

Travelling to Africa

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The story of how my body can be in in one place while my mind travels to Africa is one that started early in my life.

It was a small view I had of the world, observed through the little window of my bedroom. We lived on a cul de sac and my view outside was of a strip of garden below, a wooden fence, the garden gate, the tall green streetlamp, the end of the avenue. Across the way was a low brick wall with a gap in it where we could walk down to an air raid shelter, still standing since the war. Beyond was the mill lodge where we fished for sticklebacks, the mill and The World.

One Christmas morning the little blue globe and the bookcase appeared in my life. From then on, The World seemed to open up like a kaleidoscope. I became familiar with the exotic names of the cities of Central Asia and the mangrove swamps of the Caribbean. I read any book I could get hold of, from Dickens to Jack London, and put all of them on display in the bookcase my dad had painted for me. The names Timbuktu and Tashkent, Zanzibar and Zaire became my friends. I dreamt of a world where people lived on sampans and in huts, wore kimonos and saris. I stared at my globe and imagined the world beyond my little room, in that little house, in that corner of an avenue somewhere in a very ordinary little mill town in the north of England.

More often than not, my dad was in The World. He worked abroad a lot when I was a child, in countries with the exotic names I could find on my globe: Sudan, Iran, Italy, places I had never been. When I think of my life then, I see it distilled into moments suffused with intense feelings. I'd sit and close my eyes tight, trying hard to remember what he looked like, his blue eyes, his blond curls. I would imagine that I was with him, that I could feel his presence. Staying for hours in my bedroom, I stared at the blue globe that he'd given me, trying to imagine the place where he was. I'd mouth the names of the cities... Khartoum, Tehran, Hong Kong, marvel at their sounds.

When I was in junior school, my dad was away in the Sudan for a whole year. I dreamt of him, and longed for his return. In the meantime, I went to Africa quite often, for Mrs. Hopwood would read to us daily *King Solomon's Mines*. It was the best hour of the day, when she thrilled us and scared us by turns, imitating the voices of Quatermain, Sir Henry, King Twala, and of course, Gagool.

In my romantic way, I asked myself if my dad's experience was anything like Allan Quatermain's, whether he wore a pith helmet and went hunting in his spare time. Not having much information, or perhaps not understanding the information about what he was actually doing there, allowed me to indulge in daydream and reverie. A year is a long time in the life of a child, and the juvenile imagination has to have somewhere to go.

Travelling to Africa in Mrs. Hopwood's class was a time when you could be sure that you were safe for an hour. Our classroom was a haven from Out There, a kind of jungle where there was a lot to fear. St. Paul's school was built in the 1880s, and the playground was an unforgiving square of hard flagstones. Playing British Bulldog was extremely dangerous, and even skipping rope had its perilous moments. Then there was the headmaster, Mr. Bonell, tall and severe, with his glassy stare and his cane, the cane which he threatened to use on a regular basis. There were the fists of the bigger, rough lads, the sombre graveyard next to the church, school dinners, arithmetic, lzal toilet paper- two sheets only- and the disinfectant smell in the corridors.

Further Out There, there were the coal-black nights of winter, my father far away, my mother fearful, and talk of children going missing on the moors, just a few miles away. There was the flickering black and white TV screen with its terrible images of the Texas bookstore, President Kennedy's shattered head, Jackie's pink bloodstained clothes.

Then suddenly, there was a ray of light. I was getting dressed in my best clothes, taking a luxurious taxi ride to Manchester Airport with my mum and sister. There was a glimpse of an enormous 'plane, a reunion, sitting in the back of the cab asking my dad questions. *Have you heard of the Beatles? How long was the plane ride?* Then, gingerly, fearfully: *Are you home to stay?* There were gifts of dolls in Sudanese national dress to add to my collection. The world became vibrant again in an instant. Our home was transformed; sunlight flooded into the house, and I felt the intoxicating allure of other places. It was all blue silk pyjamas from the Hong Kong airport, 120 degrees in the shade and Boeing 707s. Travelling was obviously a wondrous thing, and I wanted it, oh how I wanted it.

Despite my longing for adventure, for now I was eight years old, and there was no way to physically escape from the stifling boredom of life in the here and now; no way to get away from the humdrum routine of my life, of beef puddings and school tomorrow. I coped by taking flights of fancy into Other Worlds. Books were useful diversions, but I had other ways of breaking free. We would sometimes walk to school the 'country way.' This involved going through the housing estate where we lived, across the main road and onto another estate. There, next to a very ordinary-looking house, there was a pathway that went down a hillside and ended at a country lane next to a brook. Of a sudden, we were in another world, a world disconnected from everything I knew.

It was cool and dark down there, and quite delicious and mysterious to me. Wearing our green gymslips and green and yellow striped ties, we would walk, my friend and I, with our respective mothers, along the unpaved lane past small farmhouses with milk pails outside. The large trees that lined the path cut out the light and made the air dank and ominous. Time seemed to stop, and I was aware of my own heartbeat. Further along, there were some ruins we called the Roman baths, which spoke of a history that no-one was completely sure of. The feeling of the place, the deep quiet of it, with the sound of the odd song thrush and the scuffle of a rabbit or a squirrel in the hedgerow, enthralled me. It was so different from the streets, the bus, the town, the bustle of life in our urban community, that it seemed otherworldly. In this place, my mind would take leave of the here- and- now and soar to other places. I made up stories of where we were; I lived in a daydream in my own head.

Sometimes, I tried to take others with me on my journeys, attempting to convince them that my Other Worlds existed. One day I blindfolded the little boy who lived close by and took him into an imaginary door in the low wall in our garden, telling him that there was a kind of train in there which would transport us to Another World. I made him go with me through the fictional door in the wall and sit with me on the train. Then I explained to him with a flourish all the things I was seeing. He was three years younger than me, and I wanted to find out how persuasive my storytelling could be. I thought it was quite a good story, but, sadly, I couldn't entirely fool either of us.

Still, travelling to Africa is a habit that has stayed with me throughout my life. I struggle with the here-and-now, battle against its constraints. It stifles me, ties me to the earth in a way I find uncomfortable, even painful. Oh, but being somewhere else, letting my mind dream of other places, as I dreamed of being with my father so long ago, now that is pure joy.