud on a weekly basis for critique. Throughout the semester, she kept saying, "Where are you in this poem, Charles?" or "Is your intended audience dead people?" I was writing narrative poetry about Greek mythological characters but made no references to myself or current events. Being the excellent teacher she was, Lynne tailored the critiques by giving me poetry examples from published authors that used similar epic epitaphs but paired with their personal experience. One example is seen in Rosanna Warren's book *Departure* from her poem *Arrival*:

That's how a god descends from a mountain peak
in Somothrace: startled attention stirs him, then
three strides vault him down to the plain as oak roots shake
and boulders lurch from the cliff face, vomiting down
its loosed jaw of scree: that's how a god descends
...how grief will come
Any day, any ordinary hour, when all we see
is a peculiar, shivering brilliance in the air
like a premonition of migraine; and no one can see
later, how in such a flash, the dark came here (23).

Warren uses a mythological depiction of the god Poseidon vaulting from his mountain as a vehicle to describe the tragic coming of grief, "like the premonition of a migraine." With examples like these, I was able to see that joining antiquity with my viewpoint was possible. I learned that unless I muster the courage to open the wound and bleed my intimate humanity onto the page, my writing will never amount to anything. I had to break the rock hard veneer of self preservation.

Finding time to write and a place to compose is a huge task and one to be taken seriously. The responsibility to personal finances, pets, romantic relationships, and to our own downtime is daunting. The labyrinth of family demands necessitates firm selfishness to the art or nothing will be accomplished. Regrettably, the high price of writing is isolation. When

composing, a writer must give it his all, and with family, give them their all. Undoubtedly, friction and lack of understanding will evolve between friends and loved ones but one must carry on. Many in working-class America feel writing is a lazy occupation, one for bohemian misfits, and this is true from a capitalist's viewpoint. But any social stigma attached to writing as a lazy art, especially in the Midwest, must be shrugged off. The stoic philosopher, Epictetus, said:

Never depend on the admiration of others. There is no strength in it. Personal merit cannot be derived from an external source. It is not to be found in your personal associations, nor can it be found in the regard of other people. It is a fact of life that other people, even people who you love, will not necessarily agree with your ideas, understand you, or share your enthusiasm. Grow up! Who cares what other people think about you! Create your own merit! (12)

To a certain degree, Epictetus's philosophy goes against the grain of American social convention because there exists a cultural paranoiac need in Americans to explain their every action to others. Whenever people meet, there is an immediate compulsion to exchange resumes in order to justify one's existence. This is a waste of creative energy. Art is a tender business requiring a shielded sensibility. Explaining artistic endeavors to automatons is like talking to dogs. They turn their heads this way and that, and then wander off for a treat. To see clearly, writers of serious literary fiction must stay on higher ground and not be caught up in the muck of dualism. Ralph Waldo Emerson inspires us with his essay *The Poet*:

The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without the impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart. For the Universe has three children, born at one time; the Knower, the Doer and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. These three are equal (261-262).

Poets are the creators of language and every word is a miraculous invention. They grasp the electrical paint from the universal collective and weave waking dreams from the sleeping minds of man. From this wellspring of imagination, governments are born and nations are formed, forged from the might of vision. Emerson states:

For poetry was written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of nations. (262-263)

Fiction chooses the reader. Through stories, the soul obtains the nourishment it needs for the life it *would* have. Reading literature compresses experience. If we could live a thousand years—there would be no need to read. We could parcel out ten of our lives over the span of ten centuries to gain the experience we need. But for now it seems, our

expiration date is 120 years, so we must peruse the shelves for second hand experience. When finding a book, it's more than the name of an author we seek, but more accurately a symbol; a seizing word, a phrase, a flash of color that ripples like a standard. We recognize it. We marvel at our luck for finding treasure in the wilderness. We say, "I know this, it is telling my story," and we feel the richer for it. Indeed, through the muck and pain of life, stories inspire us live on, even as we begin to falter. After Jack London had read the novel *Victory* by Joseph Conrad, he said, "I am glad that I am alive, if for no other reason, because of the joy of reading this book" (*Victory*, cover). By keeping faithful to the paths of our nature, we can walk through jungles of consumerism and find treasures sprinkled on the sparse brambles of capitalism. It is easy to be distracted by the voices of commercialism, but these are the mere cries of servants, not our masters, as they would have us believe. The artist should regard the shiny peddler as a barking dog on the other side of a fence.

At the age five my father abandoned the family. He was never heard of again until twenty-two years later when he turned up dead in a mortuary in Sacramento, California. When he had left, my mother took a retail clerk as her lover and later married him. He was physically abusive and made my brother and I pay for our youth with slaps, punches and bloody noses. In my limited understanding, I wrestled with the guilt of losing my father because of feeling he left on account of something that I

had done. To keep my sanity, I began exploring nature in the backyard and eventually undertook daily expeditions into the field. I turned inward during these years, discovered my mental strengths, and naturally fell into reading to further escape.

While in elementary school, the first book of fiction I bought was *Sinbad and the Seven Seas*. Sinbad's flair for handling insuperable odds with valor brightened my spirit and equipped me with a positive male role model that was sorely missing. I hungered for stories of adventure and violence to give me knowledge about how to overthrow the tyrant living in my house. Sinbad's problems mirrored my own and he always succeeded in overcoming his adversaries.

...and feeling very tired, upon reaching a certain quiet street, where a gentle breeze was blowing and rose water was sprinkled on the pavement, he sat down to rest for a while against the walls of a great house (4).

For a youngster, the above passage can sooth pain and seduced him to *become* the man sitting on the rose sprinkled pavement. No longer, as I read, did I belong to myself. The strange exotic deserts, the black haired dancing girls, the curved scimitars flashing in the sun, the creaking decks of ships, and the monsters, the all-important monsters helped me objectify my creature-stepfather.

Artists need their monsters, and so does humanity. There is in many the monstrous compulsion to murder people. It is an innate sense borne from the violence of the beginning of the universe. The molten fire still

dwells within us; a tremendous, tumultuous force not to confined to homicide, for it is the same wellspring for creativity. Sensing this, we create a semblance of this cosmic force through an ideal. Enter the monster, borne onto the page like an explosion—one we most dread of becoming, the hair radiating, mouth slavering, stinking beast. For those who allow themselves to be seduced to the destructive side of the force, the wail of the wind is an appeal from a wraith to join its dance macabre. Thus, artists objectify their fear of chaos through the creation of monsters.

In literature, John Gardner's *Grendel* serves as an example. *Grendel* was born from the epic poem *Beowulf*. While *Beowulf* is told from the side of men, *Grendel* is a monster's first person account of the epic, with of a flip-side study of humanity through the eyes of a fiend. The monster, Grendel, sees himself as a focus in the world of men: "a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in" (p. 80). He goes to the Dragon to ask where he fits into the world, whereby the dragon describes Grendel's affect upon man:

You improve them, my boy!
Can't you see that yourself?
You stimulate them! You make
them think and scheme. You drive
them to poetry, science, religion, all
that makes them what they are for as

long as they last. You are, so to
speak, the brute existent by which
they learn to define themselves.

(pp. 72-73)

From the vantage point of a monster, the artist can safely express his controversial beliefs because in fiction they are not his beliefs but an outsider's. The voice of fire prompts man to gain validation through creativity or murder. Beowulf is a professional soldier who obtains validation through murder, the killing of his fellow man and monsters. He creates order through institutionalized carnage. The poet obtains validation through the imitation of nature. He creates order through pattern making. Both ends attempt to bring order to the world by harnessing chaos. The artist weaves an understanding, the soldier kills all who oppose that understanding. Thus governments and gods are formed to support this illusion. In nature, a paper dollar is worth the price of a leaf.

All vocations are borne for either killing or creating. Society develops morals, laws and religion to negate the monster potential in people. Education simply reinforces the establishment of manners, and provides vocational training for the two sides, dark and light, destruction or creation, which is equal. For example, *construction* for development is actually *destruction*. Forests, swamps, and prairies are removed for the

progress of the species. Therefore, the other citizens of the world, what we label *flora and fauna*, are killed. On the other hand, music halts the outward looking progression of man's search for happiness, and forces introspection, which pauses destruction.

Increases in education do not necessarily lead to decreases in *monsterism*. Learned men have committed atrocities since time unmemorable. My brother, David, was a budding artist who wrote screenplays and produced his own movies. Yet he battled violent inclinations to murder people. He held a Bachelors' Degree in Journalism from Webster University in St. Louis. He was a logical, loving family man, but craved physical battle. This is very difficult for me to talk about, but I feel both disembodied and a part of Dave's death shadow somehow. My only comfort is in the thought that, in the estimate of the universe his death was an insignificant event. So in the explanation of man's creation of monsters, Dave's death is relevant. Let me explain dear reader. But first, you should understand that I loved him very deeply as a brother should. These are his last moments:

It is a warm March night and my brother is running down Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village; he is running for his life. He has just killed his man and his ears ring from the booms of his pistol. I can see from the street video that he has a strong, even pace, is timing his wind, and not running too fast as to wear himself out, or too slow as to be caught by police. He is running for the subway, and to home where his high-rise

apartment overlooks that old French whore in the harbor. His wallet lies on the bed in case he is killed. On March 15th, 2007 The New York Times reports:

Witnesses to last night's shooting described a wild scene in which as many as 30 shots were fired, creating pandemonium as patrons spilled out from Village watering holes like the Lion's Den and the Back Fence on a breezy springlike night. In one case, a comedy act in a basement club on Bleecker Street was briefly interrupted — although the show in fact went on. "I was in the middle of my set and I heard a series of pops and someone came running downstairs and said, 'A person is being shot outside,'" said Hassan Madry, 28, who was performing on stage at the Village Lantern. "I tried to calm everybody down. I told some of my jokes. You know, you got to go on with it."

As Dave runs, two auxiliary police officers, Nicholas T. Pekearo, 28, of Manhattan, and Yevgeniy Marshalik, 19, of Nassau County, flank him on the opposite side of the road. Though the video is grainy, I know what is about to happen, "Ah Oh," I think. "Don't trap, Dave—he'll kill you." I see Dave turn his head and snarl; it's that spastic animal spark that I know so well from childhood. He crosses the street in three strides and blows off the tops of the auxiliary officer's heads while they cower behind parked cars. I am repulsed, yet fascinated by Dave's grim precision. "This is my brother," I think. "How can this be my brother?" For some reason he turns back to where he shot his first man, Alfredo Romero Morales, 33, at De Marco's Pizzeria on MacDougal and West

Houston Streets. Nobody knows why he killed Morales. At this point, I lose him in the video as he runs out of the frame. There are only flashing lights in the direction he has gone. The street is empty; there is no sound on the tape. I realized with a grim chill that police are killing him at that moment. The NYC medical examiner later told me that police shot him 21 times. "Where?" I asked. "All over," he replied flatly.

"I need my illusions," my brother once said when I asked what he thought of Emerson's *On Self Reliance*. "Emerson is just—" He wiggled his fingers, suspending his arm in the air as if groping in the dark, his brow wrinkled, "I just need my illusions," he concluded with a sheepish smile. My first thought was that this was weakness, that he could not face reality. Now, months after his death, I mourn the simple, sweet humanity of his words. I realized too late that he needed his illusions to survive. And I, in my zealous quest for ultimate truth, may have unwittingly stripped away his coping tools; comprehending now, that in fact, we all need our illusions. Witnesses said bullets continued to spark near his body long after he was dead. It was as though police were trying to kill some supernatural force. He was no longer human to them. He had become the monster.

Grendel said, "All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal" (p. 157). Reality is nature: "The law of the world is a winter law; and casual" (p. 115). But Grendel's view is too terrible for most people. The *reality* is that we do need our *illusions*. Right or wrong, man needs

to order his world, and things have to die for that to be accomplished. Man is important or he would not be here. It is essential for man to label men, animals, and the unknown as monsters when those elements violate order. Just as essential is the creation of heroes, who are manifestations of that order, who come and destroy chaos. This duality of good and evil will always exist in our psyches. Literature supplies the patterns for comprehension. My writing will further contribute to the need of man to understand his world through good tales.

The following poems and stories are experiments. A Master of Fine Arts in Writing is only a beginning. The certificate on my wall says to me, "I now possess the basic skills to change the world with the power of my writing."

POETRY

A pattern of spelling errors from 20 students

I must expand my assignments

Commit to statistics

Everyday—

The overall point seems to extend from what the soul heard

On gravestone paragraphs—

Stepping stones of lifetimes afterlife

When sorrow becomes

interesting.

Midnight in Nebraska

I'm looking for a place to camp.
All the roads are fenced.
I wave to a scarecrow
Skewered between rows of corn.

I stop at a gas station
A lunatic at the pump
Rattles a handful of bullets
Says he mined them in hell.

He spits when he speaks
Calls me a cur
For buying that foreign crap.
Drives off in a blue Cadillac

His pump says 100.06 dollars
His license plate says Combat Vet
His cigarette butt says Camel
No wonder he's pissed.

I'm looking for a place to camp.
All the roads are fenced.

Nature

While bending in a cool stream
To drink
I see a reflection over my shoulder
Of a woman with garden hair
Clematis I think,
Watching me.

I'm afraid she'll vanish
If I turn
So I pretend not to see
Her watching me.
Instead, I tell the Tree Kings
On the opposite shore
Of my affection for her.

She smiles at this
And arches closer,
Stretching a vine blossom
Of White fingers.
That brush my shoulder
Teasing my spine.

Astronauts

When you pack your shit for the long flight
Consider the darkness you enter carefully.
For the music you carry shall grow old
The toothbrush shall ware down
Teeth shall crumble
And words will
Not Matter
Any
more
In
Sp
A
C
e.

Leaves of Fear

One afternoon
The trees told me
They were afraid.

To my surprise there were many.
Many voices of fear and panic,
Screeching terror inside my head.

Looking for the source
I saw them arrayed
 the trees
Facing me, leaves focused
Their wooden efforts
Shrieking over the junk
Of my mind.

On a church lot
Next door
They were cutting other trees
With much crashing to the ground.
Their arms broke
Their bodies fell

I could hear them screaming.
The pin oak
The black walnut
The crimson maple.

The callousness
Of the men
Was too much for me.

I apologized to the voices.
Telling them
The men could not hear
Their small voices.

They soothed me
These trees.
Not caring for themselves
And became mute again

It was very strange.

I am torn pain

I am torn pain

 You know my face.

I was there when they ripped you
From your mother's womb.

I was there when you murdered the robin
In its nest.

I was there when you abandoned your first love.

I was the Doctor that cut the child from your womb.

I was in the car that killed your dog.

I am the cold tile where you lied down to cry.

I am torn pain—

 You know my face.

I was the tractor that rolled over your uncle.

I was the cop that shot your brother in the head.

And later, when your mother went mad

I whispered in your ear,

“Kill her—It's the humane thing.”

I am Torn Pain—

 You know my face.

Its best seen in autumn

When the air is cool

&

 You are alone.

7.62 Military issue

She was always very quiet
Until her peace was disturbed
Then she screamed madly
Which was followed
---Always
By deathly silence
Making quite what was loud.

When I look past
Her shrouds of barrel smoke
I observed the faces she had torn.

Thus I named her
Persephone.

While you sleep

In a graveyard

A Great Hand

Tosses silver spirits into the sky.

They laugh as if on a carnival ride.

“Ah—this is how it ends,” said the little spirits.

“No,” came a voice.

“This is how it begins.

A sprinkling of salt on the black page.”

Marriage

There is a little girl under the ice in a white gown.
As I walk along the edge of the lake
She drifts with me face down.
I stare at the radius of her blond hair
Wondering what she is thinking.

She seems to deliberate in one spot,
Then glides across the lake
Following me.

A pair of mallard ducks
Dart their heads back and forth
As she passes beneath
Their paddling yellow feet.

They fly away.

At night, when I cannot sleep
I walk through the woods to the lake.
It's not long before her white form
Pulls up to the edge.

Her presence comforts me
Yet I'm afraid
To walk out on the ice.

Telegram: The Bikini

September, 5th 2004
Post Haste To:

July, 5th 1946

To: Louis Reard, French Fashion Designer
Regarding: The Bikini

Stop

Dear Louis:

Thank you—

For showing me in the open
What I desired to see beneath.

Sincerely Yours,

Man

Goshen

In Goshen
Around a great Tortoise Shell Table
Sat Jesus who spoke softly to Mohammad.
 Further down was white-bearded Zeus
With many beautiful women
I did not recognize.

Close to me
Sat Councils of the Dead
Whose voices I've heard
On windblown leaves
Down nighted avenues.

At the head of the table
Was a wounded Lion
Wearing a red cloak
Next to a strange black dog
Without a lower jaw.
The dog licked the lion's wound
In an attempt to clean it.

All eyes turned to these two
With reverence.

Future World

New York's throaty horns

Bawl atop Freedom Towers Palladium.

Swivel-hipped Lady Liberty

Hungers for amative Argonauts

Who sail into harbor

With shiploads of Golden Apples

To seed Lubberland's

New psychic therapy.

Cave People

She with pageboy hair

Vamped in saurian shadow

And shilly-shallied through

Clowders of rawboned cats

By the dark shore of her fathers

Chthonic sea.

Desert Storm

We ride silver 747s
Onto the desert floor
Dismount in a sandstorm
Dismount leaping to the ground
In Saudi Arabia at 2am.

We helmeted
Rifle-handed marines
Fix bayonets
And form a circle
In the brown wind
Holding spears like Huns.

An airline stewardess
Wearing short skirt and heels
Clanks down a stairwell
And stumbles on the sand.

Extinction event

Have you come to sing of me, Bard?"
Achilles asked
Not looking at me.
"Yes,"
I want to know you better."
And see all this,"
I said following his gaze.

On the plain
The Trojans
Feathered plums agitated
Like antennae in an ant kingdom.
Thunder cracks of helmets
Bashed on copper shields
In a whirling dust
Trample din of foot stomp,
Spear fling,
Arrow buzz.
 It was a melee.

The Greeks were packed so tight
Hector climbed up
And walked on a metal carpet of armor
Bludgeoning heads between his legs
Like a rail worker
Driving nails.

Achilles stepped onto the rampart
Spreading his arms
Drawing breath
And punched a hole in the sky
With a canon-blast scream
That rolled back the clouds
Announcing an extinction event.

There was a rift in the Trojan line
Like woodmen hearing the dinner bell
They forgot their duties
Abandoning their work

And ran for the safety of the walls.

They were wildebeests
Trampling one another
To get to the other side of the river
Their numbers were so great
The Greeks waded in the water after them
Snapping them up like crocodiles.

BEYOND ROAD'S END

I

I am a wayward son of a wayward man who abandoned me at the age of five. It was in the babysitter's backyard, by the great elm, when I realized that my father was never coming back. Every evening he would pick me up in his blue Chevy Nomad. I would be playing on the candy cane swing set, the horn would sound and he would wave. I lived for that sound. To see him in a white T-shirt, a pack of Kools on the dash, the grease on his hands, a machinist who wore his trade on beaten knuckles. He never returned. Words like divorce are meaningless to a child.

Then the stranger came, Achilles, my stepfather it turns out, and the years rolled by in darkness and violence. How can a man strike a little boy and make him bleed? What possible offense can a child commit to warrant such brutal measures? I survived however—even thrived after a time and carried my rage onto the football fields where the crowd cheered my ferocity. I wanted to kill somebody, and openly prayed to Zeus to give me strength. But those years are gone now. In a way, it was much easier then because I had someone to blame for my violence.

Now, as an adult—the flames of rage have burnt down to embers of unease, an unease that comes every two years wherever I may be. It

starts as a mild form of melancholy, and then slowly, hourly, like a tide—waves of gloom overtake me. Streets, homes, and landscapes are invisible to my passing eye, though, if asked, I can describe their minutest detail. During these spells, wild criminal thoughts pervade my mind. At night, my dreams are a chaos of flesh and blood on the sands of Arabia. It is always the same: I am running towards an enemy camp and transform into a lion. There are men gathered around a great fire, turbaned men with blade-noses. Oh, how they scream as I tear them to pieces.

I have discovered a short-term fix for the problem, finding that a tour of travel and adventure helps to stave off these lurid thoughts. It first hit me two years after high school, so I joined the Marine Corps as an infantryman. But after nine years of honorable service, a tour of combat in Desert Storm, the gnawing of unease returned after a few months of my discharge.

August 2001 found me drowning under the dismal waves of melancholy. I gazed at a map of Africa tacked on my home office wall in St. Louis, and realized with a shiver; I was contemplating an exotic form of suicide. Airline tickets lay on my desk scheduled for Johannesburg South Africa on January 11, 2002. Resting on the tickets, like a bizarre paperweight, was a Ruger .44 magnum revolver. I picked it up by the rosewood handle feeling its heavy power. “Yes, I’m taking you with me,” I said, whirling the seven-inch muzzle at the map. I would need a

gun to survive alone in the bush of Tanzania. I hoped by going on the journey to Africa, I would come full circle with myself and thereby put to rest this disease of restlessness. Somewhere among the trees, in the 50,000 square miles of the Selous Game Reserve, a wiser version of me waited.

II

Six months later, I find myself riding in the back seat of a taxi to the gates of the Zambia rail lines in Dar es Salaam. My train was departing at noon and it was one minute to the hour as the taxi pulled up to the gate. Four black men in brown slacks and yellow T-shirts stood talking at the curb. Upon opening the door, the men sprang at me, violently grabbing the duffle bag off my lap. Two of the strongest looking men, both with huge shoulders and arms, started playing tug of war with it. They were starving porters, fighting for a tip, and a fight would break out if I did not intervene.

“You!” I yelled, pointing to the more aggressive of the two. He was around twenty. “Take my bags!” The man tore the bag out of the other’s hand with a sneer then smiled at me. He hoisted my two remaining duffels on his shoulders and started running for the train. I followed closely; somewhat afraid he might steal my luggage. There was an old man with a black derby hat and black buttoned shirt squatting by one of the station’s iron support beams. As I sprinted by, he rose and sternly tapped his wristwatch.

“Hurry, she is waiting!” he hollered.

"I know," I returned, feeling like a stupid white tourist. We ran beneath the corrugated iron roof of the station out into the blazing sun. Hundreds of people lined the train and were passing money or touching fingers with passengers who leaned out of their windows. The pathway leading to the front of the train was narrow, mounded with loose gravel and a throng of people made it difficult to pass. Twice I slipped to my knees trying to keep pace with the frantic porter who ran recklessly through the crowd. A gap of thirty yards had opened between us, though I carried no baggage. As I closed the distance, the porter abruptly stopped, evidently satisfied he was at the right car, and disappeared into a dim vestibule. He slumped against a green wall and slid to the floor from exhaustion with the duffle bags arranged around him like futons. I pulled a bill worth 5000 shillings, about six dollars, from my pocket. The porter, who once looked ashen from his effort, suddenly got new life and rose up like a disciple receiving the body of Christ from a priest, taking the money with cupped hands.

The contrast from brilliant sunlight to the murky interior of the train was similar to looking into a cave. I could see rows of shadowed heads sticking up from seat backs but until my eyes adjusted, their faces remained masked. The conductor emerged from the gloom dressed in a khaki shirt and pants suite.

"Ticket please.... Thank you."

"Ah, you are in the wrong place! What is your name, Sir?"

“Stewart Gordon.”

“Do you like Tanzania, Mr. Gordon?”

“Yes it’s very beautiful,” I said smiling.

“Yes, it is very beautiful but the people are very poor. Please come with me, your seat is in the first car.” I followed closely behind, elevating my bags to avoid collisions with curious faces that rolled their eyes up to look at me. We passed through three cars until we came to a small cabin on the left where two men sat side-by-side wearing white oxford shirts and red ties. They were having an animated conversation in Swahili that had begun before my entering the cabin, for I heard them laughing uproariously down the corridor.

“This is your cabin,” the conductor said dryly then turned, disappearing into the gloom.

I stowed my gear in the cabin’s upper compartments and sat down on a green cloth bench feeling some relief. I was within eight hours of reaching my goal. Outside the train, a woman raised dried fish to my window hoping I would buy some for a few shillings. I waved her off, shaking my head, more concerned about my final destination at the Selous Game Reserve than my appetite.

The potential discovery of the pistol weighed heavily on my mind. It loomed ominously over my head in the baggage bin. I had spent the previous three months in South Africa, training at Welgevonden big game reserve as a ranger and authorized there to carry a firearm, but

Tanzania's laws were much stricter. Mercenaries and military splinter groups infested East Africa, and regularly trafficked weapons across its borders. Upon landing at Julius Nyerere Airport in Dar es Salaam, I was required to declare my revolver to authorities. I did not. They would confiscate it.

I ignored the large red "Declaration" sign, hung on chains above a turnstile, guarded by two soldiers in olive drab, armed with Kalishnikovs. I walked calmly to the blue "No Declaration" zone, a lane fenced by blue velvet handrails where a pie-faced black woman stood in a blue airport hostess uniform. She smiled as I approached. Behind the smile lurked an official presence, her brown eyes were mirrors for the government. I smiled back with the affability of a humble tourist; however, a religious zeal possessed my soul. I was on a spiritual pilgrimage and held before me the staff of blind faith, which prostrated any fear. I imagined that under a communion of trees, there waited my burning bush. Armed with this philosophy, and a face cast in iron with a sobering vision, her worldly, state trained eyes could not penetrate any downcast falsehood, or breath-holding fear.

Remarkably, she said, "Welcome," and simply stepped aside.

Passengers paced back and forth in the dark causeway. Occasionally, a shadowy figure of a man loitered in the doorway to stare at me. His brown eyes, full of window light, surveyed every item of my clothing as

if to uncover my identity. I was in a black world now and it took time to adjust to the bold, prolonged stares of the natives. I thought that the previous months in South Africa would have hardened me better, but now being further north, the rarity of my white skin brought an unwanted glamour. The two businessmen sitting across from me, our knees a few inches apart, continued their rambunctious chatting. I waited for a break in the conversation or friendly nod to cue an introduction, but unlike the other passengers, they regarded me as an invisible man. 'To hell with them,' I thought. There came a long whistle blast and the train started chugging slowly into the countryside.

I pulled from my breast pocket a few torn pages of a Lonely Planet travel book on East Africa. A little corner map showed that we would pass through a small village called Matambwe, which resides on the northern most edge of Selous. Tourists on safari are regulated there to hire armed rangers as escorts for hiking, automobile rides or boat tours down the Rufiji River, which courses the park's northern sector. However, ten miles before Matambwe is Fuga Station and it was here that I planned to get off, thus avoiding the rangers, wanting to strike out on my own.

The rocking of the train put my mind at ease and the narrow window on the left became a tangled lens of leaves. After some time, there came into view a small village of clapboard huts. Three brown men swung scythes against a green wall of jungle. The scent of fresh grass poured

into the window. I heard broken chords of deep-throated song. The men's shoulders glistened with sweat; their arms swinging rhythmically under a backdrop of tall trees and appeared to be at the foothills of a mountain range. The blue air behind them raised the steamy breath of the jungle in a white veil. The men whisked by with the clackety clack of the train. As we plunged deeper into the wilderness, the contrast between the train's grey interior and the sunlit world outside made the window appear to be an emerald television screen shining inside a coffin.

Towering marula trees with monkeys scurrying up their limbs were framed in the window and forested mountains loomed in the distance to the south. The jungle canopy stretched unbroken for thousands of miles and seethed an ancient patience. It was a chlorophyllous sea whose residents teemed in all strata, finding shelter in reefs of leaves and grass. The train seemed like an alien worm that gouged the earth, dividing the green, causing a red weal in the soil to be hastily bandaged with metal-scabbed tracks.

I saw no fences. There can be no fences around the world's oceans, and there can be none around its jungles. There was freedom in the thought that at the next station I could get off and never look back at civilization. I had relinquished my fear of death, come to terms with its inevitability, and in so doing, given up any thought of going back. As I gazed out the window at the jungle, the perfume of courage filled my lungs. The trees crowded the tracks like canyons.

My mind slipped back to a few weeks earlier; to an Egyptian singer I'd met in Dar es Salaam named Lavonia. She had belly danced for me in her bedroom. It was not so much her loosened hair or almond eyes, though there was something to that, but a necklace of little silver stars that had captivated me. They chimed on her breast, jinked under a red light, slipped beneath the sheen of cleavage, undulating with little ticks and jerks of her buttocks, throwing her long hair over my face, looking down on me inside, the stars tickling my face.

She had asked me to return with her to Cairo, saying that her Christian family would like me. That she had a lucrative gig with a band, singing at five-star resorts in Cairo and Alexandria. The offer was romantic and interesting, but I was afraid. There was no doubt that I could love her. However, my money was running out. I imagined myself stranded and penniless in an obscure Muslim town. She overcame these objections by saying that she had money enough for both of us. I told her no. That I would catch up with her after my tour in Africa. She blanched. She covered her face with hands bejeweled on every finger and sobbed. I stood by with arms at my sides feeling helpless, not guessing at the time how courageous her offer had been. How a beautiful woman could make a leap of faith like that confused me. I reached out to take her in my arms but she turned away with a muffled "No." After a half hour, she uncovered her face and transfixed me with a look of stone. I was the stranger again. I felt unsteady while descending her apartment stairs,

telling myself that it could never work, that I had done the right thing. A little voice cried coward.

A cool breeze from the window brushed my cheek and another face rose up in memory, a black haired green-eyed face—one that I'd scarcely thought of in twenty years, an American girl named Leanne. For six months I had been lost in her arms and legs. While walking down the cobbled streets of the St. Louis's Central West End, we leaned weak-kneed into one another, trembling with excitement, and entered the undiscovered country of our hearts. I had revealed every secret, confronted every fear, torn down every wall, and in return, love blazed the hotter between us. Water and food became tasteless. We needed only to breathe the other's breath to live. But it was during that cold winter of 1983, when I was with Leanne, the barren trees clawed a grey sky that never cleared, and the aforementioned restlessness came over me for the first time—not knowing then it would be a dreadful life long companion.

I broke up with her. I broke up because of a crazy fear that she would abandon me, reject me somehow, that the pain would be less if I initiated it. Fool! For two years I struggled to hold on to my sanity because of regret. Strangely, my mind blended the two women.

III

“Fuga Station, Mr. Gordon,” the conductor announced, leaning his head into the cabin. I could feel the train slowing and stood up weak-kneed reaching for my gear. The conductor gazed at me, then my gear, and then peered worriedly out the window as if searching the sky for a storm.

“Yes,” I said, “Is there something else?”

“I think there is a problem. Fuga is a one-man station and no tourists stop here. The next stop is Matambwe where game rangers can escort you into the park. There is danger at Fuga because of simba and poachers. Maybe you should get off at Matambwe?” There was genuine concern in the conductor’s voice. He seemed bent on helping an ignorant tourist. I was happy with the news because it confirmed that I would be alone, to live or die according to my own chosen fate.

“Thank you for the information but I have a party from the George Stigler Resort picking me up at Fuga Station,” I lied. I had read about the Stigler Resort in Lonely Planet Tanzania and dropped the name to end any suspicions. The conductor shrugged and seemed satisfied with the answer and helped me to the door with my luggage. Just as I turned into

the corridor, I felt a tug on my arm. I looked back and recoiled from the sight of one of the businessmen's sweaty faces only a few inches away.

"Yes?" I said startled.

"In Africa, if you look for *shit* you will find it!" He barked angrily. I did not know what to do or say. I jerked my arm away with a snarl, felt angry, numb. I wanted to confront him but remembered the gun and decided to move towards the door instead. I made sure my gear was piled safely on the platform outside, then glanced up to see if he was looking at me from the window. There was no one, only a few lolling heads of sleeping passengers. The old train sluggishly pulled away like a grey curtain and revealed the jungle.

"Fuga" was painted thickly in black over the door of a concrete pillbox surrounded by barbed wire. Two bare-chested men in blue pajama bottoms and flip flops sat in front on a plank bench holding machetes on their laps. There were no other people so I assumed these were the station heads.

My breath whistled through my teeth. I was scared—not of the two men, but of going into the jungle alone. It was one thing to plan a trip in the safety of my home, but now the reality of what I was doing hit me very hard. I was sure lions waited behind the tall grass on the other side of the tracks. "You're a damn fool, Gordon," I said aloud, looking towards the blue hills to the south, and then tittered nervously. I told myself to keep moving and not think too much. The sweltering sun

crushed down on my head. I began to unpack my duffels and immediately found my broad brimmed Filson hat. A man can survive anywhere under the privacy of his hat. I assembled my pack, securing the tent and sleeping bag on the exterior.

The two men watched me slack-jawed with flies crawling on their faces. They looked too stupid to be of any threat. They might have been dead for all I knew, but then I saw their eyes clicking back and forth like a couple of lizards tracking flies. A chill ran up my scalp, making my hair stand up. I thought of the pistol hidden in the bag and planned to take it out once I was a few hundred yards into the bush. I slung the pack on, adjusted the weight and looked out at the thick wall of elephant grass lining the track. When I glanced back, the two men were gone. I took a deep breath and plunged through the grass, wanting to put as much distance between me and the station as possible. After penetrating the brush for several yards, I stopped and listened for any pursuit of the lizard-eyed men. There was none.

I slid down the rail berm and found shade under the overhanging trees, where a flat plain of lush grass sprawled before me. The fifty-foot tree canopy blazed with sunny holes, dappling the forest floor. I was surprised that Selous appeared so naturally manicured. It was a drastic change from the scrub country of South Africa where trees seldom grew higher than thirty feet. I wanted to admire it more but clouds of tsetse flies began bouncing off my face. I snatched one off my arm and

examined it. It was a little bigger than a housefly and felt rubbery like a tick. I was short of breath, feeling a primal fear that was foreign to me. The forest was ancient, the trees older than Jesus no doubt. I focused on putting one foot in front of the other. After walking a few hundred yards, I stopped by a termite mound and holstered the big revolver.

It was 3:30pm, Monday, March 19, 2002. By my estimates, I had enough corn meal and rice in my pack to last for two weeks, which was more than enough food. I was only planning to stay in the reserve for seven days, if I survived them, and then catch the return train at Fuga Station to Dar on Sunday, March 25. Doubtless, there would be trouble when I reemerged on the tracks. Park authorities would be looking for me. People, white people in particular, do not just get off the train and disappear into the jungle alone. I planned to play stupid on the matter if they found me, ditching the pistol and acting like a dumb tourist.

I used my military compass to shoot an azimuth of 220 degrees southwest towards the Beho Beho River, which lay ten miles away according to a small map I carried. If time and supplies allowed, I would strike out another ten miles further south to the Rifiji River. Both rivers ran east to west, the same as the railroad tracks to my rear. The twenty miles between the tracks and the Rifiji River was my zone of exploration. I would use a Kadydyn water filtration system to purify my drinking water at any springs or creeks I would cross. This being March,

the beginning of the rainy season, I felt sure finding water would be no problem.

It was 4:30 and the sun was slanting behind the trees over my right shoulder. I had to set up camp soon. I knew the lions would start moving around shortly before sunset.

I found a glade of soft grass girdled by some overhanging trees with no signs of game trails. After erecting the tent, I pissed on bushes and saplings at the twelve, three, six, and nine o'clock positions around it, setting up a scent perimeter that warned any curious animals, "This place is mine," and used a piss bottle once inside to avoid exposing myself in the dark. The big cats switched on at night, keying in on any movement. I memorized every bush and stone in front of the tent because lions were known to wait outside if they were hunting you. As long as I remained inside, both lions and elephants would not test the alien structure of the tent for fear of the unknown. I ducked inside as quickly as possible to keep out the tsetse flies. A dozen or so slipped in anyway, which I took great pleasure in killing because of the trouble they'd caused me during the trek. I lay still for a couple of hours letting my body cool, and listened to the jungle. Soon, male lions began huffing in the distance, jackals whimpered, and baboons barked, "WhaWho!" at prowling leopards.

I was troubled. During the three or so mile hike, I had drunk three quarters of my water supply. My clothes were soaked in sweat. I should

have come across a water source by now. It was the rainy season after all. I knew I was carrying too much weight. I would come across water in the morning, I assured myself, and fell asleep

The sun was well above the trees when I woke, its rays illuminating the forest green tent fabric above my head. It seemed hotter than the previous day. I needed to cross a stream soon to refill my canteens. Eating breakfast was out of the question. It would require too much water to digest the food. No, once I found water I could relax and eat a little, I thought. Besides, the rice that I carried required more water than I had to boil it.

It was too damn hot! What could afford to throw out to make the pack lighter? I pulled up tent stakes, cinched the pack, checked my compass coordinates, and pushed south.

I was beating the shit out of myself trying to keep the flies off. They swarmed out of the waist high grass, bumping into my eyeballs. I reapplied bug repellent to my face and hands and this kept them at bay for awhile. I was so preoccupied that I nearly tripped over a bull elephant before its massive grey bulk detached itself from the jungle tracery. He had not noticed me yet and was pulling grass with his trunk, occasionally swatting flies from his belly between loud crunching mouthfuls of grass. In South Africa I learned that the big five: lion, leopard, elephant, water buffalo, and rhino, had a safe zone of about three hundred meters before attacking. I froze in terror, he being merely fifty meters away. The

elephant would definitely charge if he saw me. I crept downwind of him towards his rear and after a hundred meters, escaped to the other side of a saw-toothed colony of ten-foot high termite mounds. My stomach dropped when a crashing sound came from behind, causing me to wheel around with my pistol. The elephant was taking a tremendous dump onto the forest floor.

Besides the lone elephant, the Selous Reserve seemed devoid of life. Not even birds showed themselves. Yet there was something. Many times after rounding a corner from tree cover to open ground, I felt a tense presence lingering in the air, as if something had been standing there a moment before. Once I heard a strange high cackle behind some trees, then to the side. An upright creature seemed to be orbiting me in the thick foliage, but I could not catch a solid glimpse of it.

I saw a green hump of wooded mountains to the south and figured the Beho Beho River was running at their base. I imagined cold water trickling down a mountain gorge into a blue tributary. My water supply was gone. The heat was making me dizzy, and the damn flies were wearing me out. Looking around in a quiet panic, I began to realize that I was in the middle of some kind of green mechanism. Instead of seeing a one-dimensional wall of vegetation, the jungle became a conscious green entity that was silent and watchful. Patterns began to emerge in the leaves. Where before subtle bends in the grass were unnoticed, now animal highways emerged, webbed out like a central nervous system.

Here they traveled, carrying food back and forth along pathway like arteries that nourished a green brain. I suddenly felt very small, like a tiny cog of protein in a primal wheel that rolled long before the puny concept of time.

I remembered the map of Africa hanging on my office wall in St. Louis. How I felt a godlike superiority while gazing down at the paper mountains and painted jungles. I had made grand plans back then. With my finger, I had traced down the thin lines of roads and rivers at my mind's convenience. But there was no blood on the map, nor flies or thirst or death. I now regarded it as a blue print of bullshit. "Get it together, Stew."

I began pitching out various items from my pack, leaving a gear trail behind of canvas shelter-halves, bags of cornmeal, a folding shovel, knives, hot-sauces, and other accoutrements. It was reckless. Anybody could follow me now, but the weight was off my shoulders and it felt wonderful. I did not have the energy to bury it.

On the other side of an eroded field of red dirt, a big stand of trees loomed a quarter mile away. I hoped there would be a creek under their shade. The mountains in the south never seemed to get any closer. After crossing the field, I inspected the area for water but only found a dry creek bed. I was in trouble. My heart hammered in my ears. I felt a flash of panic. It welled up and seized my throat like a dog. "Well, this is what you asked for jackass!" I bellowed to no one. I sat down on my pack and

stared at the mountains. They were so far away. A glance at my watch told me it was five pm. Time to make camp. It had been twenty-four hours since I last tasted food or water. I could afford to miss a few meals, but the water situation had become critical.

The fact that I had only come across a single elephant the entire day worried me. The conductors warning about poachers could be an explanation, or the wildlife simply knew that there was no water in the area.

I set up the tent and slipped inside. I had my fly killing ritual to look forward to, the little bloody smears on the green walls. The ground was still hot from the day, turning the inside of the tent into an oven. As my body cooled, the moon began to rise, casting silver rays inside through the door-flap that was partially unzipped, allowing for a draft. A game ranger in South Africa once told me that hyenas liked to stick their heads in open tents and tear off people's ears. I made sure the opening was not too large and kept the pistol on my chest. A weird, almost human laugh tittered nearby. I dropped off to sleep as soon as I closed my eyes.

In the middle of a dark gymnasium, I sat on brown metal chair in a pool of light. In the rafters, a floodlight shone down near a basketball backboard. On the floor, just beyond the circle of the light, a butler stood at attention with his heels together. He wore a tuxedo, white kid gloves, and held a silver platter. I could not make out his face, but etched against

the blackness floated an unusually wide smile, pregnant with teeth. He snarled, then released a piercing cackle. I heard a tapping sound to my right, looked over, and recognized the old man with the derby hat from the train station. He was sitting next to me in a second chair, feverishly tapping his watch.

“She is waiting. You must hurry!” he cried.

“Who!”

The old man grabbed his throat and screamed. A human head emerged from his mouth with the sound of snapping bones. His teeth flew out like popcorn. A scrunched face rose up, tearing away the old man’s head, knocking off his hat. A new face stared back at me. The face was mine! I tried to run, but was frozen to the chair. A slim blond woman suddenly appeared on his lap, sitting sidesaddle. She twisted around confused, whipping her head this way and that, mystified as to how she got there. She was around twenty, pretty, in a simple country way, and wore a baby blue nightgown. She recoiled from the man’s face and quietly regarded him a moment at arm’s length. A low hum welled up from her throat. Her eyes widened, she began huffing. A crescendo, channeled through the O of her lips, built, then pierced the air with an earsplitting shriek. To my pleasure, she vaulted onto my lap, wrapping her trembling arms around my neck. “Help me,” she moaned.

“You’ll die!” shouted the other me. “Let her go!”

There was a roar! The butler, who I had forgotten, stepped into the light with the face of a hyena. It slavered at us with a rabid leer and flung the lid off the platter. The lid clanged noisily somewhere in the dark. A pack of bipedal creatures detached themselves from the shadows and pursued it, their claws scratching the laminate floor. The hyena butler lifted a shotgun from the platter, racked a shell, and blew the head off the other me. As I gazed shocked at the headless body, a strange sensation of relief flowed through me. A plume of white smoke rose from its trunk. Then, to my horror, the smoke began forming into another head. The hyena-butler stuck its muzzle in my face and growled,

“We have to keep doing this, *you know*.”

Grey light leaked through the tent door. I crawled out and squinted at the sunrise, which slowly rose up the bleached horizon. What the *hell*? The vision of the dream was still in my head. Soon, a ball of fire vaulted out of the trees, searing my upturned face. I began to laugh, not a happy laugh, but a high crazy laugh that turned into a sob. I cried, feeling sorry for myself. I rolled out of the tent onto my back, looking at the sun. I realized I had gotten exactly what I asked for: the thirst, the flies, the isolation, the possibility of death. I wished for this, and now that I had it, the sun became a mirror and in it, a face shown, a reflection of myself it seemed, my *true* insignificant self. Gone was the man of illusion and grandeur. I was stripped of my lies—no, there reflected back at me the

face of a little boy—a lost little boy. Instead of being repulsed, I reached out for the face, wanting to take the boy that was I in my arms.

“Ah, Father, please help me! I need you. I want to live.” I turned my eyes from the sun so that I would not go blind. I felt a cool breeze on the back of my head. I looked over my shoulder and saw on the eastern horizon a peculiar black cloud sailing towards me at great speed. It was so far away, I dared not hope that it was a harbinger of rain. But I did hope, and then got the crazy idea to will it towards me. As it approached, a cool breeze began to pick up, chasing away the cloying heat. The trees began to wave their limbs trying to flag it down. As the cloud drew near, it appeared to be the bust of a woman. She had a Roman nose and black eyes, her stern brows glowered down on the earth. Horses ran through her hair, galloping down the waves of cloudy mane. She surveyed the landscape below like a charioteer, cleft chin turning this way and that, and fiercely jutting out, reminding me of a pouting Mussolini. A mist fell as she passed over.

Clouds curled and rumbled behind her like the stampede of a thousand horses. I jumped up, pulled the canvas floor tarp from beneath the tent, sprinted up the side of a nearby hill, and draped the tarp over the branches of a small tree. The gusting wind plastered the tarp on the side of the coming storm. I ran down the hill, got my canteen cup, then ran back to the tarp and pressed it to the canvas as sheets of rain came bucketing down, filling the cup in the cascade of water. While drinking, I

glanced down the hill. My pack was gone, washed away. The once dry creek bed had turned into a torrent of brown water. The tent lines were also pulling loose, the green fabric flattening under the muddy swirl. I ran down, sloshing hip deep, and somehow managed to save it. Now I had all the water I needed, but the food was gone. It was no use chasing after the pack; it could be miles downstream for all I knew, washed into the Rifi River. The storm subsided after an hour and the sun broke out hotly through low silver clouds. The dull throb of hunger poked my stomach. I was very tired. The flies bumbled and buzzed on my face, inflicting painful stabs. They seemed to sense my desperation and swarmed out of the grass. I had read once that herds of caribou in Alaska sometimes commit suicide by plunging over cliffs to escape hordes of mosquitoes during the summer months. I looked around for a suitable cliff, then laughed. There was a collective hush in the jungle, not a bird sang, not a branch moved, as if nature was drawing its breath. I sensed that the weavings of the green world had an arcane logic, a great plan that I was just beginning to grasp. I felt very small. I sat down on the hill to mull things over awhile and ceased my fly-killing battle. They, in response, mysteriously went away. "You have given all that I asked for," I bellowed wildly at the trees. Their green faces mused silently. "Did you know that I traveled fifteen thousand miles to have this conversation with you? I suppose I should ask for food now. The rains came after all."

IV

For some reason a poem came to mind that I had read years ago by Stephen Crane:

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

I suddenly awoke from myself, "What the *hell* am I doing out here." I was not at my home anymore. I was not on my street. I was not in my country. I was in the lion's den; I was on the ant's trail, I was on the monkey's road. For god's sake! I had a right to be happy! "Grow up, Stew. Everybody's got a problem." I decided to turn back—sick of this Moses in a burning land bullshit.

A troop of thirty baboons came ambling across a straw field on my right. They moved in a spearhead formation, with either side flanked by large males. A huge male, the leader, led the main body of females and infants. Far to the rear, a little female lagged behind holding her belly. The leader halted next to a towering red termite mound and began to

pick at the dirt near the base. The rest of the troop sat on their hunches looking back at the straggler, rolling their eyes at her. They reached out their hands and caressed her fur as she passed. She sat down heavily next to the male, glancing at him then to the ground. He continued foraging, appearing not to notice. The troop watched. One baboon, a youngster, lay down in the sun to nap. A male guarding the right flank ran over and slapped him on the head. The youngster howled to the others for safety but found no sympathizers. They pushed him away. He sat down and stared sullen-eyed at the leader, covertly glancing at the head-slapper. Soon the straggling female began to pick up termite-dirt and put it in her mouth as if she were self-medicating on the chalk in the soil. After a while, she lay down and slept. The leader stood watch, giving her his shade.

A herd of elephants crossed the straw field. They moved quietly, approaching like small grey mountains. They continually probed each other's mouths with their trunks. A thicket stood on the others side of the field with an abundance of shade, where pink-lavender birds darted from leafy branches to the ground like animated Easter-eggs. They returned to their perches with pieces of orange and yellow fruit in their beaks. The elephants penetrated the grove, scattering the birds into the blue sky. The grove trumpeted.

The napping straggler raised her head from the ground, the noise waking her. She quickly sat up, appearing somewhat revived. The beaten

youngster ran over and fondled her, stroking her face. She smoothed back his head with her hand. The troop stood up, stretched, yawned, and waited for the leader. He analyzed the terrain for a moment, then sauntered to the grove with the troop in tow. They gathered by the trunk of a palm tree, under a blotch of shade, and waited patiently for the elephants to leave.

Propping my head on the balled up tent and dozed for a while. My own snoring woke me up after what could have been five minutes or an hour. I rose to me feet feeling refreshed. The water had done me good. My stomach growled terribly, however; the pain was awful, indescribable. I knew I had to find something to eat while I had strength. The grove looked abandoned. I could only hope that the fruit the animals were eating was not poison. I inspected the area and found what appeared to be jalapeño pepper plants interlaced between the trees. Oblong fruit, the size of peppers, painted the thicket in orange and gold. Piles of elephant dung were loaded with black seedpods. The monkey crap was full of it, as was the scattered bird droppings. I tasted some of the fruit. It was very mild, almost pulpy with no discernable taste. I took off my hat and filled it while monitoring my stomach for pain. There was none. I noticed that the baboons had dug up the roots of the plant, which showed gnaw marks, and stripped the root bark almost entirely away. I pulled up several plants and chopped the trunk off with my knife, planning to boil the roots. If it was true that primates shared 98 percent

of my DNA, I figured I could eat most anything they did. The creek supplied all the water I needed to boil the fruit along with its roots in my canteen cup. I ate the leathery mix with my fingers. Even with the boiling, it was extremely tough.

After the meal I sat back and lazed, feeling strange warmth moving up and down my legs. There was a cathedral like hush all around. The overhanging trees had moving frescoes of red and gold birds. The birds twittered merrily, darting to this branch and that. I heard thunder in the direction where the cloud tempest had flown. The sky was filling with clouds again. Through the chattering of birds came a strange feminine humming, as if a woman was singing on the other side of the grove. I walked around the leafy perimeter and was stunned by a beautiful woman sitting on a large round boulder. It was the cloud goddess. No longer was she in a vaporous form, but flesh and blood. Her flowing red gown trickled down the stone like blood. Her legs were open, her skirts drawn back, and the small head of a horse protruded from her swollen vagina. She caressed its mane, singing soothingly in a language I did not understand. Suddenly an entire grey foal tumbled from between her thighs onto the ground. It clamored unsteadily to its feet, galloped three strides and vaulted into the sky, disappearing into the cumulus above.

“When a man leers like that, he can never be a good man.,” she said with a cavernous feminine voice. She stared at me with terrible black eyes, two holes on alabaster.

“His passions rule his reason and he is no more than a pig, grunting from the pen of enthrallment.” She drew her skirt casually over her legs.

“I wasn’t...”

“Silence,” she boomed. “Is *I* the only word in your vocabulary!” Overhead, lightning arced from cloud to cloud like synaptic flashes in a great brain.

“You walk abandoned, not by the hand of another but by your own will. The misty days drift by over eons of self-exile. Nevertheless, the clouds break golden just a little further down the road.” I walked closer, not believing my eyes.

“What would they say about a man who never faces the sun? Upon waking, he looks neither right, nor left, always blinded by his own self-absorption.” I sat down by her ivory sandaled feet. She gazed at me, cocking her head, left and right, regarding me, it seemed, with pity.

“You can learn much from the flower,” she continued, “its petals attuned to the bright voice of fire. The flower never shirks the flame. I feel your heart breaking as you sit next to me on the lawn. But it is your duty to bow to Nature, for it is through me comes your children.” She leaned down. Her breath carried the odor of warm circuitry. She whispered,

“Is it necessary that you fully know me? Not really, my love. You should be happy that I am here, but for a little while.” As she said this,

her face changed into Leanne's then Lavonia's, and other visages of women that I had known.

I woke, my head jumping from the rolled up tent. Had it been a dream? I walked around the glade to see if she was there. I found a large boulder, but no woman sat there. Every time I closed my eyes, the back of my lids would turn into television screens. The drug in the plant was still heavy in my system. This coupled with the dangerous possibility of lions and leopards stalking about, terrified my already fragmented mind. To the wildlife, my nervous body language must certainly cry weakness.

It was growing dark. I set up the tent, now made flimsy by the loss of its aluminum stakes in the flood. The tempest song still haunted me; the woman's beautiful voice compelled me to eat more of the plant. I wanted to die with her voice in my head. I thought about eating more but something inside warned against it. No—I would live. I felt sure of that, once my damn head cleared. But would she come again every time I ate the plant? Why court death when I still had something to give to the world? I wanted to love again—climb that last mountain. Every time I reached the pinnacle, cold fear would send me scurrying back down. Why was I afraid? Why had I run?

I closed my eyes and heard the green voices of trees. Their innumerable electric tones synchronized into a great roaring orchestra. I could hear the jungle growing. Moreover, somewhere within the green symphony of leaves, the beautiful hymn of the cloud goddess came

again. I opened my eyes hoping she would be there. To my surprise, she emerged from a deeper thicket between the fat trunks of Marula trees. She seemed an ancient queen walking between columns.

“The sunbeams of unrecorded time shine here,” she said, standing in the dappled, fading light. Her gown appeared woven from the same blood-red fabric as the sunset above her. She approached like a drifting fog, flying over the grass; the flies moved out of the way. But I could not bear the abyss of her black eyes, so turned my head. Her cool lips caressed my ear with the smell of ozone.

“Let your father go,” she whispered. “The fault is not yours.”

V

Whatever these plants are called; I loved them, and stuffed my cargo pockets full.

Park rangers arrested me when I arrived back at Fuga Station three days later. I was tired, hungry, and horribly fly-bitten—but felt wonderful. I had found a new, wiser version of myself after all. The park authorities did not find the gun because I left it behind in the jungle, a few hundred meters from the tracks. I played the stupid tourist as I had planned but the rangers did not buy it. They were convinced I was a Special Forces soldier from America sent by the government to spy on them. They held me in custody for a couple days in their northern border headquarters.

A ranger named Richard, who wore a red Nike shirt that said; “Just do it!” interrogated me. He said that he had studied at Boston University. He supplied me with all the Kilimanjaro beer that I wanted, but no food. Then when I was drunk, he said seriously:

“What is it that I am to do with you my friend?”

“I don’t know,” I said sitting up, trying to get sober. “I don’t have any money. It’s back in Dar es Salaam.”

“You challenge me.” he replied quietly.

“Know. It’s just that I didn’t bring any money with me because in America parks are free. You can go in and out as you please. I thought that was the case here.”

“How do they pay for the park?”

“With taxes from the people,” I said.

“It does not work that way in Tanzania. Here, the park fees pay for everything.”

“I’m sorry. If you let me go back to Dar, I’ll pay whatever I owe.”

“If I let you go back, I will never see you again.”

“No, you can keep my passport until I come back with the money.”

“Let me see your passport,” he said firmly. I handed it to him. He did not open it, but immediately put it in his back pocket, then stared quizzically at me. I was afraid. Now I would be alone in Africa without a passport. How would I get home? Richard seemed to read this in my eyes.

“I give your passport back,” he said, and quickly handed it back while looking at the ground. “How did you feel?”

“Not good.”

“Yes, my friend. If police caught you in the city without it, they would suspect you as a terrorist! They would arrest you! Now, what is it that I am to do with you?”

“You could have a ranger escort me back to Dar, then I could give him the money.”

“You challenge me!” This line of questioning went on for two days.

Eventually a ranger named, Doctor, did escort me back to Dar es Salaam on a train—which had a bar. With my few remaining dollars, I bought Doctor many beers. Thankfully, he was a happy drunk.

I paid 375 dollars in park fees at the Ivory Room in Dar, where the park authorities reside as well as the offices of the World Wildlife Fund and various NGO's.

When I had finished with all this park business, I returned to my hotel, the Silver Sands, and took a shower. That night at the bar, I met a beautiful black whore named Maggie in a red sequenced dress. She had blue eyes, which is rare in Africa, which burned like torches out of her stately ebony face. It was then that I began my vigorous rehabilitation.

I found out much later that the plant that I had eaten, for I had brought a few leaves home with me, was Ibo or Ibogaine, valued by witchdoctors in Eastern and Central Africa for its visionary powers.

As for the cloud goddess, I never saw her again. I guess she was not some Jeannie I could just hijack out of the jungle. I experimented with Ibo several times in the privacy of my home in St. Louis, which only resulted in delirious headaches. I think I know what she was trying to say back there in Africa. That people come and go throughout our lives. That

friends, lovers, children, and our parents are all temporary. We should not blame ourselves when the tide of life separates us from others.

As for my recurring depressions—there is none. In fact, my wanderlust is completely gone as well. For my mind seems finally at ease.

I was grateful to have found those leaves of courage.

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