

Us Living So Closely

For us living so closely together in camp there is little privacy. Few walls, no screens or glass, two shared tables. There are bars on the cabin windows, because monkeys are thieves, but they do nothing for sight or sound. In my first weeks I greeted everyone, now a small nod at most. Definitely no talking on the path to and from the *cho* (the toilet). This is two cement holes in the ground with a rusting tin sheet in between; the goal is to arrive alone. It is also the goal to see nothing, but N's headlamp falls in there and the yawning pit is dimly, hideously illuminated for a week. I hold my breath while I go, in case a fly should come up out of the hole and into my mouth.

Daybreak's rising heat forces me early from my tent into the chorusing throng of creatures teeny and robust, night-noisers passing the baton to day-noisers. The men in camp start their work as soon as they wake. There are only several jobs to be done, a few things to pound and chop, but the pounding and chopping is never over. Peanuts (pounding) and firewood (chopping), mostly. Fruit falls from trees (thump) and is then prepared (chop). There is staticky music (thump), a radio evangelist auctioneering his ware with cadence and stamina (chop) in a language I don't understand. Over my tent is a tin roof on stilts, and over that a fruit tree. Things eat there after dark, messily, and the *clang* of figs on the roof startles me awake, night after night. They roll down and off, nestling into the dry, shallow trough that surrounds my tent moat-like, hollowed by sheets of rainwater runoff. A rogue and solitary hammerhead bat makes his temporary home above the shelter, or under sometimes, with me. He's huge – wings three feet across – the encyclopedia calls him “megabat”. And *Hypsignathus monstrosus*. I'm glad to hear those wings at dusk, *whomp whomp* as he plucks and settles, but I'm also glad not to see him. In the weak dawn light I raise the wrong mug to my lips and realize *this is not a teabag* at all, but another bat, tiny and asleep, who maybe climbed in for the honey and there dozed off. I tip her over the railing, and she sails gently away.

When chores are through I'm always reading. Right now, a novel about a disfigured gamer in Los Angeles, and another about the unsolved murder of an Irish recluse. Two British expressions I wish I could integrate into my own speech without seeming a pretentious usurper: *muggins*, a silly way to refer to yourself, as in “who do you think arrived with two different socks on? Muggins, that's who”. And *twig*, to catch on to something. Like “because you logged in with your nickname, I didn't twig it was you”.

Two things A. says that remind me of the taste of my own language. When I ask to accompany him into the forest he replies, “You're welcome!” as if I'd already thanked him. And if I request he point out Baez to me, should he see her in the forest, he replies, “Yes please!” as if I'd offered a slice of cake instead of asking a favor. Today I fall into a kind of Who's On First routine with a ranger who arrives to the dusty car battery that serves as charging station, just as I disconnect from a staticky overseas call. He announces, “You are talking to John.” I say, “No, I wasn't, I was talking to my friend,” and he again says, “You are talking to John,” and I say, “That wasn't John, that was my friend.” I finally twig (!) that he is introducing himself. Hello, John.

There is sometimes the crunch of shells underfoot, where baboons have pried a hand-sized snail off a tree and crushed it to get to the insides. Snails are awful to see this large – bizarre and unsettling, particularly when I come upon them locked together in their slick mating embrace. Figs are never-ending in their varieties, each one filled inside with silent larvae. Families of butterflies cluster on the red of my backpack, slowly pedaling, sipping, when I stand still. The enthusiastic cricket near my sleeping head has found a new home thank god; a civet came creeping and croaking past last night about 3am. Elephants are back in the southern sector, no buffalo sightings in a while. Patterns of tropical life.

I follow Benny over a crossing of the Wantabu, a river at the northwest territory rim I've not seen before. The group ranges loosely down the slope, narrowing over the water to single file across a string of flat stones, then spreads its way up again, toward some distant fig behemoth. He crosses the river with unsteady hops, arms out like a tight-roper, and I laugh out loud. Lita's left foot is missing from a hunter's snare, and she walks awkwardly on the stump like a cartoon pirate. Rather than sitting upright on her as a jockey would, her son rides kind of sliding off the left side of her back, like someone slowly falling off a horse. I decide to follow females instead and, with their circling to avoid me, I spend two hours in the jungliest jungle possible, covered with biting ants so tiny they squeeze past the buttons on my shirt, through the buttonhole, to ravage the virgin skin on my stomach and waist. In my desperation to escape their hordes, I come up helplessly, again and again, on dense bank and deep water. Finally a downed tree offers a trembling bridge and I bushwhack laboriously to higher ground. Exhausted, I wait at a spot I guess the females might come to, once they think they've lost me, and they do: victory (of a kind) is mine. I gaze in triumph down over the valley's tangled vigor and drink my lukewarm water, sedimenty with electrolyte tablet.

After I return from the forest, I make myself a snack of little sour oranges, sectioning them with the rough knife missing its handle, and a tin mug of cold tea. The weekly groceries have arrived, carried in on porters' heads from Bigodi village, and I stack them in the wooden cupboard, our feeble defense against mice. I place several dusty bunches of wilted leaves tied with string to the side, unsure whether to toss them into the nearby brush. When J. steps onto the porch, with a blue plastic tub of clean cups and cutlery, I gesture at the bunches with my mug, as a question. J. looks me in the face as he lowers his load and says, "It is tea". To not recognize even what is in my own mouth: I am an American.

At Halloween we use candles and Scrabble tiles for a séance. I ask my grandma if she's made it from Florida, where she died, to my grandfather's side at the cemetery in Pennsylvania. I choose seven letters from a velvet bag and they spell out *we at pip*. It turns out that *pip* is N's childhood nickname, sitting to my right, our knees touching. Hello, grandma.

In the nearest town for Thanksgiving, a rooster crows outside my door at 4:45am - my individual door, which opens onto the interior hallway of the hotel. There is no toilet seat or shower head, no soap or toilet paper. Two of the bed legs have been replaced with cinder blocks, and still the

luxury astounds. After breakfast I go to release a hand-sized cockroach from the wastebasket prison I contrived last midnight and discover it is no longer there; I stand in a plastic tub to shower. The clouded mirror turns my attention to how I look, a novelty at once compelling and unwelcome. I'm reminded of A.'s comment on the value of children – when you are old and ugly, who will make sure that your husband continues to provide you with a house? And the rather more poignant, “Who will bring you water when you're too old to get it yourself?”

If A. were at a gathering and wine were being passed, he would never accept a sip before a man who had more wives than he. He explains that a man with several wives has expertise managing complex situations (true, that) and is worthy of respect. In Rukiga: *ibanyi* (my husband), *ibanyiitwe* (our husband), *eihato* (rivalry of wives). A waitress, the only local woman I've spoken to in five months, tells me about the tiny covered baskets I've bought. You crack coffee berries with your own teeth, lay them in the sun to dry, collect them together again, and then offer them to visitors to chew when they arrive at your home. To me it seems almost like kissing, a step removed, both matter-of-fact and intimate.

I travel to the government offices, where there is no glass in the windows, and park the jeep sideways across red mud canyons carved by fifty rainy seasons. The secretary wears flip flops with her grey office-lady suit, and as we arrive she slips them off to tuck her bare feet up under her thighs. She and S. have never met but she is delighted by his broad smile, and the conversation (which is not about my in-hand visa documents) begins. S. inquires after her grandparents, and tells her that his own grandmother is 120 years old. He notes that she still has every one of her teeth and, though she can no longer hear or walk, is generally considered a great success. This he attributes partly to her regular consumption of simsim, the local ground sesame powder. The secretary nods and agrees. She then adds that her own neighbor is 200 years old, and also eats a good deal of simsim. S. nods and agrees that this is impressive; they smile without making eye contact. After 25 minutes S. wonders aloud if the closed door to the inner office might open before lunchtime. The secretary muses that it may do so, or it may not. I silently consider the sign above the door: “I am Ugandan: just, productive, orderly, patriotic”.

I eat lasagna at the hotel with the flushing toilet, use their wifi to restock my Kindle, and return to the office lady. While I navigate the murky visa-renewal process, I have to leave my passport here in this office, with these rifled men. An alternative is to take a bus into Rwanda and try to buy a visa upon reentry, but that feels even dicier. While I wait, I doodle a floor plan for the beach cottage I'm going to have in the Florida Keys when my ship comes in. The white(ish) taxi vans that occasionally pass are painted with slogans, many religious, others simply encouraging. Allahu Akhbar, God Saves, Never Give Up, Hope Is Eternal, Love Each Other. There is one I've seen around a few times that says “Team Up All Night”, which doesn't inspire confidence. Businesses too: Jesus Loves You Supermarket, God Is Able Hair Salon.

Also in Rukiga: *omu-himbi* (poet), *omwezi* (moon), *gwejegyeraho* (to nap). Whale, no. But wench, yes: *omu-kazi ishiki*.

On the return trip an eight inch piece of rebar lodges in the rear tire, and the gluey red mud makes snowshoes out of our sneakers as we hover uselessly around the men solving the problem. I wrap my feet in paper once we're on the move again, and hold aloft for two hours the thirty raw eggs that are my charge.

Mushrooms push their soft fingers up everywhere, tiny glistening rock crevices, broad slopes of fallen tree, long damp ridges routed by foraging pigs, slick miniature pools collecting in liana whorls suspended above the ground. Red fluted umbrellas so delicate they're torn by the paddling legs of traveling insects no bigger than seeds. Creamy, translucent knobs huddling together by the thousands. Broad, tough, brown-streaked fans a foot across, spindly sprouts wavering from the dense loam into the weak filtered light. Ghostly black columns like children's pinkies that nose up in dusky colonies, breathing out clouds of lingering dust when my feet punch through. We visit a place at the base of a tiny waterfall where an elephant, wounded by poachers, finally collapsed to die. The bones have lain in the water for eight years, blackening with sediment; a femur longer than my entire leg; several vertebrae I could have lifted over my head, to settle heavy on my shoulders.

I cross a clear-cut jeep trail high on a ridge and two jeweled dung beetles choreograph to trundle away what baboons left behind. The baboons themselves linger on the path in the distance, glaring in my direction, sitting back on their haunches with one arm outstretched for their unsteady babies and the other resting wrist-on-knee. Elephants move in herds through the forest, walking single file on our trails if they're useful and making their own if they're not. Chimpanzees cross water at open places, like we do, stepping carefully from one flat rock to another, checking their feet for mud. But elephants cross water wherever they like, churning everything to mash, lying in the low areas and sprawling their legs wide. I press through their soggy churn, praying that snakes are not. Alone one hot day, an error in judgment: I sink suddenly and without warning above both knees. I can't bend, there is no leverage, nothing to pull. My arms disappear above the elbow when I try to push, and I am afraid. I've just finished a Swedish crime novel where the lead detective has nightmares that he's an ox slowly suffocating in deep mud. Also that scene from *NeverEnding Story*, with the white horse disappearing beneath the sand, nostrils flaring, eyes rolling, from my childhood. More practically, I am horrified of my boots being suctioned off my feet, and they nearly are. I twist my right leg hard to create liquid space, and hear the strain pop in my knee. I lay flat, with my cheek against the mud to spread wide enough as I drag one leg higher inch by inch. I slick along on my stomach to a heavy mat of flowering weeds; I stagger upright, one eye closed tight against the clinging mud, and heavier by what feels like thirty pounds. My own stench keeps me moving the two uphill miles to camp. Rainy season is almost upon us, so I feel less guilty about the long gush of water from the rain tank, sluicing off the caking. What satisfaction, to watch my boots reappear from their sludgy blocks, and buttons resurface from my pant legs. A snail shell shard emerges from a cargo pocket.

There are lizards everywhere (one popped out of the fridge box two days ago); those living in the pole sleeves of my tent rustle all night. During a recent sleep-in, I awake to the sound and sight

of a big skink eating a smaller skink alive on the tent mesh above my head. It takes 45 minutes. Later I watch motionless, socks in hand, as an eagle drops directly into camp to seize a gecko sunning on a dirt mound near my tent. It flies off low and slow, straight up the camp road, the thing piteously dangling from one clenched talon. I later tell my 3-year old niece about it in an email - she has a great love for birds since they got backyard chickens. Her advice in response (transcribed by my sister) is "If you jump off a big cliff, you have to wear a hot air balloon". If I work on my computer after darkness falls, the screen glow attracts buggy fliers by the hundreds. They bounce off my face and chest while I write, some small, some huge: moths, grasshoppers, crickets, a praying mantis. As I lay in my tent at night, the light from my headlamp attracts them to land on the outside, as close as they can get to the source, and I watch their heavy bodies and tiny feet patter in shadow up and down the nylon slope. At dusk, a dazed bat strikes my forehead with a soft grunt.

My body learns the rhythm of hard work and small injury, regular food and regular sleep, weather's constant skin feel. I've seen my face only twice in ten days. I show up for dinner with my hair uncombed and wearing socks with my flip flops. All of us five spit right off the porch when we brush teeth, and my damp socks hang, slowly drying, next to the dinner table. Every time I pee I am squatting, and I don't drop the curtain unless I actually hear someone on the path - yesterday a large bird stood and watched me from arm's length, head cocked to the side. I hike for nine hours, I refill jerrycans with water from the rain tank, I sweep out my tent, I eat, I read, and I sleep. I make no lists because there is nothing that needs doing that is not an obvious sequela to what I have in-progress. I speak when I have something to say, but not otherwise. We never mention each other, to each other. At first because someone could overhear you, but soon because silent observation becomes the way of doing everything.

J.'s faded chest tattoo reminds me of a scarification ritual I read about in *Euphoria*, an initiation rite for pre-teen boys in New Guinea in the 1930's: hundreds of tiny cuts made in the back and the upper arms, then a mud and citrus paste rubbed in. The resulting scars resemble crocodile skin; the tough hide a permanent and visible marker of masculinity. This day we find only Miles, in the late afternoon. I am under his tree with my binoculars staring straight up when he drops a nut straight down, from 100 feet. It cuts open the bridge of my nose and now this little u-shaped scar reminds me of my own tender flesh.

I share a Werther's on the trail, and G. thanks me by closing his huge rough hands over mine. At his skin's warmth I remember the rise and fall of cats' sleep against my own. Heat moves through the forest and over my body in heavy ownership; I am never touched here.

Alone in the forest, I see a "golden cat", something I'd previously thought of as a magical friendly creature, the sort to wear a little hat in a children's story. This is not so. I am sitting motionless in the middle of a trail, gazing northward with a rare, open sightline, waiting for chimpanzees, and the golden cat simply crosses, oblivious and muscularly silent. I am rooted to the spot for ten minutes making absolutely sure no cubs came trundling, and then another ten rehearsing my

fight moves, should it come to that. I hurry southward and west, swinging my arms wide from the shoulders to make myself larger. Or like I'm capable of anything.

Rainforest chimpanzees, and the human cultures they inspire, are vanishing. In August 2016 I traveled 7200 miles from upstate New York to Kibale National Park in western Uganda for five months of remote tent-living, binoculars in hand. The world that is Ngogo - the more than 200 individual chimpanzees that live there, and the researchers who sleep, eat, and work in the forest to record their lives – is a breathing, blended archive of the ancient and the modern, stories ready and unfolding. The opportunity to put language to moments of wild living, as a close witness to personal story both human and chimpanzee, is rare. I am grateful to the ones who came before me, and to the ones who make the protection of these lives their own life's work.

Dogwood, Vol. 21, 2022