

**TOM DREYER***A novel extract and an essay***From *Equatoria***

(2006)

[...]

Early afternoon. The settlement was shimmering with heat. The river was a smouldering stretch of sludge. On the opposite bank three white herons broke the uniform green of the jungle. They gazed at their reflections in the water. Eventually one ruffled itself out of its trance. It examined its surroundings, then flung back its white comb to call. The sound drifted low over the water, slapping against the quay and the veranda of the *Metropole Hotel* where two weary travellers sat talking.

Willis Reed's leggings creaked as he settled his legs on a footstool. The stopper of a beer bottle jiggled between his fingers. It was made of shiny porcelain, with a little red unicorn on it, as well as the name of a brewery. At the lower end was a loop of wire that had once attached the stopper to a bottle of Belgian lager.

Willis could still remember the beer hall where he had bought it, in the heart of Antwerp, close to the zoo where he had just met with a panel of curators and money-lenders. After these negotiations he'd greeted the men one-by-one and assured them that he wouldn't let them down. He whistled as he left, glancing up at creaking merry-go-rounds, tigers, bears and the bleary eyes of elephants. In his mind's eye he could already see the one animal that would leave these city-dwellers speechless.

Near the tram stop he had decided to celebrate his success with one and later two foaming lagers. He dreamed, as he drank, of the coming journey, of ferns parting before him like the leaves of a book. He had just started speculating whether future patrons would be able to hear the animal from this far, when the five o' clock tram shrilled in the distance. He'd had to leave in a hurry. He slid a few francs under an ashtray and then, without really thinking about it, leaned over and snapped the stopper off the beer bottle.

That had been five months ago, five months during which he'd carried the little node of porcelain with him everywhere. It had been in his waistcoat pocket while he and Guy had done their research – in the Bodleian, as well as the offices of the Royal Geographic Society. It had been in one of his trunks during their eleven-day voyage from Southampton to Boma, seat of the Belgian colonial administration, and gateway to the Congo. Also on their long voyage upstream he would often take out and examine his little talisman.

Now his eyes played over the profile of mane and rampant forelegs. 'The unicorn,' he muttered, and then louder so that Guy sitting opposite him could also hear: '*Monoceros. Unicornis.* The Greeks associated it with purity and virility. And in the Middle Ages it was widely regarded as a symbol of the Redeemer.'

Guy didn't look up – there was after all nothing new in this communication.

Willis did not let himself be put off his stride. He brought the icon closer to his eyes. 'Hunters scoured the forests of Castile, Tuscany and even Africa, but seldom saw more than a flash in the distance. The unicorn was too cunning for their snares, and too swift for their dogs. And when a hunter did chance upon on one, he generally got more than he'd bargained for. The unicorn would lower its horn – that slender spear with which, like an oryx, it could deflect any projectile– and the hunter would become the one fleeing through the forest.'

Guy grinned. 'Head over heels and in growing need of a clean pair of pants.'

'Just so,' Willis confirmed. 'Arse-over-heels.'

Guy laughed uproariously. “Tell me,’ he asked, sitting back and locking his hands behind his head, ‘how would one go about it then, collaring this unicorn?’

Willis weighed the stopper in his hand. ‘According to Jacob van Vitri there was only one way, and that involved recruiting a virgin. Beautiful but heartless.’

“Is there any other kind?” Guy asked, but Willis ignored him.

“She had to wait by a lime tree, deep in a forest where one of these animals had been spotted. Lured by a creature as pure as itself, the unicorn would approach and lie down with its head on her lap, allowing hunters to close in with their swords and bows and arrows.”

Guy pursed his lips, his attention fixed on the latticed branches on the other side of the river. ‘A lime tree?’ he asked.

Willis did not reply. His eyes were also on the forest, but his thoughts were with the animal – almost as mysterious as the unicorn – awaiting him somewhere in that wilderness.

\*

Silence descended on the veranda, the only sound coming from a small group of men in the corner: colonial officials and clerks, also two members of the local citizen’s force, each with a Browning on his hip. The notorious ferocity of the *Openbare Weermacht* was not much in evidence today. They joked and bantered, occasionally lobbing a dart at a board.

Willis scabbled closer a bowl of peanuts, his eyes on Guy and the lithographs of moths and butterflies he had arranged in a semi-circle in front of him. Guy was measuring the distance between the antennae of an emperor moth. He also measured the thorax, and the length of each leg. Then he crumpled the lobe of his ear, and made a quick note, before stooping over his magnifying glass once more.

Willis was chewing contentedly. He’d known Guy since their Oxford days, when they’d studied together under the celebrated Sir Horace Plunkett. After Oxford Willis had stayed on in the zoology department, eventually becoming liaison officer with the Belgian Academy, whereas Guy had gone off to Africa in search of the *Lepidoptera* of which he had grown so fond. They’d kept contact and over the years had collaborated on more than one project, amongst others a study of the intestinal parasites of the Gabonese rhebok. Yes, the men in Antwerp had chosen well, Willis thought, shaking some more peanuts into his mouth. Apart from financial considerations this expedition was after all also of a scientific nature, and with his open mind and his experience of field work in the tropics, Guy could be worth his weight in gold.

He stretched himself languidly, his eyes on the settlement in which they found themselves: a few bamboo huts sprouting like mushrooms on the banks of the Aruwimi. Against the hills were bigger houses as well, where officials and pen-pushers tried nightly to keep the heat and boredom at bay. Next to the hotel was a toll house and further down a row of stalls. On market days traders would exchange mirrors, tobacco and coils of wire for venison or ivory. At the quay, like a visitor from another world, a steamboat lay moored. The *Mercator*. The boat that had carried Willis and Guy from the confluence of the Congo and the Aruwimi.

Like other ships in its class the *Mercator* lay low in the water. The steering cabin was in the fore-end and astern was the screw that could propel it at a speed of up to four knots. Steel steps led to the upper deck, where you could sit under a canvas awning, drinking gin and peering out at the passing forest. Willis looked at the gangplank along which he and Guy had come ashore that morning, then lifted his eyes to Fort Iringa looming like a nightmare over the town.

\*

A movement in the foreground caught his attention. A vervet monkey had clambered onto the veranda railing, and was now hovering there like a drop of water on a wire. Its eyes were darting about and its nostrils quivering to determine the exact origin of the smell of peanuts.

Its arrival had not gone unnoticed. A waiter rolled up his shirtsleeves, and walked over to lift a flyswatter from a hook. The monkey cleared off, but remained hanging just out of sight – from where it

could keep one eye on the proceedings on the veranda.

Guy now looked up from his lithographs. Willis followed his gaze to a singular individual striding through the mud in front of the hotel. The man was dressed in the uniform of the Belgian army, his attitude painfully correct, as if he was animated by invisible clockwork. In front of the hotel he scraped his boots clean, then mounted the steps and marched up to the two travellers. Willis expected to see him bob like the cuckoo on a Swiss clock.

'Messrs Reed and Nichols,' he began, 'it is my privilege to welcome you here on behalf of Commandant Fick, commander of Fort Iringa, also supreme commander of the Northern Brigade of the *Openbare Weermacht*, and recipient of the Military Cross for Bravery, Dedication and Philanthropy. As you may know, tonight is a special night. You are invited to celebrate it with us in the banqueting hall.'

He placed a strip of paper, on which the same message was typed, on the table, then stood back awaiting a response. His uniform was ostentatious, with braiding on the shoulders and coloured ribbons on the lapels. One of the men in the corner whispered something that made his comrades laugh, but the messenger did not notice. He had just spotted the monkey. It had taken up position on a table, something that he, as representative of law and order, and *aide de camp* of the most powerful man in the district, could hardly permit. He darted a reprimanding look at the waiter and a moment later the flyswatter was brought into action again. While the monkey fled, he turned back to Willis and Guy. 'Sirs?'

It was Guy who got up and extended his hand. 'Tell Commandant Fick that we would be honoured to make his acquaintance.'

\*

After the departure of the messenger, Guy focused on his butterflies again. The officials took up their glasses, while the monkey hoisted itself onto the veranda railing once more. Its eyes were glitter-black, its hands restless on the shiny bamboo. It realised that if it didn't act now, it would go hungry today. With a shriek that voiced both the hope and despair of its existence, it launched itself onto Willis's table, where by accident it got hold of the beer stopper rather than the peanuts. It made its getaway, and was on the point of taking refuge in the safety of a nearby tree, when the crack of a pistol shot convulsed it. It fell into the mud with a soft thud.

Willis's ears were ringing. Through the gunsmoke he saw Guy jumping up, felt the table rock while pictures of butterflies fluttered to the ground. 'What the hell!' Guy bellowed, but the citizen force member who had fired the shot merely spun his pistol around his finger. Guy took a step closer, but the fellow's comrades closed up in front of him like a wall.

As so many times before, Willis felt as if there were some membrane between himself and the world. He looked at Guy and the smirking men, then at the motionless bundle, and couldn't understand why he wasn't more upset. He went on his knees to look for his beer stopper amongst the papers. It was nowhere to be found. While Guy and the drunkards squabbled, he slipped down the veranda steps to where the monkey was lying. He unfolded the dead fingers, but the monkey's hand was empty.

\*

Blowflies whirled as Willis attended to the monkey's carcass in the clearing behind the hotel. He had strung it up between the shoots of a wild pear and was now using his hunting knife to look for the stopper. He cut along the line of the throat. Guy touched his shoulder, but nothing would make him abandon his search now. He broke the breastbone to follow the course of the gizzard.

A cleaner had been beating carpets, but now stood transfixed. It was something to see: the propped-up monkey, the tears flowing freely over Willis's cheeks. The men's appearance, too, was remarkable. Willis had a bony nose and a fringe that skirted his eyebrows. The weeks on the river had burnished his neck and forearms with sunburn, and yet he still looked as if he'd be more at home on a balloon-tired bicycle, in the shade of Oxford's mouldering buildings.

Guy was shorter and stouter. His cheeks were fuller and behind the lenses of his spectacles his eyes remained inscrutable. He now turned round and walked away, while Willis stooped lower to open the

monkey's gut. The stench was overpowering, and he too had to get up to vomit at the edge of the forest. It was only much later that he felt porcelain under his fingers.

Guy was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling. Willis walked to the river to rinse the stopper and wash his face.

\*

It was a lovely evening on the banks of the Aruwimi. A fish leapt in the darkness. The smell of Guy and Willis's cologne mingled with the sweet forest smell of decay. They were walking in silence, because after the events of that afternoon they didn't yet have much to say to each other.

Reaching the fort they crossed a muddy parade ground to the stone building arising above the mango trees. An Askari saluted, his skin luminous in the light of a torch. He was a Basango, one of the tribes inhabiting the area to the south of the river. He led them through a courtyard and up two flights of stairs. The sound of trumpets and violins grew louder, till they reached the upper terrace, where the music was streaming through the open door of the banqueting hall, an old favourite, 'Sweet lights of home'.

Willis looked at the settlement in the distance; here and there fires were burning and on the upper deck of the *Mercator* a gas lamp spluttered. 'I'm sorry, Guy,' he said, but Guy just shrugged.

In the banqueting hall some forty people were socialising in groups. The men were in evening dress or uniform, the women resplendent in dresses that rustled over the stone floor. The band was a glittering array of cellos, trumpets and trombones.

Commandant Jors Finck, Commander of Fort Iringa, as well as Supreme Commander of the Northern Brigade of the *Openbare Weermacht*, and recipient of the Military Cross for Bravery, Dedication and Philanthropy, was a shortish little fellow. His eyes narrowed when he noticed the two travellers. He kissed the hand of the woman he'd been talking to and walked up to welcome them.

'Ah, Messrs Reed and Nichols! Welcome to Iringa.' He lifted two glasses from a passing tray, then addressed himself to the nearest circle of guests: 'Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Willis Reed and Guy Nichols. They are here on an important scientific mission.'

Willis smiled awkwardly, Guy adjusted his spectacles. 'You must understand,' the Commandant continued, 'around here we don't often see new faces.'

For the next half-hour Willis and Guy were introduced to a procession of officers, landowners and functionaries. Lippens. Hinde. De Heusch. Many were Flemish, others sported the darker features of Wallonia. There was also a stray Jones or Macintosh, because the colonials here in Iringa were on friendly footing with their counterparts in the neighbouring Uganda colony. Their kings might squabble about the exact configuration of the map of Africa, but on the ground there was good-neighbourliness, a kind of complicity even.

The time came to sit down. Willis and Guy followed the Commandant to the main table, where he placed himself in the midst of a group of women. 'Meet Kim and Berenice,' he said, putting his arms around two satin-clad temptresses. 'And who could forget the lovely Alice de Quincy?' The first two women were intimidating, but Alice was a classic beauty, with high cheekbones and a physicality that made Willis feel as if the earth had suddenly shifted a fraction on its own axle. The Commandant's voice droned on, but it was only when he was called upon to meet Alice's husband that Willis emerged from his trance.

General de Quincy's beard was grey and angular, his eyes rheumy. He was the owner of a rubber plantation on the outskirts of the district, but as the ceremonial sword by his side attested, he'd served in the Sudanese army in his day. He had fought against the Dervishes, and had even been present at the famous Battle of Omdurman. He had, however, been drinking himself back into a kind of prenatal state, and tonight would not be a night of anecdotes.

Alice wiped a dribble of spit from his chin. The Commandant turned back to his harem, his canines gleaming like those of the crocodile on the regimental emblem. Willis was now staring openly at Alice, but before he could think of something to break the ice, the woman next to him tapped him on the elbow. With her flowing dress and the little chain draped over her forehead she looked not unlike a decorated camel at a Mid-Eastern wedding.

She gestured towards a young man at a neighbouring table. ‘Lieutenant De Nijs,’ she whispered, ‘just returned from the Mountains of the Moon. An exceedingly strange young man, principally known for his efforts to break in zebras as mounts for King Leopold’s soldiers.’

Willis watched the chap under discussion knock back a glass of brandy, then got a fleeting image of him: arms akimbo, whipping a recalcitrant steed. He turned back to the woman, a frown on his forehead, and in his breast something of the old feeling: that he was different from other people, that he lacked some faculty of human intercourse, which would forever exclude him from the circle of their smiles. When he took too long to reply, the woman lost interest and addressed herself to someone else.

He swiveled back to Alice.

Bright as one of Guy’s butterflies, she let her attention flutter from one guest to the next. She whispered something to the redheaded woman next to her. They laughed, and she rested her hand lightly on the woman’s forearm.

Tiny bubbles were streaking through the champagne on the table. Willis reached for the bottle, but was beaten to it by Guy. Guy and the Dom Perignon had become acquainted some time before. His tongue had loosened with every sip, and he had succeeded in embroiling two officers in a conversation about his pet subject. ‘Yes,’ he was now saying, ‘the long-suckered moths are a fascinating group. And surely the most fascinating of all is one that ended up in the net of a colleague of mine only very recently. *Xanthopon morgani predicta*. This moth uses its foot-long proboscis to drain the nectar from orchids. As early as 1862, when he first saw Madagascar’s enormous blooms, Charles Darwin had predicted that such an insect would some day be found. Nine-and-a-half inches,’ Guy crooned, and indicated with his index fingers just how long such a whopper of a tongue really was.

The officers did not appear to share his enthusiasm. Guy took another sip of champagne. ‘We must remember just how powerful natural selection can be. It can contort an organism and its progeny into the most fantastic shapes.’ He wiped the back of his hand across his lips. ‘Survival of the fittest. Imagine that this ... this fort was a living thing, and that it could procreate. Just think how it would contort and distort until something altogether different would come into being here.’

‘That is fascinating, Mr Nichols,’ declared the Commandant, who had been listening from the head of the table. ‘Truly riveting.’ An officer moved the champagne bottle somewhat further away from Guy. The Commandant caressed a woman’s ear-lobe. ‘You hear that, sweetheart? Nine and a half inches.’ The woman smiled and slapped playfully at his hand, which was now also straying to other parts of her body. His fingers had wandered from her neck to her wrist before he recalled that they were not alone at table, and that as host he had certain obligations. ‘Tell me, Mr Reed,’ he asked, fixing the two travellers once more, ‘what brings *you* to the Congo?’

Willis saw many heads turn towards him. His throat dried. ‘I am looking for an okapi,’ he said.

For the first time Alice de Quincy looked at him with a glimmer of interest. But she said nothing. She coaxed her husband back to an upright position, then leant over to exchange a snippet of conversation with the redheaded woman.

[...]

(Translated from *Afrikaans* by Michiel Heyns)

## STRANGE ORANGE WORLD

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tom Dreyer. I was born in Cape Town in 1972 and grew up in a long, thin triangle between Melkbos, Johannesburg and Stellenbosch.

I'm standing on a concrete table near Victoria West, watching heat waves shimmer above the tarmac. I'm drinking coffee from a thermos flask, peeling a hard-boiled egg and then tossing the eggshells into a bin. I'm chasing my brother through a field of Namaqualand daisies, till we both drop from exhaustion and lie gazing at the blue of the sky. I'm standing in my dad's garage, the wheel cap of a Variant in my hand, watching his legs disappear ever deeper under the chassis. I'm bobbing in a portapool while my sister balances on one leg like a flamingo and the sun turns the water into shimmering gold.

Somewhere shacks are burning. A Casspir crashes through a roadblock while a haze of tear gas obscures the sun. A rubber bullet hits a child in the face. A man lies bleeding in the back of a Landrover, while the driver and his chum talk about rugby or last Saturday's police barbeque. Then another Casspir screams around a corner and people dive in behind barricades of corrugated iron. And all the while I am lying on the carpet in front of the television, watching Cassimir, the friendly orange dragon, frolicking about in his strange orange world.

In his novel *The Good Soldier* Ford Maddox Ford tells the story of two couples who visit a certain spa in the German countryside each year. For the narrator these are golden times, until his blinkers are removed and he discovers that his wife and the other man had been having an affair all along. He now finds himself face to face with a dilemma: What happens to memories when we discover that they were built on a substrate of lies, on foundations of sand? Can pleasures experienced in ignorance be revoked? Can the delicious taste of a bottle of wine on the terrace of a German spa, or of a glass of Oros in the cool water of a portapool, be recalled as easily as one reels a fish through the water?

At a certain level it is clearly impossible. The past - with its share of happiness or sorrow - is over, and nothing we do or say can change a thing about it. The mouth has laughed, the heart has leapt and a flood of joy has irrevocably swept through the blood. "If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months and four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple?" asks Ford's narrator.

But this isn't the whole picture either, for who can deny that hollow feeling, that mixture of shame and anger when you realise that the wool had been pulled over your eyes and that the world wasn't at all what you had imagined it to be? For Ford's narrator all the life bleeds from his once cherished memories. His dream turns into a nightmare, for his memories are all framed by the shadow of what was really going on, and he blames himself for ever having been so blind and self-absorbed.

The past might be over; but if this *is* the case, then the words and images in our minds are the only place where it still exists - and in the realm of the mind anything is possible. There birds *can* fly backwards and wine bottles *can* recall their wine from our mouths and glasses.

Like many members of my generation I know the dilemma of Ford's narrator. I find myself in the awkward position of having led a happy childhood in a South Africa that for the majority of South Africans was anything but happy. School, family, friends and television – all conspired to form a safe little shell in which it was possible to believe that South Africa was a country just like any other, and that most people's lives were at bottom very much like my own. Only later, after the heedless days of youth had

made way for the agonies of adolescence, would I realise - to my horror - what had really been going on.

But what do I now do with my memories of that earlier time? What do I do with the fact that I was once happy in the phony little world inside the shell? Is nostalgia at all permissible? Is not the worst of all taboos to find something of worth in those terrible times (like Samson pulling a honeycomb from the rotting carcass of a lion)? How could we have been laughing while millions wept? How could we have frolicked in portapools while the sirens of Sharpeville and Boipatong wailed?

One might respond by trying to distance oneself from the past and by living exclusively in the present. But such an approach is problematic, and for the writer most of all.

Writing, for me, involves two distinct processes. One is rational and calculated, the cool appraisal of words and phrases, the meticulous reworking of sentences until they contain nothing half-formed or superfluous. The other process is more instinctive and elemental: it is the creative process itself, that mysterious alchemy that takes place when you suspend your critical faculties for a moment and avail yourself of the pure world of images, archetypes and memories.

One's childhood is a major wellspring of this world. Whenever I dip into the stream from which words are born, the sweet taste of Oros comes back to me; I see the sun gleaming like a halo, or find myself hunting tortoises in some half-forgotten backyard.

It is true that we have many layers of memory; many things happen to us after childhood, and of course these things also find expression in our writing. It is the writer's task to pick at the tangles of human emotion and motivation - and insight into these things comes only through experience. But I believe that a writer is always also busy with a more fundamental project: exploring the basic condition of "being alive", the underlying reality of things, those qualities that make a stone a stone, an orange an orange, or a human being a human being. This basic grip on the world and what it feels like to be alive is established at an early age.

There is something mystical about childhood memories. They are out of focus, yet somehow bathed in light. Because they are formed in a time of freedom, they retain something of that freedom, as water retains the taste of the bedrock through which it flows. Because they are formed before the prejudices and preconceptions that taint later experience, we perceive them as somehow larger and more universal, as archetypes transcending time and space.

It is necessary to address an objection that might be forming in the reader's mind: how is it possible that anyone could have grown up so sheltered? How could anyone in the South Africa of the 1970's have believed that everything was bright and balmy, or at least balmy enough to be hunting for tortoises rather than taking to the streets or building bomb shelters?

In response to this I would remind the reader that the entire society was geared towards sustaining this illusion of normality. School, church and state worked together to prevent anything from threatening our fragile little shell. Yes, there were correctives - snippets of grown-up conversation, reports of police and protesters clashing, and of course the constant awareness of other people living on the outskirts of our world, people of whom we knew very little. There *were* suggestions that something was amiss, but to us our illusion seemed more real than the scattered clues that another world existed somewhere beyond our own.

It is easy to overestimate the political awareness of kids in that or any age. Alexander the Great might have been a mere pup when he wept that there were only so many countries for him to conquer. At thirteen Hector Peterson was enough of a man to face the bullets of the SAP. But most of us do not grow up that quickly. And I believe that we don't have to beat ourselves up about it either. Once grown up, there is time enough for the worries and responsibilities of adulthood. Carefreeness and enchantment have always been the birthright of a child.

Yet it is probably inevitable that in a country like South Africa our initiation would come a bit

sooner than in many other parts. I still remember the day - it must have been in 1983 or '84 - when we did the French revolution in history class: a nation drawing a line in the sand, prison walls tumbling and sunlight gleaming on the blade of a guillotine. Our teacher must have been praying that we didn't see the obvious parallels with our own situation here at the tip of Africa, but some of us did see, and the period turned into one that neither he nor we would soon forget. I remember how I felt when I stepped onto the school grounds afterwards. In my mind's eye I could already see the walls of Louw Geldenhuys Primary tumbling, a prospect that filled me with trepidation but also with excitement. Childish? Certainly, but there is a time of life at which childishness is to be expected.

Though nothing was quite the same again, life nonetheless reverted to its former rhythm of bicycles, skateboards and Kreepy Kraulys, now also marked by a growing awareness of the girls in their maroon skirts. Real anger and disillusionment about what had been happening in our country, our city and our heads, was only a year or two away – but until then we would live recklessly like children in all ages.

We might as well face it, a kind of schizophrenia runs through the minds of our generation, we who grew up under a certain set of rules, but now live in a world where different ones apply. That this change was for the good, and long overdue, does not mean that there aren't adjustments to be made. I grapple with a sense of guilt about a happy childhood in the days of Apartheid. But is the young black writer with happy childhood memories not in an equally awkward position? His experiences are equally at odds with the accepted version of history. (And what about the white writer with an unhappy past?)

Our memories make us who we are. They construct a sense of identity and belonging that makes us citizens rather than refugees. Trying to repress or forget our pasts is bad for our psyches and could spell death for our writing.

I believe that it is the special responsibility of our generation of writers - we who straddle the divide - to bring together the various stories of our pasts, and to reconcile them with one another and with the new realities that surround us. Only then will our stories lift off the page, and will we begin to get a sense of how it feels, and what it means, to be a South African today.

\*\*\*