

A Trip To Africa

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and

Guide David Mboya



Foreward

The following is a series of poems and images that attempt to capture pieces of a wonderful trip to Africa that occurred from August 14, 2015 to August 25, 2015. The trip started upon arrival in Kilimanjaro Airport and the city of Arusha and went first to Tarangire National Park, then to Lake Manyara and Ngorongoro Crater and then to the northern part of the Serengeti National Park adjacent to the Kenyan border. Many of the images were drawn in the field, others upon return.

Table of Contents	Page
Hoopoe -----	3
Superb Starling -----	5
Little Bee-eater -----	7
White-headed Buffalo Weaver -----	9
Red-cheeked Cordonbleu -----	11
Yellow-billed Stork -----	13
Unknown Rusty-breasted Bird at Gibb's Farm -----	15
White-Naped Raven -----	17
Collared Sunbird -----	19
Ricki Patel in the Bush -----	21
Gray-crowned Crane -----	23
Liilac-breasted Roller -----	25
White-bellied Go-away-bird -----	27
Common Ostrich -----	29
Secretary Bird -----	31
Maribu Stork -----	33
Yellow-collared Lovebird -----	35
European Roller -----	37
Lappett-faced Vulture -----	39
Ruppell's Long-tailed Starling -----	41

Hoopoe

Preparing to leave for Turkey and Africa
In early August in Houston.

The hoopoe painting arrived by email,
A gift from my artist-friend Isabelle
To warm me up for our coming adventure,
The club-headed orange-brown and white striped bird
Reminding me that exotic new places and things await,
Things removed from the Texas Coast.

The hoopoe reminds me of Grandhi's tomb in Delhi,
A place of reverence and flower petals in remembrance
Of a man of principle,
A man who worked against violence,
A man who worked against our worst selves,
A man who showed us a different way,
A man who's tomb was guarded by the hoopoe,
Seemingly playing on the branches of the nearby shrub,
The same bird that greeted me in the cool morning air
Of Botswana's Okovango Delta,
Welcoming me to one of the world's great natural areas,
Cementing an image of islands of habitat
Floating amongst reeds and lily pads and animals
That navigate throughout on seemingly webbed-hooves.

So when the hoopoe image arrived it assured me
That wonderful new experiences await,
Realities not present on the Texas coast
Realities that will remain with me forever
When I return from the heart of Africa in August 2015.

Written in Houston before catching the flight to Tanzania



Superb Starling

On the morning of the first day
In Arusha, Tanzania in August of 2015

The bird hopping on the pounded dirt
Beside my breakfast table is simply superb,
A spectacular, splendid, sense-stimulating starling
With iridescent blue, red, black and purple –
A feast for the eyes as is Tanzania.

As we start our explorations, we are surprised –
Surprised that Tanzania is also a feast for the brain,
A country aware of both challenges and solutions,
Be they wildlife corridors or census methods
That do not inquire about religious preference,
Choosing instead to assert that they are one –
A country working for the good of all citizens,
A country that generates dot com Maasai
Like our guide David Mboya,
A man of the present,
A man who makes his living from preservation
While respecting yet migrating from his cultural past.

And as we travel, we are accompanied
By the beautiful bird first seen
Hopping beside my chair that first morning,
Sharing the wealth and bounty of Tanzania with us,
A superb envoy from superb Tanzania.



Little Bee-eater

Looking out over the valley of the Tarangire River
As the sun announces the arrival of today.

My brain switches back to yesterday
To our journey to tsetse fly country
In search of a swamp in the middle of the park,
Watching cheetahs and wildebeests and elephants,
Stopping at a low water crossing
To marvel at the beautiful bee-eater –
The green and orange and yellow vision
Standing guard from the extended bare limb,
Watching over the python-wrapped orchid,
Welcoming our Texas troupe to tsetse country.

Thank Gods for the tsetse fly.
This infamous little bug with the big bite –
The savior of nature in Tanzania –
Protecting bee-eaters and elephant and gazelles
Not with ethics or laws but with economics –
Economics related to the bite being deadly to cows,
Cows that bring the people,
People who destroy the habitat to bring more cows,
Except that the old tsetse fly kills cows
And dead cows make no money,
Eden destroyed but for the bite of the fly,

Leaving Tarangire, I am more focused than ever
On economics as a key to conservation,
A lesson received from the little bee-eater
Sitting on a bare limb in the heart of Africa
And the fly who kills cows



White-headed Buffalo Weaver

Having lunch on a hillside overlooking a huge wetland
In the middle of Tarangire National Parkl.

The white-headed bird with the orange-circled rump
Hops beside our lunch table,
Seemingly accompanying us when we experience
New visions in the Eden that is Tanzania.

Grazing and gazing with our guide and group of Texans,
We are startled by the appearance of elephants
First on our left and then our right,
Long columns marching down to the wetland edge,
Streaming past for many minutes,
All stopping to drink, some rolling over,
Baptizing themselves in life-giving water,
Water that is now beginning to be less
As the season dries the dirt
And shrinks the swamp.

Looking out we see a special place,
A place infused with the spirit of living things
On the only planet supporting life, life that is
Jeopardized by a changing climate that alters
The rain without which there would be no life
In this place of life.

Before us we see a swath of green and blue
In a landscape of brown and gold,
Presided over by the Buffalo weaver,
A humble bird that weaves a nest,
A massive tangle that protects it and its young,
A nest built with an emergency exit,
A nest built better than our economy
That has no emergency exit for climate change.

Watching the lumbering giants stride across the wet grassland,
I am refueled and renewed in the continuing struggle
To redesign a society, a culture, before it destroys
The lovely water meadow where elephants bathe
In Tanzania in August, 2015.



Red-cheeked Cordonbleu

In Tarangire National Park in Tanzania
Watching African life being lived in August, 2015.

We stop our Toyota to gaze
Upon the small blue-breasted bird
With the lovely rosy blushes
That dot its cheek,
An excellent small living thing
Amongst the elephant and the lion,
A bird of the sand and seeds,
Bringing the gift of color
To a landscape of faded gray and brown.

Later, we come upon some large white scat,
The type of thing we discuss on trips like this,
And our guide asks “Whose is it for 50 points”?
And amidst our set of wild guesses
My man John Chapman offers that this is the scat
Of the red-cheeked cordonbleu,
And our guide David almost falls from the Toyota
In fits of laughter
At the absurdity of the answer,
And he laughs about it as do we all
For the rest of the day.

Thank heavens for John Chapman,
My teammate, my buddy, my friend,
Revealed to me yet again
Looking at hyena scat
In Tarangire in the heart of Africa in August 2015.



Yellow-Billed Stork

Sitting beside Lake Manyara eating lunch with zeb-bras.

The yellow-billed storks appear as a swarm
Circling above the lovely wetland
At the edge of the large alkaline lake
In the midst of the Rift Valley,
Flying in a circular pattern,
Losing altitude, tumbling to land among friends,
Leaving behind the sound of their wings losing air,
The whoosh of delight of arrival.

Delight such as I feel among our load of Texans,
A group of friends traveling together,
John and Princie, Susan and Ann, Garland and Jim,
Finding comfort in each other, much like - - -
A tower of giraffes, a troop of baboons,
A dazzle of zeb-bras, a pride of lions,
Comfort also from the welcoming wetland where
Hippos huddle and grumpy old buffaloes wallow,
A place where storks and pelicans and ibis gather
On a wonderful day for picnic lunch
Sitting with friends, making stories,
Living life in another land.

We humans think that we are different,
That our self-awareness makes us unique,
But sitting on Lake Manyara, it seems to me
That humans and these wild things are
More alike than not, finding comfort in one another,
Staying close for safety, gathering together
For shelter, for water, for protection,
Not all that different from our "load of Texans",
A thought that gives me comfort and peace
On the banks of an alkaline lake in Tanzania
Making stories, living life, finding comfort.



The Unknown Rusty Breasted Bird at Gibb's Farm

Taking a day or rest at Gibb's Farm
On the forested outer rim of Ngorongoro Crater.

The morning is filled with the song
Of a rusty breasted bird whose name I do not know,
A bird pausing to put on a musical show,
A singer delighting my ears and my mind,
A bird that makes me feel alive today as I walk along.

Hallelujah the bird sings to the sun,
Praise be to life,
Praise be to the green slopes
And vegetable gardens that feed
Spirit and body –
Nourishing the soul, feasting the eyes.
Hallelujah, hallelujah
For I am alive and living another day –

Hallelujah you rusty-breasted messenger
Who I am receiving loud and clear.
Praise be to Garland, my companion and my love,
Praise be to Chapman and Princie and Susan and Ann,
Praise be to me
For my spirit flies with the music
That comes from the rusty breasted bird
With no name known to me.

On the outer rim of Ngorongoro at Gibb's Farm
In August 2015.



White-naped Raven

At the Masai Village on the rim
Of Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania.

The colored garb upon the gathered Maasai
Offers an abrupt contrast to the brown earth
And the heavily grazed dusty grass and mud huts
Of the village of the Maasai,
An interesting and perplexing people
Who value cows and resist change,
Holding firm to traditions in the face
Of the forces and convictions of modernity.

The two large black birds set their wings and lower their feet,
Gliding in to land on the fence protecting the village,
Two white-naped ravens watching six bewildered Texans
Receiving the message of the Maasai,
A message that seems to say leave us be,
Let us go in our own way,
Just leave us alone,
Much like the game-managers speak
Of the elephants and the zeb-bras of the park.

Are the Maasai better off
Than the urban poor of the U.S. who are
Food insecure, conscious of what they lack,
Poor who are cast as lazy and weak,
Poor who end up in jail for crimes
That wealthier citizens of a different race
Do not?

The intelligent ravens look on, amused at my discomfort,
Sagely watching a wandering spirit
Ambling through life,
Telling me to learn from this place
In the heart of Africa
And I respond "message received".

On the rim of Ngorongoro Crater
In August, 2015.



Collared Sunbird

At the entry gate to Ngorongoro Crater
Waiting for paperwork to enter the park.

We have a wounded traveler in our midst,
A large lip protruding from an encounter
With a window sill in a darkened room
In response to a wake-up knock.
Susan is a gamer, still with the group
That wanders in the parking lot where we see
A lovely green-headed bird with a curved bill,
Doing an imitation of a hummingbird,
Probing into flowers, flitting here and there,
Reflecting the sun back in a way
That gives more than it seemingly receives,
A symbol of the power of life and living things.

Later we go to the infirmary for physical repair
And meet Dr. Frank, a man whose calling is to minister
To those needing physical help,
A man who shares that earlier in his life
He was not spiritually ready for what he today is doing.
What a great concept – spiritual readiness,
The ability to hear and act in service
Of a greater good, a higher concept of self,
A condition of receptivity to things that fuel
The flame within.

And like the collared sunbird's receipt of the sun,
I seek to receive and reflect spiritual messages
That travel like the low frequency communications of the elephant,

And I find myself twisting my dial,
Tuning my receiving frequency
Near Ngorongoro Crater in the heart of Africa
In August 2015.



Ricki Patel in the Bush

Following Ricki Patel touring Ngorongoro Crater
With his friends and trusty dot com guide.

When nature calls, you need to answer
But what do you do when nature calls in nature?
Why of course Ricki puts his faith in his guide,
The man in whom you entrust your life
And your friends who would never try to trick you,
So when the guide asked if Ricki wished to irrigate the bush,
Ricki said yes with total trust.

Fearless in the face of massive thorns,
Ricki almost walked into the wily Masai's trap
For behind the designated bush
Lay two nasty Cape Buffalo,
But Ricki was up to the challenge,
Nonchalantly stepping off the Toyota,
Cowering the big bull with his icy stare,
Rendering the big cow powerless,
But as Ricki was opening his office for business,
The bull who escaped Ricki's stare charged
So just like a matador Ricki yelled "Hey toro"
And used his purple backpack as a cape,
Frustrating and exhausting the big bull,
Then Ricki completed his business and left
With a flick of his blue middle finger.

Returning to the Toyota to high fives all around,
Ricki signs off from the bush with this life lesson –
Beware of which bush you choose
Behind which to open your office or
You may find yourself out of business.

From the crater in the heart of Africa in August 2015.



Gray-crowned Crane

In the Rift Valley traveling to Ngorongoro crater
In Tanzania in August 2015.

Geologic processes abound, assaulting my senses
Filling my brain with the images and the wisdom
Of my friend the geophysicist H.C. Clark trying to explain
Mind-boggling concepts like geologic time,
The Rift Valley a slash across the landscape
Dividing upthrown from downthrown,
Liberating groundwater,
Creating the underground forest of Lake Manyara park
That is enabled by the gift of earth-water,
An earth that also generated the collapsed volcano
That is Ngorongoro,
Awe inspiring from the top edge and from within,
An inverted mushroom cap whose floor
Teems with living things living life.

The crowned cranes graze across the landscape of the floor
With the wildebeest and the buffalo and the warthogs,
Striking gray and white birds with fabulous yellow crowns,
Working in pairs, grazing along, smooth and easy,
The crater a sparkling jewel,
A true world heritage site,
A spiritual place shaped by a volcano,
Volcanoes that were worshipped as
Gods by the Maasai.

The crowned cranes rise together,
Flapping their broad white-patched wings
As they move to the next patch of grassland,
And I thank the crater for its existence
And I thank Tanzania for finding a way to protect it.

Driving out of the crater after encountering God
At Ngorongoro In August 2015.



Lilac-breasted Roller

In the Serengeti watching nature
In the heart of Africa in August 2015.

The herd of wildebeest approaches the gully -
Slowly, cautiously, almost, not quite and now
They start to dash across the small depression
And amidst the bearded confusion
An apparition in turquoise flashes above them,
And then spreads its wings and lands atop
The leafless branch, showing its full majesty –
Turquoise lower body, lilac breast and a white top,
A symbol to me of Africa,
One that has been ever present from
Tarangire to Ngorongoro to Serengeti.

The herd of wildebeest marches beneath the roller,
A group of nomads marching right to left for a while,
Only to turn back to march left to right,
Crossing the northern Serengeti,
Providing meat for lions
And hyenas and cheetahs and leopards
And vultures and maribu storks,
A walking meat market, a movable feast,
The stuff of dreams of predators.

If reincarnation were to occur,
I wish to be a lilac-breasted roller,
Greeting the herd, watching it meander,
Darting up to catch the Serengeti wind,
And please don't bring me back as a bearded beast,
Always looking over my shoulder,
Sleeping with one eye open,
Queing up at the crossing,
Thinking, hesitating, waiting, pushing,
Jumping forward and then back

And then making a mad dash for life,
Every day.

In the Serengeti in August 2015.



White-bellied Go-away-bird

In the Serengeti reflecting upon nature's marvels
And the wisdom of the Go-away-bird.

The pointed-headed bird in the Acacia tree
Let's loose its call – Go Away, Go Away.
This white-bellied bird with the dark weird head
Calls out what must be an African rule –
The impala with one horn fought for females and lost –
Go Away, Go Away, Go Away.
The sick wildebeest is left behind by the herd –
Go Away, Go Away, Go Away.
The old buffalo bulls are expelled from the group.
Go Away, Go Away, Go Away.
The young elephant male is pushed out by the mothers –
Go Away, Go Away, Go Away.
And to the Maasai who cries when his penis is shaped –
Go Away, Go Away, Go Away.

The Go-away-bird chants a rule of the wild
That seems to be lost in America today,
Where all children are winners and none lose,
Where consequences are soft and boundaries mushy,
Are we evolving forward in search of perfection
Or putting aside one of Mother Nature's rules?

Go Away, Go Away or Stay please stay?
I simply don't know the best way.
So I take this question to the talking bird
Who looks down at me and says "Go Away".

In Tanzania in the Serengeti watching nature work.



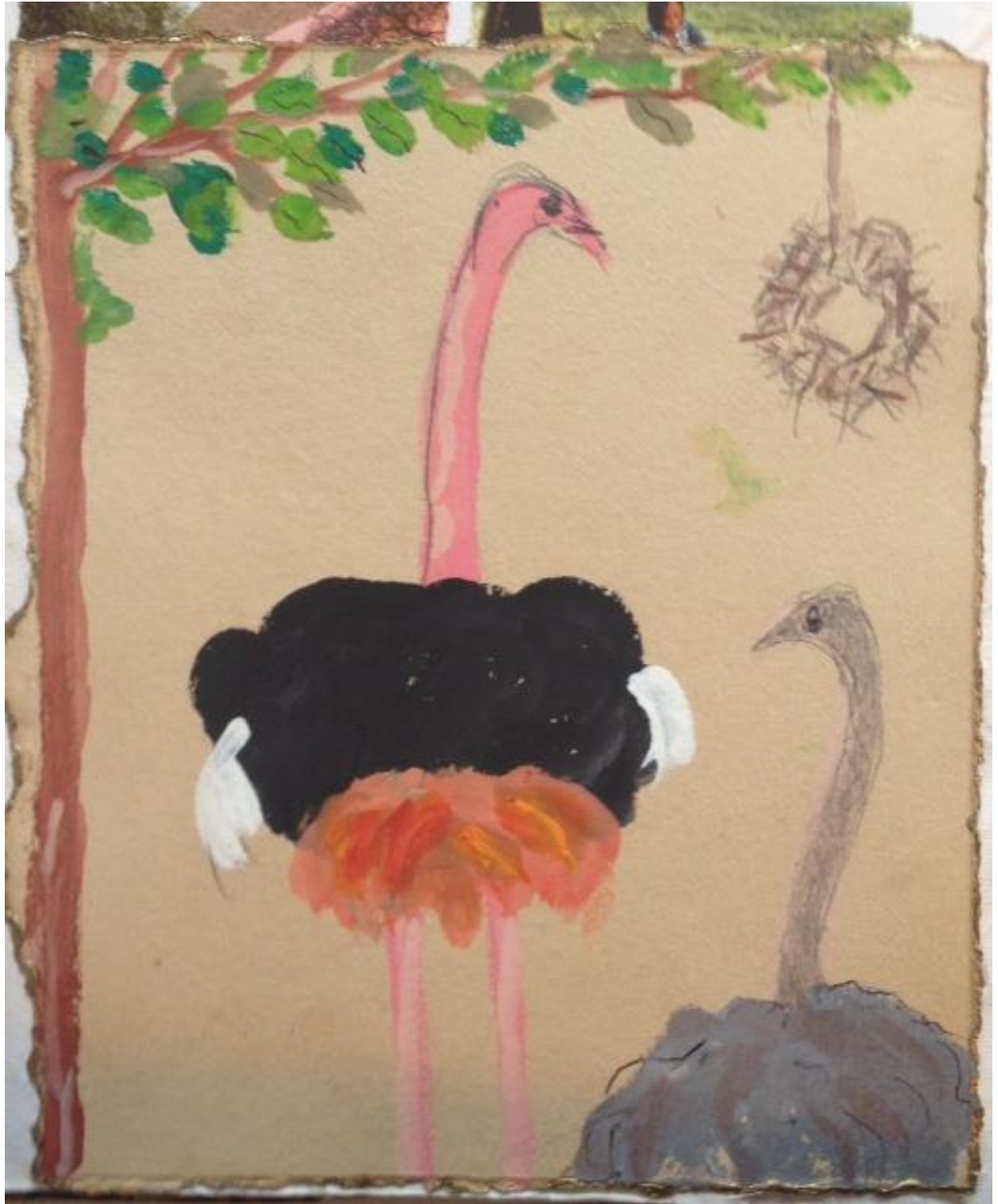
Common Ostrich

In the Serengeti with friends
Watching living things living life.

The black circle appears on the landscape
Of yellow, brown, green and blue,
A form that resolves as we move closer
Into a reddish neck and big pink thighs,
Extrusions from a fluff of feathers
Looking like a fan from the orient,
An exotic, exciting bird that cannot fly,
A bird that stands with the elephants and wildebeest,
Giraffes and gazelles,
A bird that defines its own space.

You ain't no cheechee, you big bird
That in ancient times might have been worshipped
As a manifestation of the Gods – a marvel of nature,
The ostrich God, my higher power in Africa,
For what is a higher power other than something
Larger than yourself, something you cannot control,
Something that inspires awe.
So I pray to the ostrich as a symbol
Of life and living on Earth,
I bow to its majesty,
I feel my spirit fly when I see
The big black bird that cannot fly
And I will return home
Richer, grateful and full of happiness.

In the temple of the Church of the Earth
That is the Serengeti in Tanzania in August 2015.



Secretary Bird

In the Serengeti near the Kenyan border
With Nomad Tours in August 2015.

The large bird with the black pantaloons
And the striking feathered crown
Strides across the grassland,
Looking for a serpent upon which to pounce,
A formidable-looking snake-eater moving across the shortgrass.

The herd of wildebeest is confused.
Weather patterns that have been a long-standing constant
Are changing –
The rain stopped too soon in the southern Serengeti
And it's not supposed to rain in the northern Serengeti
In August but it rained last night,
A conflict with the information in the herd's DNA,
Confusing messages to the shape-shifting phenomenon
Known as the herd,
One of numerous indications that what was is no more,
Unmistakable evidence of human impact
In the heart of Africa far from the source
Of carbon emissions causing the change.

The secretary bird and the wildebeest,
Two peas in the pod of change
Caused by my kind,
A kind that intervenes to change nature
In ways they know not and about which they seem
To care not,
Ways known as serpent thinking
That I call upon the secretary bird
To jump upon and crush into dust.

And as I dream on, I smile as I see
The secretary bird jumping up and down

On the venomous snakes of my existence
In the Serengeti during my afternoon siesta.



Maribu Stork

Sitting around the campfire in the early evening
In the northern Serengeti.

Today we gazed upon a maribu stork
Waiting to find the scraps from a wildebeest
That offered itself to the lionesses
That roam Gardenia Creek,
A stork that was voted Africa's ugliest bird,
A bird with feces-covered legs
And big red sack hanging below a bill
Crafted by the devil itself,
A bird beloved by our artist Prince
Who finds beauty amidst the assemblage
That is the maribu stork.

Later in camp, our four lionesses recline
In the folding chairs set out around the fire,
Suddenly alerted by the words of Chapman,
A man who perhaps unwisely jests that
"My girl call his girl",
A man emulating a wildebeest
Ambling alone across the grass,
Unknowingly walking into four fiery sets
Of eyes that carefully weigh the energy
Required to take the prey
Against the rewards,
And I am relieved when they let the wandering beast
Pass by,
My man Chapman again surviving another day,
Failing to serve up the last tasty scraps
To the lovely, the beautiful, the magnificent
Maribu stork of the Serengeti in August 2015.



Yellow –collared Lovebird

In Tanzania in the Serengeti
In August with the woman of my life.

The Yellow-collared Lovebirds are striking
With green and yellow bodies and
Brown heads with a striking orange beak,
Usually seen in pairs,
Traveling together
Like me and my wonderful Garland,
My love, my companion, my buddy.

I wake up from an afternoon nap
And watch her walking through the tent,
Organizing this, gathering that,
Charging yet another modern device
And I find myself feeling warm inside,
Not from the heat but from affection
That flows from me to her,
From my repaired heart
Like waves on the Indian ocean,
A partnership that makes life worth living
Me and my Garland.

And later on the game drive,
The pairs of lovebirds fly over us,
And I smile in the Serengeti in Tanzania
After a hot afternoon in the tent.



European Roller

In the Serengeti in August 2015
Watching wildebeests endlessly marching on.

Amidst the multitude of wildebeests
A shy roller stands watch,
Looking very striking on the bare limb
Set against the gray mud bank and the yellow grass,
Green accompanied by turquoise
A fashion statement on a creek bank.

Beside the European roller
The march of wildebeests continues,
Revealing the central role
Of these bearded mooing antelopes,
A so-called keystone species in the life engine
That is the Serengeti,
A species whose migration must be protected
Against the roads to bring commerce
From the shores of Lake Victoria
To the markets and opportunities of Arusha
And Mombasa and Dar Es Salaam,
A road that stands for the conflict
Of modernization and protection,
A road that would mark the beginning of the end
Of the majesty that is the Serengeti.

And as I reflect upon the wildebeest and the roller,
I tip my hat to the Tanzanian government
That has so far resisted the force of development
Pulsing from the shores of Lake Victoria,
Hoping to generate sufficient cash from the Serengeti
To justify its protection.

And as I prepare to leave Tanzania,
I applaud the East African country
For doing that which my government,

An advanced so-called first world country,
Seems unable to do.

Packing my bags on the eve of my departure
Near the end of a trip of a lifetime.



Lappett-faced Vulture

In the midst of the African continent
Taking it all in.

The Serengeti lies majestic before my gaze,
The yellow rolling hills and green water cuts
Lined with wildebeests from edge to edge
Heading to the Mara River,
Heading back from the Mara River,
Flowing like water, making offerings
To the lions and to the vultures
Led by the Lappett-faced with the fierce cutting beak
That opens up the covered parts
And then sits back to watch its brethren
Glide in and hop to the feast.

In the morning sun the water flows from the side
Of the hill behind our camp,
Pure and clean like the ecosystem itself,
Creating a reed-filled wetland,
A thing of beauty amidst beautiful things,
A place that reminds us
Why Ann led a moment of silence this morning
For Earth Church, our sacred ground,
Giver of life, giver of inner peace.

As the Serengeti winds rise with the sun,
The Lappet-faced recycler sits in the bare tree,
Adding to our spiritual well-being
On a trip of a lifetime.

And as the big plane flies me back to the Texas coast,
I am revived, restored and renewed,
Ready to continue as a missionary
In the service of the Church of the Earth.



Ruppell's Long Tailed Starling

Preparing to leave Tanzania
Near the end of an incredible journey in August 2015.

There is a wind that blows across the Serengeti
Straight into your soul and takes your inner self
To the holiest of places,
A window to the mother that is the Earth,
A place that leaves no doubt
That the Earth is a church
And that we are parishioners
With much to learn,
Parishioners fortunate to feel the wind blow,
Imprinting our deepest selves with the
Indelible stain of truth,
A truth delivered by the band of starlings
That are ever present in Tanzania,
A starling like Ruppell's long-tailed
That looks like a common blackbird
Until the sun hits its feathers
And projects a myriad of hues
Of green and purple and black,
Revealing that what you thought,
What you believed,
Must be reconsidered,
Just as we must reconsider the role of our species
On the care and protection of our Mother
That is Earth.

So I let the Serengeti winds fill my wings
And fly me back to Texas,
A place where much remains to be done
To preserve our own chapel
In the Church of the Earth.





A wetland in the grassland that is the Serengeti, the center of Earth Church in Africa.

The End.