

Embracing the many-coloured beast:

One night towards the end of my first year of Zimbabwe (1982), inspired by a few glasses of the local 'Charlemagne' sparkling wine, I wrote out a recollection of a few hours at the beginning of the same year, when unbeknownst, the course of my future turned on a dime:



Nearly a year has passed since the afternoon of January 2, 1982, when with mounting uncertainty, I stepped off the Voyageur Express from Montreal into the icy sunshine of downtown Ottawa.

I took a taxi to the Lord Elgin hotel, saving my receipt, as requested. Waving away the help of a porter who held the door, I dragged my bags across the salty sidewalk into the lobby. Not accustomed to an upscale hotel, I felt conspicuous at the reception desk. When I slid the booking confirmation letter before her, the desk clerk smiled and held open the leather ledger for my sign-in.

In taking the room key, I flinched in the nearness of the point of no return. Bailing out of the contract on the precipice would leave me owing for the hotel bill as well as for the airfare from Vancouver.

At the elevator door I hesitated, wondering whether I should immediately call my college friend, N.V., in Vancouver where for the next few weeks my forwarded mail would be sent. N.V. had kindly promised to immediately contact me should there be a reply to the telegram I'd sent to the Ministry of Education in Bangkok. With a job offer from Thailand, I would be forced to make a wrenching—

I jumped back in the snap of static electricity from the elevator button. In the quizzical look from reception desk, I gave a 'no problem' smile. Looking back up at the dingy elevator panel, I decided to wait until after the orientation reception before making the call. At least then I would have a better feel for both the prospects and the risks. When the elevator door slid open, I gritted teeth and lifted my bags inside.

A moment later I was sniffing the antiseptic air of my room: there was a double bed, phone, TV, clean carpet— even a kitchenette. In the last Ottawa orientation for the Tanzania placement I had been bunked up in a university dorm with another 'volunteer.' Still, even such indications that the Zimbabwe program was well funded (somewhat mysteriously?) did not quell the butterflies.

The luminous dial of the bedside clock registered 4:25 PM. The reception was in the conference room on the main floor at 7:00 PM. Could any other recruits waiting in adjacent rooms be quite as jittery about their three-year commitment to a rural African school?

I heaved my bags onto the bed and slowly began unpacking. Not surprisingly my shirts all faintly smelled of tobacco. Tsking, I thought of the hacking coughs of my friend and her husband in Pointe Claire. During my visit, she had asked— just as had N.V. in Vancouver—whether I'd carefully considered the security situation in Zimbabwe before signing the contract...

In fact, for years I had followed the tragic conflict in Rhodesia. On April 18, 1980— the day of Zimbabwe independence— I was on a street corner in Moshi, Tanzania, stirred by the procession of singing school children waving flags and portraits of both Julius Nyerere and Robert Mugabe. Then when Mugabe, in a surprise turn from the virulence of his rhetoric prior to independence, spoke of reconciliation— curiosity was further seeded. I was keen to visit— even to look for work there. What could be more exciting than witnessing the dynamics of an emerging multi-racial African democracy?

When in October '81, the ad appeared in the *Globe and Mail* classifieds recruiting for "Canadian teachers of a range of secondary subjects for secondary schools in rural Zimbabwe", I immediately applied. Although I had been barely two months back in Canada from Tanzania and had just started my first job as in teaching English to international students, I was eager to get away again.

Yet some impressions of my Tanzanian Mission school sojourn still prickled. Remembering '*Ujaama*', Tanzanian socialism, particularly for worthless currency and empty-shelves— there was hardly reassurance in the fact that Zimbabwe's ruling regime was avowedly bent on Marxist transformation.

Meanwhile, a second—and brighter— prospect was emerging: teaching in 'the Land of Smiles':

Even in the few days in which I passed through Thailand on my trip back from Africa, I had been enchanted by fleeting impressions of exquisite beauty. In beholding the temple statues of svelte-waisted Apsara nymphs it was impossible not to remember the droopy-breasted Makonde *shetani* [devil] carvings back on the Swahili coast.

In Chiang Mai, I had spoken with the head of the English department of a teachers' college where another Canadian acquaintance worked. Kindly and accommodating, she encouraged me to apply for a position as soon as I got back to Canada. I did— and followed up with a letter to her in Chiang Mai confirming it. In her reply she urged me to be patient— the bureaucracy was slow— but assured that she had already sent a recommendation to the Ministry of Education in Bangkok...

Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe application process went lightning-fast: within three weeks I was booked for an interview in Ottawa. I was initially delighted with the job offer—but in the days that followed—I grew wary. In the uncertainty that peace could possibly hold among rival factions recently emerged from the bloody guerrilla war—was the program in danger from lack of recruitment? In the midst of such uncertainty, how many Canadian teachers were prepared to commit to a rural African school (with possibly erratic water and electricity) for three years?



Sighing, I picked up the remote from the bedside table and flicked on the colour TV angling downwards from the opposite wall. I stepped to the middle of the room and watched the picture ghosting up.

Flicking through channels, I lifted finger in the voice of Joan Baez singing Bob Dylan's haunting: '*I Shall be Released*'. She was performing before a crowd of flower children gathered around what appeared to be a large ocean side swimming pool. In the foreground, credits were rolling for the documentary: '*Celebration at Big Sur*'. However aware that TV was the last distraction I needed—I was immediately drawn in.

I recalled that the Big Sur event was in the fall of '69—just a few weeks after the legendary Woodstock festival. A hope had been engendered that something of the magical gathering of the tribes at Bethel, New York, might be replicated on the west coast...

Putting my shirts on hangers, I watched with growing interest. After the camera completed a 360° pan, it focused on Joanie on stage in an orange caftan, with long earrings dangling, singing the final verse:

*'I see my light come shining from the west unto the east
Any day now, any day now—
I shall be released...'*

She was gorgeous! It was touching to think that she was still in her twenties—a younger woman to me now.

After hanging up shirts in the closet, I sat back on the bed and watched the spectacle of cavorting hippies, butterflies and crashing waves against cliffs... In the meantime, the inner turmoil bore on:

The dilemma at the heart of it was: at the age of thirty was I really ready to commit to three years of African isolation? I was sure that if the choice was between sojourning among smiley Buddhists or dour Christians—that decision would be dead simple. But

the fact was that I had already signed a contract—to abort it on delivery would be devastating. The reimbursements already owed would be nothing compared to a shattering of credibility for future applications.

At the same time, I could use a booster of the old enthusiasm. Being on the ground in an infant Africa democracy courted by both east and west could be a unique and fascinating opportunity. Then there was the work itself: Can lending a hand in the secondary education of young people to whom that opportunity has been systemically denied not be regarded as a modestly noble undertaking?

Meanwhile, there were no indications that material deprivations would be anything close to those of the Tanzania posting. According to the information package, the available creature comforts on a teacher's salary in Zimbabwe compared reasonably with those of Canada— along with a far superior climate.

But would it be safe?

A few days before leaving Vancouver, there came a report of a bombing in downtown Salisbury. According to the BBC analyst, internecine rivalry between the 2 ruling parties was at the dangerous point of possibly breaking out into renewed civil war...

Yet more worrisome: might there be hostility towards foreign whites? Having been systemically intimidated by white Rhodesians, it was hard to imagine that all traces of racial tension had vanished in Mugabe's mere declaration of 'reconciliation.'

Amid this angst, my eyes swam through performances by John Sebastian, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and even by an angelic Joanie Mitchell...



Then after a commercial break there came the most riveting sequence:

It began with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young playing '*Sea of Madness*' before what looked like a raucous crowd of bad trippers. Naked male hippies jumped in the pool while nearby children looked scared. It appeared that all semblance of the spirit of Woodstock had drifted away in the Pacific fog...

The scene then cut to Steve Stills. He was dressed in a hooded fur jacket weaving about the crowd—looking drunk. As the crowd parted in a circle around him, a skinny bearded heckler in purple shirt staggered towards him shouting with middle finger jabbing up. A trio of retainers patted Steve's furry shoulders and tried to hold him back. Twisting away from them with hands on hips and grinning weirdly, Steve lunged forward. He shoved the skinny heckler off balance and then threw a haymaker punch. The two then grappled for a few seconds before Steve's retainers rushed forward and pulled him stumbling

backwards. The heckler, held back by the arms, was still taunting... From the crowd there arose cries: "*No, no Steve, peace and love man, peace and love!*"

Suddenly, Steve dropped his head— seemingly in shame— as he was lead away.

In the next scene Steve Stills, in the same furry jacket, was onstage alone on a stool with his acoustic guitar. With his bushy sideburns and fresh face he looked no older than twenty-five.

"I really freaked out there," he said into the mike, "I really freaked, because that's not love— that's not showing love to your brother, man—not like it's supposed to be."

Then softly he broke into his ballad, '*Four and Twenty*':

'Four and twenty years ago I came into this life...'

Deeply moved, I recalled listening to the Crosby, Stills, and Nash '*Déjà vu*' album played on a cassette tape in the darkness of the Sarten bar in Mojacar, Spain, *circa*, November, 1971. On the other side of the table was a beautiful dark-haired "older" English woman who was also staying in the village with a rather fickle boyfriend. As '*Four and Twenty*' played, the 'older' woman (her name was Eileen) held a glowing cigarette and sang sweetly along:

*'Morning comes to sunrise
And I'm driven to my bed
I see that it is empty and there're devils in my head.'*

I was only twenty and painfully shy— definitely too young for a twenty-seven-year-old woman. Yet to a restless thirty-year-old: Eileen, as remembered from Andalucía— just like Joan Baez and Joanie Mitchell in the Big Sur concert—suddenly seemed fresh and innocent...

*'I embrace the many-coloured beast
I grow weary of the torment— can there be no peace?'*



As Steve Stills on the TV strummed the final chords and face-painted hippies in the Big Sur audience blew giant bubbles, I reached a decision:

I would phone N.V. after the orientation reception and leave him my hotel room number. If an offer should come through from Thailand in the next thirty-six hours—I would reply that I will be available at the beginning of their school year, assuming that to be September. Yet would that not leave Zimbabwe students in the lurch? No, I shivered, the

best hope now is that there has been no telegram and the agonizing choice can be altogether avoided...



I checked my watch. It was 5:30 PM. Just an hour and a half before the reception. There was barely enough time to clean up and dash out in the bitter cold to pick up a few granola bars. With the *Celebration at Big Sur* still playing, I lowered the TV volume and quickly undressed.

Shaving while the bathtub filled, I resolved that in the orientation Q/A session— I would ask about security. However awkward for the facilitators (likely Zimbabweans from Carleton university) I would also bluntly ask how we were likely to be received by locals in the countryside... Squinting in the steamy mirror, I tried to reassure myself: despite the history of racial tensions, just maybe the Shona will be welcoming— maybe they are more like the Igbos of Nigeria than the Wachagga of Tanzania. If reconciliation really does prevail— it could be a fascinating place to sojourn...

A few moments later through the partly open bathroom door, there came the voice of Joanie Mitchell singing her 'Woodstock' Anthem ('...and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden...'). Particularly plaintive it sounded at the end of a concert in want of peace and harmony. Having had a surfeit of '60s nostalgia, I switched off the TV from the bedside remote.

Back in the bathroom, I sank into the tub and closed eyes. 'At the very heart of it,' I reflected, 'the question is: where lie the best opportunities for warmth and intimacy?'

Just then I heard a phone ringing. Was it N.V. phoning from Vancouver with news of a telegram from Bangkok? Omigod, what'll I do? I jolted up dripping and grabbed a towel. The white phone on the bedtime table was silent while faintly a ringing continued from behind the wall. Relieved, I lay back in the tub with the hot water tap running.

A moment later, I heard a ghostly cry. I bobbed up, twisted off the tap and listened. A baby in the next room? There was only a faint hiss in the trickle of air from the ceiling vent. Had the cry been only imagined? I sank back, ears below the water. Maybe it was an Apsara nymph and her cherubic babe wailing as they spiraled away into limbo...



Ad. note:

An official letter from the Ministry of Education in Bangkok offering employment in the teachers' college in Chiang Mai forwarded from Vancouver to Sandringham Secondary School did not arrive until late February.

I was first tempted to write back and request a postponement of the proposed start date from July 1st until January 1st next year. Even though I would still have to break my contract here, at least I would be able to take the students through the Cambridge exam preparation and the end of the school year. A little uncertain of the wording, I set the letter aside. While impressions of the friendliness and warmth of Zimbabwean colleagues and students strengthened in the weeks that followed—the interest in the teachers' college in Chiang Mai faded...

More recently, an offer to transfer to a school near Masvingo (formerly Fort Victoria) established by Swiss missionaries has raised the possibility of teaching 'A' Level English Literature. Where else in the world would I, with such slim paper qualifications, have such an opportunity?

Now with the first year having so swiftly passed, the end of the contract two years hence already seems uncomfortably close. So in January '84 where will I find myself? Will I be back in a rooming house in East Vancouver starting all over again?

I cannot fail to be haunted by the advice of N.V. one year ago. When after the Ottawa interview I told him of plans of heading for Zimbabwe, he said: "*Don't you think you'd better stay around long enough to give the place a chance? You know, you might just find yourself at thirty-five— a man without a country...*"

So, within the next two years— however unlikely in land-locked Zimbabwe— I can only hope for a sea-change...

1982, November, Chibero, Zimbabwe (Transcribed 2015)