

BIOPHILE 13 – March 2009

The Return

Nearly four years ago, in what often seems to have been another life, I walked over 2 000 kilometres from Durban to the Victoria Falls. The expedition is well documented and I have alluded to it previously in *Confessions*. So let us speak this time about the journey's end. And the next journey's beginning – since these are invariably one and the same thing.

After four and a half months' trudge through sun, wind and rain; over rocky rise, hot tar and deep sand; despite exhaustion, temper tantrums and betrayals, I finally took the last of my three million steps to The Falls. And I stood at the point I'd dreamed of for so long - the oily, black precipice overlooking the world's most wondrous cascade. Sobbing and shuddering I tossed the four shells I'd carried all the way from the sea into the foaming water of the Zambezi River.

What I didn't know, then, was that those talismans rushed downstream as scouts for my next quest– and that they held secrets that I'd best not know for a while. And what I didn't notice, then, was that I was standing at a position on the cliff which, in hindsight, was most appropriately named: “Danger Point.”

Recently I returned there. I was invited to speak about my walk for a corporate audience at a hotel on the Zambian side of the Vic Falls. After the presentation, and with time in hand before catching my flight home, I walked across the border, into Zimbabwe and back to Danger Point. The embankment that had been crisp and khaki when I arrived there on foot in mid-winter was now pliable and verdant. At low water, the last time, the tumbling curtain had arrayed itself before me without reticence. Now, frogs and crickets competed with the cacophony of the spume – spume so thick that I only occasionally got a glimpse of the water. Clarity, confusion, clarity, confusion. Like growth. Like life.

But as to the secrets my shells had carried away down the river, there was now no confusion at all. The new journey that had emerged at Danger Point had turned out to be as unpopular as the walk had been popular. And I had signed up for a battle which would be unwinnable – at least in my lifetime. The journey is into veganism. And the war is against speciesism*.

Deciding to forgo eating animals and all the other ‘forgoings’ involved in my attempts at a compassionate life proved to be quite easy. Once I’d seen the horrific images of how they died in abattoirs, laboratories, hunts and ritual killings, it did not take much self-control to stop putting them into my mouth and using them on my skin and in my kitchen.

But *telling* people about that decision has led me into territory that was far scarier than anything I’d encountered in Big Five Botswana. Day after day my audiences drown me in waves of shock, anger, guilt and denial. And rather than take a long, hard look at what they’re perpetrating, they write me off as sentimental, misinformed, extremist or completely mad.

Well, the pariah path is now well-trodden and I’m familiar with its gulleys and dongas. But what I have yet to accept in the deepest parts of my being, is that my nearest and dearest, my kith and kin (with the exception of my mother and sister), care not a jot for the suffering and abuse of billions of sentient beings with whom they share the planet. They know what’s going on now – they’ve seen my show – and their cruelty and indifference leaves me incredulous and often in great pain. Elizabeth Costello, the character in J M Coetzee’s wonderful book “The Lives of Animals” says it thus:

“I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.”

Yes, the secrets that the shells carried were those of a monumental, horrifying blight at the centre of our so-called civilization that I would no longer be allowed to ignore. But I would have to accept that the vast majority of humankind was not going to share my epiphany. Worse, I would have to accept that animals’ agony was not going to ameliorate, let alone end, before I’ve taken the last step of this new journey – indeed of my life.

I thought about these things as I stood, once again, at an ending that was beginning. And I decided that the newest journey would be one into even greater compassion – in particular compassion for people who, for reasons which only they know, are happy to support and condone this outrageous conduct. No doubt, this was to be the hardest trek of them all.

I took a small stone from the cliff, wrapped it in my anger, pain and frustration, and hurled it into the water with all my might. On the stroll back into Zambia, I stood in a long queue at the Zimbabwe border post. The woman in front of me wore a blue T shirt, plain save for the words:

“What now?”

* Speciesism is the (somewhat awkward) term coined for the prejudice inherent in placing the interests of our human species above those of others. Similarly, the practice of according some non-human animals greater value or rights than others – for instance, deeming an elephant more worthy of conservation and comfort than a pig.