

THE HIPPO GYPSIES

By Jason Emde

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author RICHARD STUECKER writes: The “Hippo Gypsies” is a carousing memoir about a year of adventure in Zimbabwe taken by the author, Jason Emde as an exchange student in the late 1980’s. Influenced by the inimitable hip travel novel in both content and in writing style, On The Road, Emde’s creative non-fiction rushes down the page like a raft on a white water river. Not unlike the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, there is a jiving rhythm to his word- and image-packed sentences that embrace the enthusiasm of an eighteen-year-old tasting his first unfettered freedom but also reflect the joy of young travel in a country just finding itself after throwing off the yoke of colonialism. In this short piece, Emde is able to aptly characterize his host families, recreate the local geography, give short passages of history, and re-animate the group of the disparate fellow student adventurers who bond into the Hippo Gypsies. Anyone reader who engulfed freedom along with booze and sex perhaps in a foreign country in an exchange program or perhaps their freshman year away from mom and dad and the boredom of home will connect deeply with this story that reminds us that all youthful things must come to an end; that home will never be the same again; and that memories of those times are unrepeatabe and lay deep in our consciousness and dreams but color the lives we go on to eventually lead, always a wisp in the imagination not far from the present now.*

The Hippo Gypsies

With no motive other than a thirst for excitement, in 1988 I applied for a year-long Rotary Club student exchange. Applicants to the program are asked to select their top three potential host countries and I put down India, Thailand, and Zimbabwe, picking Thailand and Zimbabwe only because I thought they sounded exotic and would suggest I was rock-ribbed and brave. It was India I was really interested in, thanks to a fascination with Buddhism kindled by Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*; I didn’t even know, in my callowness, that I should've been looking at China and Japan. When a Rotarian called me up to tell me I’d been accepted and would be going to my

third choice I couldn't remember what it was. There was an unpleasant pause. "You're going to *Zimbabwe*," he said, finally.

"Great," I said, thinking *Where's Zimbabwe?*

The following August I flew to Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. I was very young. I was eighteen. I didn't give a shit, and I also cared a lot. I'd been in love, I *was* in love, my heart was wide open, or I thought it was, and I cared about that. Eighteen and ready to go all over the place and do everything. I shrugged off the loss of my wholly imaginary India and plunged into Africa.

Where's Zimbabwe? Zimbabwe is a sub-Saharan, comma-shaped country bordered by Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa. Formerly Southern Rhodesia, then Rhodesia, then Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, then Zimbabwe. *Zimbabwe* means *great houses of stone* in the Shona language. Population in 1989: ten million, with, approximately, 100 000 whites. Official languages: English, Shona, Ndebele. In 1980, after thirteen years of asymmetrical warfare, Robert Mugabe, the Shona leader of ZANU-PF and a Marxist who would later boast of having "a degree in violence," is elected as the new country's first black prime minister. The stories I heard before I went were all positive: Zimbabwe is the most successful post-colonial sub-Saharan state; it's safe; Mugabe has asked the jittery white population to stay and help rebuild the country; because of excellent conservation programs, Zimbabwe has too many elephants; lions can be seen in the streets of Bulawayo, sometimes. Tanzania's President Nyerere said to Mugabe, "You have inherited a jewel. Keep it that way."

Though only ten years before it was bush war, atrocities, jungle firefights, liberation, and the

overthrow of white minority rule, and only ten years afterwards it was downward spiral, dictatorship, permeant corruption, AIDS pandemic, torture, and farm invasions, while I was there Zimbabwe—for me, for the Hippo Gypsies—was beautiful. It was perfect. I was young, and spacious; everybody was young and spacious. South Africa was necklacings and carnage and Soweto fuming in the cook-fire dusk, and Zambia was a disreputable nowhere, and Mozambique was proxy war and ambush and mortar attacks, but Zimbabwe was hope and promise and Victoria Falls, light and air and elephants, a storm of jacaranda blossoms all the way down the wide, wide boulevards of Bulawayo, my home for a year. Never once was Africa an implacable brooding, an inscrutable frenzy. It was a trance of sunshine. I was only eighteen, and Zimbabwe was only nine, and it became playground, incitement, and crucible for the Hippo Gypsies: Church, Simon, Nicole, and me.

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Things started with my first encounter, at sixteen, with Jack Kerouac's mind-widening 1957 novel, *On The Road*, and they climaxed, three years later, with the river deep, mountain high victory of the Hippo Gypsies over parochial authority in a cinderblock cabin on the banks of the Zambezi river, in Zimbabwe.

I was tipped off by the 10 000 Maniacs song "Hey Jack Kerouac" and went down to Bookland and bought the Signet 25th anniversary paperback edition of *On The Road*. It sat in a pile of books at the foot of my bed for a couple of weeks or months before I got around to it but, when I did, it left me pop-eyed with awe on the floor. Since then, of course, I've been told over and over

again what an embarrassment Kerouac was, and is, and how his typing-not-writing style ruined every young writer who ever came to it, and how all that Beat Generation stuff is a lot of misogynistic bunk, and so on and so forth, but that first time, and many subsequent times, *On The Road* was nothing less than a ripe overburst of American joy that made me want to dance down the street and jump up and down and be so excited with life I could hardly get a word out. Before *Road* I'd never thought of traveling; it had never even crossed my mind. I had some murky image of college in Vancouver, maybe, and a wife and a job, something mildly academic, probably teaching, like my dad, and a house with a guest room and a macramé owl on the wall. The usual fussy dignities. In just under 300 pages Kerouac nullified those half-formed notions entirely; the world opened up wide; pure and ragged visions shot across my imagination like fireworks. It was the hitchhiking and drinking and frantic movement, and it was the two main characters, Dean and Sal, the wild, yea-saying maniacal hero and his shy and shambling follower. The action, and the recording of the action. When Sal said, "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion," something chimed sympathetically in my chest. And I wanted to *be* Dean Moriarty and be mad to live, mad to talk, desirous of everything at the same time. Things had changed.

Behind was Vernon: high school hassles, minimum wage at Kentucky Fried Chicken, getting beat up at the library, main street rooftops, rafts of bad poetry, domestic strife, my friends gearing up for college, Laara's purple underpants, the *Batman* soundtrack, our teenage turpitude, our drunks in the park. The regular and unsurprising tussles, the predictable scramblings for position and attention. But my upcoming year in Zimbabwe gave me a certain distinction and status, a cool glow in my gang. This wasn't hitchhiking to Kamloops, this was Africa, dense,

trackless *Africa*—desert caravans, pyramids, crocodiles, Kilimanjaro, tiny Lucy in her pebbly grave, gorillas in the mist, the tree where man was born. *Africa*. And *Africa* is what my friends always said, never Zimbabwe; nobody else knew where Zimbabwe was either. So: ahead was immeasurable Africa and unparalleled Hippo Gypsy adventure therein and, beyond that, on the other side, two weeks of homelessness in London on the way home, shitting in jars for a week so my doctor could check for parasites, Laara tenderly but firmly gone, work and whiskey and dishwasher steams and chambermaid dims and the struggle for survival in Tofino, Banff, Saskatoon, Vernon; hangovers and college classrooms and Amsterdam and Chichen Itza and Auschwitz and Bali and China and Japan, my mother dead and my best friend dead, marriage and sons, accumulated clutter, the stuff that doesn't go away, mishaps and surrenders and lying in the dark, remembering the ripe light in Bulawayo, the Indian Ocean at Amanzimtoti, the frenzy of stars in Botswana's wide, wide desert sky.

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I loved Nicole the best but I met Church first. Church was a big, shy, ungainly misfit, but we didn't care about that. We were all misfits. Church was weird, yes, but there was a moody, cynical wit behind his misfit shyness. Behind him you could sense dim and lonely Wisconsin basement bedrooms, carefully concealed anger and disgust, thwarted hungers. He seemed genuinely mystified when my second host mother adopted a sympathetically maternal pose toward him, as if he needed help, friends, kindness, counsel. "She treated me like I was *handicapped*," he brooded. He was quiet and watchful and sardonic and grumpy but he was also capable of sudden, gleeful outbursts and he was by far the funniest of us all in his dark and

sometimes sorrowful way. Church and I were fixated on the film version of *1984* and I was delighted by his John Hurt impressions, half-tribute and half-lampoon. “With the smell of cheap perfume and dead insects,” he’d intone, “I went ahead and did it just the same.” Smart and observant, Church was a genius photographer, a true artist; he paid close attention and his eye got the country and the people and us: the high curving stone walls of Great Zimbabwe, capital of an ancient Shona kingdom; curio vendors under a Malawian summer sky; shy Alice, six years old, at Monkey Paw Bay; Simon and I sharing a cot and smoking, shirtless, in the Zambezi cabin; Nicole, sad and watchful on the hotel veranda in Marondera.

Simon was weird, too, but in other, wilder directions. He was built of pure, uninhibited Australian spontaneity; the usual proprieties had no power over him. Impulsive, unschooled, a constant surprise. He was muscular, an athlete—rugby, I think—with a flip of blonde hair dangling down his forehead. I always had the impression that, before Zimbabwe, he’d repressed his tenderer side, or sides, and had played the beer-swilling jock because he didn’t know what else to do and there was no room to manoeuvre. As a Hippo Gypsy he was free to rage and goof and groan however he wanted to. He came down to see me in Bulawayo; we roamed all over town, looking for trouble and kicks. “Whoo!” yelled Simon, billowing smoke. “Let’s go find some racists to beat up!” He had a thing for chickens; he was an enthusiast and a connoisseur; he even had a chicken shirt, a t-shirt covered in chicken pictures. “My favourite animal!” he’d holler, doing a strange chicken strut down the road. For some reason we decided we needed caveman names, and Simon’s was the best: *Eggnog*.

Nicole, Nicole, Nicole. An indefinable charm, yes, but also something mannish, or even almost

seraphically coarse, in her face and eyes. Something intelligent, too, and almost wary, almost cautious, despite her own appetites for booze and weed and wildness. In the first week of our acquaintance, at a Rotary function, some dinner somewhere, Nicole and I got drunk and snuck into the bathroom and locked the door and started kissing, desirous, furious, and later I went down on her in somebody's front yard, the sun coming up, Nicole lying on her back, legs wide, smoking and laughing while I did my eighteen-year-old best below. It was unhip to be over-particular, to be finicky or hesitant; the scene we created around ourselves was about the perfect *now*, and who cares about tomorrow. Nicole could accept anything with a shrug. I always wanted and needed her more than she wanted or needed me; there was something aloof and cool about her, something that sat back, in the dark, watching. That was I all needed to fall all the way, and when you're eighteen there's no bottom.

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August, 1989. The sunset in Harare had green in it. Nervous, very far from Vernon, overseas for the first time, seeing my first green sunset, I checked with the Zimbabwean guy next to me that this was the plane to Bulawayo. "Bulawayo?" he said, wide-eyed. "This plane is going to *Johannesburg*." He laughed, not unkindly, at my dismay. "Just kidding," he said.

Bulawayo—which means *the place of the killing*—is in the southwest of the country, in Matabeleland. Seven years before I got there Mugabe had unleashed his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade on the area in order to destroy political opponents and mostly imaginary "dissidents." Fifth Brigade was known as *Gukurahundi*: the wind that blows away the chaff.

Composed of Shona soldiers who answered only to Mugabe, Fifth Brigade rampaged through the primarily Ndebele lands of western Zimbabwe, murdering as many as 20,000 civilians over the course of four years. “First you will eat your chickens, then your goats, then your cattle, then your donkeys,” said a Fifth Brigade officer, explaining his force’s systematic starvation policy to shuddering villagers. “Then you will eat your children and finally you will eat the dissidents.” But I didn’t know about any of that, then. People weren’t telling that story.

It was a weird life, though. It took six weeks for letters to get to Canada, and at least six weeks for an answer, from my best friend, from my parents, from Laara. International phone calls were haunted by cosmic static and befuddling delays. Bulawayo was weird. The accents were weird, and so were the words: *howzit*, *borehole*, *kopje*, *lekker*, *skaaver*. The underflowing suspicions and resentments and fears were weird: dogs, guards, glass-shard-topped walls. School was weird: uniforms, paddlings, prefects. Having servants was weird. Banda, the gardener, killing a cobra by the hedge with a hoe was weird. But you sink into it; at eighteen it’s easy, it’s light as ashes. *ALL NEW WORLD*, Simon wrote to me, later. *ALIVE*.

All new world. The vast slants of light in the centre of town in the afternoon. The ramshackle kapenta boats on Lake Kariba at night. My pal David’s mother sitting amused and quiet in the kitchen as we yell and laugh, cooking up a steaming mess of *sadza* for supper while David’s little brother Maceo, three years old, stands potbellied in the doorway, chattering at me in Shona. Perfect things. An elephant skin hipflask, half-jacks of ouzo, *mrimba* thumb pianos. The theatre in Marondera where you could drink *and* smoke. Rhinos, flying ants, guinea fowl, leopards, zebras, snakes. The domestic with my second family who poured bug poison on his head to kill

the ants he felt running around in his brain. Fire trees, fever-trees, musasa and marula trees, baobabs, flamboyants, mopane scrub, broad-leaved rattlepod, milk-rope, starstalk, purple joyweed, sticky love grass, Zambezi wine-spike. Two beers: Lion and Castle, in bottles without labels, usually, so you had to check the cap. My favourite drinking spot: the Selborne Hotel bar, on Leopold Takawira Avenue downtown, not far from City Hall, among the wide streets, the colonial arches, no women allowed, two Zimbabwean dollars for a pack of Madisons and a bottle of Castle beer. Madison cigarettes, proclaimed the package, were *Toasted*. I sat in the Selborne Hotel bar and smoked and drank and thought about the Hippo Gypsies and felt very Kerouacian indeed.

My Rotary Club's weekly luncheons were held in the Selborne Hotel; they were stuffy and dull and the only good thing about them was I could get out of school to attend. One week the club's outgoing student, Babette Gray, was introduced. She was going to Germany for her year abroad. She gave a little speech and smiled a lot. After lunch I galloped outside to talk to her as she walked away down the sun-shot sidewalk, on her way back to Girl's College. I yelled her name and she turned around in radiant, cinematic slow motion, smiling. Freckled, blonde, pretty without being too sure about it. A trance of sunlight; perfect things. She was later my date at the big dance at *my* school, Christian Brothers College. I got drunk and fell over. There were difficulties. "I hate the way you live out of that book," she said. She meant *On The Road*. Twenty years later, going through a divorce, she came to visit me in Japan. It was good to see her. Her Zimbabwean accent brought the whole country back, the red earth, the View of the World, bus station clamour, cricket on Christmas Day, the way her maid Sheila said *Jason*, my little host brothers and sister dancing ecstatically on the lawn during the first rain of the year.

Around the time I met the other Hippo Gypsies I was about to move to my third host family, the Conrads. My first family had been wealthy white Catholics with a big house and a pool and tennis courts and lots of kids; I was a loudmouth atheist punk and there'd been some friction. My second family had given me a lot of freedom and space and I didn't want to move. Paul and Cynthia Conrad turned out, however, to be the easiest-going, non-flakiest couple I'd ever met. They were great. Paul didn't give a damn about anything; Cynthia exuded an utterly generous, totally bullshit-free practicality. I ended up spending a lot of time with their kids, especially four-year-old Martin. He'd tell me scrambled versions of fairy tales in his weird accent. "And Goldilocks said, this porridge is *too tasty*." Because I'd already graduated from high school in Canada Paul and Cynthia thought going to CBC every day was a waste of time and were happy to write notes excusing me for the day or the week. "Why sit around in a classroom?" Paul'd ask. "Go hang out with your friends." One night he took Simon, Church, Nicole and me to an outdoor bar in a black township. We drank soapy beer out of communal plastic buckets and ate roasted beetles and yelled smiling talk with everybody. At some point a policeman came up to us and, very politely, suggested we leave. "Is there some kind of problem?" Paul asked. "Not yet," said the cop, "but there could be." Paul bought us a case of beer on the way home. We drank it around the pool. He'd told us a story about a friend of his in college who would strip, roll up newspapers, set them on fire, and run through pubs with the newspaper clenched between his buttocks, so of course we tried it. I can still see Simon standing there, smoking a placid cigarette, a flaming newspaper sticking out of his ass, and Nicole sitting in the dark, smiling.

Why sit around in a classroom? Christian Brothers College was a daily skirmish between the sixth form prefects and me and my school pal Andy Anderson. The prefects, whose high and mighty responsibility it was to enforce school discipline, applied themselves to the job of catching Andy and I smoking. They never could; we slipped away, laughing. School was limits and rigidity, humourless assistant headmasters, the usual mix of bullies and collaborators. The headmaster was a member of my Rotary club; I had to be careful; there was always the threat of being sent home. Rotary's four big rules for its exchange students: no drinking, no drugs, no dating, no driving. Nobody interesting paid the slightest bit of attention to any of them but we had to step lightly, sometimes. There were other, harder-to-see constraints and hazards too. The monster of race was always there, looming, Rhodes-shaped, over the country, over the continent. I'd always thought that bone-deep racism came with horns and fangs and claws, with scales, with an idiotic, animal frenzy. I didn't know it could crawl and squirm behind the kindest eyes, the most generous, grandmotherly faces. Bulawayo's white community had a taut rope of tension running through the middle of it; you could feel it thrumming behind the glass-shard-topped fences, hear it in the talk, see it in the Rhodesian flag hidden behind the door. It set traps and limits in the day. "You'll never understand it," Andy said to me, sighing, tired of my eager, pedantic talk. "I know feeling this way is wrong, but it's in me too deep. I had family members killed in the war and racist hate poured into me since I was a baby. It's too late for me." We left it at that. There was nowhere else to go.

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Church and I met Nicole and Simon on a Rotary-arranged trip to Malawi in February 1990 and during that week we were pulled together by youth and the glories of exploration and became a gang. We called ourselves The Hippo Gypsies; I can't remember who came up with that, or why, but it stuck. We smoked Life brand cigarettes and drank and yelled, we sang along to the Violent Femmes in the back of the *kombi* somewhere near the Mozambique border, we goofed in the market and wrestled in the van, we dug hippo traps with our legs in the sand. Beer bottles clanked under our beds. One day the Peace Corps took us out to a dusty and necessitous village where we played soccer with a lumpy, lopsided ball and were soundly beaten by the barefoot kids flashing around; we stood panting and coughing on the ragged field. A guy thrummed a guitar made out of twigs and a tin box and the assembled kids sang for us, rich and beautiful. This was the actual mud-hut thorn-scrub African heart of pennilessness we'd heard about and those kids sang and sang. "Holy shit," we said, sweating, wide-eyed, happy, crackling and twanging with youth. We got loaded on gin and tonics on the flight back to Zimbabwe and swore we'd never forget and would stay Hippo Gypsies forever.

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I was off to Harare, where Church and Simon lived, every chance I got. I'd take the awful, lurching trains, or hitchhike, and get to Harare and rush to meet Church and go drinking downtown. We'd talk to anybody: diamond miners, street weirdos, prostitutes, Rotarians, truck drivers, kids. For some reason Church and I decided to hitch and meet in KweKwe, halfway between Harare and Bulawayo; on the street there we fell in with some white stoners who took us into the bush and got us high. "I came out here one time and the local witch doctor got mad

‘cause I was too close to his hut or something and so he used his magic to blow up my Coke bottle,” the leader said, solemnly nodding. Once, on the road, I saw Mugabe’s motorcade go by: outlying cops on motorcycles, trucks full of soldiers, a big Mercedes, an ambulance, more soldiers, more cops. Mugabe, who would ruin the country. And there was the afternoon, sometime near the end, when Church and I hitched to Marondera, where Nicole lived, and met her at the hotel downtown. She was quiet, abstracted: her father had died. She was flying back to Australia. Death had descended on our frantic, youthful scene. The next morning I kissed her, stole one of her sweaters, and hitched back to Harare. Hitching was never a problem for us; usually the first white to come by would pick you up.

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Everything vortexed together during our week camping on the Zambezi river that June. Church and I were leaving soon and this was our final blow-out bash and jubilee. We stayed in a cabin that was cinderblock up to about chest-level, and then chickenwire to the roof, and cacophonous with African wildlife noise, dark laughter, high wild talk. The cement floor ash-scattered and high and cluttered with cots and cameras and bottles of ouzo. Church and Simon and I went looking for baboons in a wide, dry riverbed; later, in camp, a guide said he’d gone after us and found lion tracks on top of ours in the sand. What else? An elephant in the bush behind the cabin swinging its gigantic head to look at me as I tiptoed closer to get a photograph, or Simon standing undaunted in the middle of the road as a bull elephant advanced, flapping its ears, and the rest of us shuffled quietly backwards and the guide hissed “Simon! *Simon!*” We spent whole days canoeing down the Zambezi, suntanning naked, smoking, singing, watching crocodiles slide

silently off the banks. “There’s no danger from crocs, *if* you stay out of the water,” one of our guides told us. “So stay out of the water.” The hippos posed the greater danger, he said. “If they’ve got babies with them and you get between them and land, they’ll jump off the bottom, capsize your boat, and bite you and kill you.” We’d be drifting lazily—Simon trying to buy dope from farmers on the Zambian side—and a hippo would surface, snorting, downriver. We’d paddle carefully around and then get out on a sandbar and have a hippo shit fight. We’d meet up now and then with the other students, drifting in their own canoes. One of the girls dropped her paddle; it sank to the sandy bottom. Simon and I stared at each other, both knowing this was the moment, both wanting to be heroic and rescue the paddle and show off for the girls, but we were paralyzed, fearful of the Zambezi’s myriad toothy dangers. Simon suddenly plunged into the river—clear and not particularly deep at that point— and then, like a cartoon cannonball, exploded straight up out of the water and into the boat in one incredible, terrified leap. He lay there, panting and triumphant, while Church and I gaped at him with astonishment and pride.

Our days. Our fully open, unrestrained days.

We shrugged off all responsibility, all pretence and control; we kicked ourselves free of limits and supervision and careened, yawping and howling, wherever the night and noise took us. It was the final, ecstatic phase. Our chaperones gave our depraved cabin a wide berth, like you’d do with a mother hippo in the river. We’d finally achieved the ragged exultation of unrestricted freedom we’d been chasing across the country and through Malawi and Botswana and South Africa and Swaziland. Could that have only happened in Africa? On the banks of an African river? In the animal-busy bush? If we’d all met up in say, Sweden, would the same sort of thing

have happened? In India? Did it happen to Babette in Germany? Did it happen in Wisconsin, Melbourne, Vernon? Did the echoes reach Nicole, fatherless in Broome?

Weeks later it was break up and scatter. Church was already gone; Nicole was back in Zimbabwe but farther away than ever; Simon was drunk in the airport. We planned to meet up in Piccadilly Circus on New Years Eve, 1991, a big reunion in a year and half. We were too close, too welded together, too attached to our story not to be a gang forever. The Hippo Gypsies loomed large in our personal legends; it felt like the pearl had been handed to us. I flew to London for two weeks of adventurous homelessness that left me, finally, wandering Trafalgar Square with no money and a broken nose. The adventure was over. I flew home.

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Back in drowsical Vernon, commonplace, again, at nineteen. “Any sexual contact in Africa?” my doctor asked. “We’d better get you an AIDS test.” I’d hitchhiked alone across Zimbabwe and now my parents wanted me in the house by midnight. There were stiff and dreary scenes. My Vernon friends had limited patience for my stories about people and places far away. You only get so much time and now I was back in the same restricted little boat with them anyway. The Hippo Gypsies couldn’t survive in Canada. I turned them into stories and then I turned them into lapse and lack.

Church, came to see me, twice; both times were difficult. We squinted at each other. Weird jealousies arose. We sent each other enormous letters for a while and then he disappeared. A

mutual friend told me, many years later, that Church talked about the Hippo Gypsies all the time. “Like it was yesterday,” he said. “So alive in his head still. To the point where reliving those memories was more important to him than being in the moment or continuing on outside of Zimbabwe.” The grim realities of afterwards were too grim, too real. Everything was a disappointment after sun-smashed Africa. And Nicole, just before she was sent home for good following some final unforgivable Rotary transgression or another, wrote to me and asked, “What did you do to Simon? He’s just like you now.”

The Hippo Gypsies never met up in London or anywhere else.

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Was Africa just one wild gigantic swerve in otherwise more or less ordinary lives? We went a little crazy for a while and then turned to the serious things, the usual things? Is that what happened? I don’t know. Church withdrew; Simon and Nicole went back to Australia and married other people and had beautiful golden kids; I gloomed in Vancouver Island restaurant kitchens and plummeted drunk in Banff and slopped unhappily around Vernon before signing up, finally, for school. But thanks to Zimbabwe I had developed a taste for non-native experience, for not belonging, for anti-belonging, for distance, for weirdness, for independence, for licence, and as soon as I finished college I was off again, to Japan, and another all new world, alive.

“For while there’s life, there’s indefinable charm,” Kerouac wrote. “Ripeness is all.”

That there may be more to life than ripeness was an understanding that came later. There is some regret from the days when we were young and unconfined in Africa, when we didn't know and didn't care and went ahead and did it, just the same. *Unconfined* meant adventure and kicks and beauty, perfect things, trances of sunshine, yes, but it also meant that our recklessness and greed were unconfined, too, that we were sometimes stupid with impulse, that we were often heedless of all those all around us who lived with snakes and dust without access to the freedom we enjoyed so loudly and well. But it would be untrue to say I don't love the Hippo Gypsies. We were stupid and crazy, but we were beautiful, too. In a beautiful country we expanded and opened up, to each other, to connection, to difference, to misfit display, to strangeness, newness, sweetness. We jumped up and down and we leapt in, which is how you learn.

And now almost thirty years later, in my Japanese house, with my shelf of books on Zimbabwe and Ghana and South Africa and Nigeria, with an *On The Road* poster on my office wall, with my wife and my sons safely asleep upstairs, each in their characteristic sprawl, with Mugabe dead at last, I sit in the dark and remember. I don't want to go back, to Zimbabwe in its first decade, its season of lost purity, back to when I was a Hippo Gypsy and young and clear. I am now a vast and uneasy conglomerate but I don't want to go back, knowing what I know, because I'd ruin all the perfect things. I know I would. But yet. But yet. I sit in the dark and think about the Hippo Gypsies, about Church and Simon and Nicole, I talk to them in an everlasting confab, and I remember Zimbabwe in its youth, the light in the afternoon in downtown Bulawayo, an immensity of African sunlight slanting down the wide, wide streets, wide enough for a full team

of horses and wagon to turn around in, as I was repeatedly told, and I guess it's probably true.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I'm routinely accused of living too much in the past, and it may even be true, but I'm fascinated by the intersection of memory and history and ghosts and echoes and clues, which are some of the things I look at, or try to, in *The Hippo Gypsies*. I think it's possible to be homesick for a time as well as for a place and I wanted to save that particular time and place—Zimbabwe in the late 1980s—from vanishing. Writing about things I've done and seen is a way to keep the door to the past from slamming shut on me. So that's going on. This piece is also a love letter to Jack Kerouac and travel and books and old friends and being eighteen and at large in the world. Kerouac once instructed writers to "be in love with your life." *The Hippo Gypsies* is a small part of that project.*

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