The Lion of 81 Upper Orange Street

The footpath shimmered in the heat of central Los Angeles, the last leg of a four-month holiday before my husband and I emigrated to Australia in mid 1981. As we waited for the first of two buses to return us to our accommodation in the San Fernando Valley, I reflected on the past few hours I'd spent absorbed in the collection of ancient animals at the La Brea Tar Pits museum complex behind us. The *Smilodon*, with its burnished skeleton, extended canines and open-jawed stare, had captured my interest and heart. One of the most recognised of prehistoric mammals, this sabre-toothed cat had a short tail and muscular build, and was known to ambush prey rather than stalk and pursue it as modern cats do in the wild. Who knew what victim it had been about to take by surprise when the tar welled up and swallowed everything 10,000 years ago?

'Hello.'

The woman had been watching us for a few minutes, no doubt wondering why anyone would be waiting for public transport in a city that worships the motor car. In her mid-fifties with a trim figure and dyed black hair, she had that congeniality Americans display on their home turf.

'So where do you folks come from?'

'Cape Town. South Africa.'

'Ah, Africa. I have a friend who lives in Nairobi. Maybe you know her?'[1]

'No, ma'am, we would definitely not know your friend.' I explained to the woman that it took two hours to fly from Cape Town to Johannesburg, and another four hours on an international flight to Nairobi. Besides which, anyone in possession of a South African passport – reeking of the stench of apartheid at that time – would not be allowed into the airport transport lounge, let alone permitted to wander the streets of Nairobi.

[1] This question has become popularised in the mythology surrounding foreigners' perceptions of South Africa.

I sighed at her ignorance, reminding myself that not everybody travelled, and that some people were naturally indifferent to the culture, politics and geography of countries and continents beyond the borders of their own. If they thought that people like me lived in mud huts or butchered live animals in their back garden, it was because what they had read, heard from others, or seen from Hollywood, had transmuted such mythology into fact. There was one line of inquiry, however, that always took me by surprise. I was never sure if the person was pulling my leg or whether they genuinely believed that lions walked the streets of African cities. Nor did they seem convinced when I said the only place to see lions in Cape Town was at the zoo.

Cape Town's first zoo, like the nearby campus of the University of Cape Town, owed its existence to the mining magnate, politician and imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes. In 1896, he was given two lions and a leopard for which he built an enclosed extension to the herb garden on his estate, Groote Schuur, a sprawling property on the lower slopes of Devil's Peak.[2] The gift of these cats prompted him to establish a menagerie of wild animals and birds that would be housed in aviaries, cages, fields and – for the lions – a den. Seeing a clear parallel between himself and the king of the jungle, he instructed his architect, Sir Herbert Baker, to draw up a:

> *'spacious and beautiful building: a Paestum temple…where the king of beasts would be admired in his natural strength and dignity. The old Roman in him pictured the beauty of lions moving through great columns, and he was quite unperturbed, when warned of sanguinary fights which would ensue.'*[3]

[2] Part of the mountainous backdrop to Cape Town.

[3] Ommaney, S *Lacuna Groote Schuur Zoo* Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town 2012, page 5. Paestum, in southern Italy, is famous for its three ancient Greek temples of the Doric Order (750-480 BC), a period noted for its simple circular capitals at the top of columns. Baker had the Temple of Poseidon in mind when he designed the lions' den.

Baker, who would become South Africa's most recognised designer of public buildings in the early twentieth century, drew up plans for a linear building comprised of individual cages separated by columns, with a 'summer house' at either end. Rhodes baulked at the cost of the project, opting instead for a reduced version of the architect's vision that would become the first building of Cape Town's zoo. More structures and enclosures were added in a pattern that referenced the prevailing fashion of placing a zoo within a garden setting.

On his death in 1902, Rhodes bequeathed various parts of his estate to the Cape Provincial Administration, stipulating that admission to the zoo be free. Every day it opened at 9am and closed at 5pm to the sound of a whistle. After the original lion house was demolished in 1930 and replaced with new enclosures, the zoo became known as the Groote Schuur Zoo. More animals, reptiles and birds were brought onto the site, but it was the lions' sandstone den, adjoining outdoor pit, and the lions themselves, that were the centrepiece of the facility. If the wind blew from a particular direction, residents in nearby suburbs heard the roar of the lions.

The Groote Schuur Zoo is linked to my earliest memory of living at the house at 81 Upper Orange Street in Oranjezicht.

81 Upper Orange Street, Oranjezicht, Cape Town. Google Street View

Translated from the Dutch, this suburb nestling in the shadow of Table Mountain means 'orange view' and, for many years, I assumed that the object within sight was a citrus orchard. While there had once been a farm in the suburb, the person who named the suburb is thought to have had another orange in mind: *Oranje* – one of the five bastions of the Castle of Good Hope, a seventeenth-century Dutch East India Company fort in what is now Cape Town's central business district.

My parents chose the house – an eclectic mix of classical, Edwardian and Cape Dutch Revival architecture – for its proximity to schools and to my father's medical practice. Its four bedrooms, living spaces, bathroom, kitchen and ancillary quarters seemed cosy for a family of five with two domestic servants and pets - a perception reinforced by the sliver of front garden wedged between the house and the main street frontage, and the small patch of kikuyu[4] lawn that faced the mountain.

[4] A vigorous grass that is native to the highland regions of East Africa, and commonly used for lawns in Australia.

I was about four years old when my father announced that he was bringing a lion cub home for a day, a special arrangement he had made with a patient who was a keeper at the Groote Schuur Zoo. The cub was three months old and had been abandoned by his mother.

That morning my father went to collect the lion, placed him on the passenger side of his car and drove home. I expect that the pleated form of the Humber Super Snipe's bench seat was the most comfortable thing the cub had ever sat on. Everything was fine until my father had to circumvent a traffic officer on a pedestal in the centre of town. The cub stuck his paw through the open window to touch the cop, almost causing the man to faint and my father to double up with laughter.

I was thrilled with the lion, a novel distraction from our workaday pets and the occasional angulate tortoise that wandered into the garden. He was endearing and playful in the way that domestic kittens can be, and any menace that his outsized paws and claws may have conveyed was subsumed into my father's behaviour: if it was good enough for Dad to handle the cub, then it was alright for me to approach him. Less enthusiastic about the new visitor were my mother and the family cat, Blackie, who disappeared the instant he saw the lion.

There is one surviving record of that day. Even in monochrome, the cub's markings are dramatic, the lighter shading of the belly contrasting with the more accentuated mottling on his paws, legs, tail and face - a differentiation that would disappear with maturity. A young child holds the unseen end of a lead attached to the cub's collar. I like to think that, from the shape of their lower leg, the child is me.

Another photo which I recall from memory showed a young girl in a dress with puffed sleeves and ruched midriff, holding a baby's bottle filled with milk. The photographer captured the image as I was bending down from the waist, bottle poised to engage with the cub's mouth. It is an affecting remembrance, as much for the opportunity to give to the cub something that his mother had refused, as the mutual trust that allowed this act to happen.

'It's the lion or me.'

If my mother had been stiff lipped about the cub mingling with children on the lawn, allowing him inside the house was an act of war. By late afternoon he had become irritable and was pacing up and down, demonstrating the behaviour cats use when they want to press a

point. It was time to take him back to the zoo. As Dad bundled his passenger into the Humber, we settled in and waited for Blackie to come home.

Lion's Den, Groote Schuur Zoo. Francois Swanepoel, 2017. http://www.artefacts.co.za

I visited the Groote Schuur Zoo often during the late fifties and early sixties. While the zoo was home to indigenous and exotic animal and bird species, some of which – like the wildebeest and ostriches, and the Australian macropods and emus – had their own paddock, I remember only monkeys, peacocks and lions. I remember pitching peanuts into the monkey cage – the unhusked nuts were sold in brown paper bags by vendors at the zoo entrance – seeing how close I could get to a peacock with its tail feathers unfurled, and watching lions lounge in the amphitheatre in front of their quarters, hoping that one of them would roar. It was delightful to be there; Cape Town's zoo, surrounded on three sides by mature vegetation and with views across the Cape Flats to the Hottentots Holland Mountains in the east, rivalled the zoos of Sydney, San Diego and Vienna for setting. It didn't occur to me that the monkeys were conditioned to perform tricks in exchange for peanuts, the peacocks hated being chased

by children and the lions were bored. I didn't think that this place I found so entertaining might be unsuitable for the keeping of animals.

I was holidaying in Johannesburg in mid-1966 when a cousin invited me to join her and her husband on an overnight trip to the Kruger National Park. We set out shortly before midnight to secure a forward position in the queue at the Crocodile Bridge Gate, arriving around 4am at the entrance to the southern region of the park. The next two hours, while we waited for the gate to open, passed in a blur of small talk and breakfast.

Within hours of crossing into the park on that crisp winter day, I had seen hippos wallowing in pools, crocodiles basking on riverbanks and herds of impala executing feather-light *jetés* across the path of our car. In the distance, giraffe ears twitched with changes of wind direction, zebra stripes appeared and disappeared in the bush, and elephants crowded around evaporating waterholes. With almost 20,000 square kilometres at their disposal, one fifth of it in the region we were visiting, there was no question of the animals being constrained, not even by discreet perimeter fences.

'Right there!'

The lion was sitting on the road shoulder, paws outstretched in sphinx mode, eyes half closed. The shaggy mane proclaimed his gender, the size of his belly an indicator of seniority in the tribe. It was as if he was waiting for the fresh batch of visitors to pay homage to his royal self. I pressed my nose up against the window. He was still there when we pulled away.

I had been unprepared for the sheer vastness of Kruger and the cornucopia of game concentrated in its southern region. Up until then, my interaction with wildlife – other than the lion cub encounter – had been proscribed by visits to the Groote Schuur Zoo and attending circus performances. These formats, while ironclad in their guarantee of sightings, were predicated on the animals being restrained to allow a human audience to watch them in a safe and controlled environment. In Kruger, it was I who had to be confined for my own

safety while the animals were at liberty to roam, some of them relaxed enough to venture up to the car window. It was an ironic reversal of the zoo experience.

In seeing what was possible, I had awakened to the shortcomings of the Groote Schuur Zoo. I was not alone.

Styled after the European menageries of the nineteenth century, where exotic animals were housed in small cages with grilles, bars and chains, the Groote Schuur Zoo became swept up in a global protest in the 1970s. Protestors rebuked the idealisation of such places as 'pleasant and familiar refuges' where visitors could 'appreciate wild animals as if they were pets and who thought of the zoo as a friendly place of domestication and individualised contact.'[5]

At home, animal welfare advocates and the public had started complaining about the living conditions of animals in Cape Town's two-hectare zoo, its ability to expand hampered by a freeway on one side and the university on the other. One commentator likened it to a place where 'animals were collected like stamps and displayed as trophies…that served the narrow interests, whims and social aspirations of their aristocratic and wealthy mercantile founders.'[6] This was a thinly veiled swipe at Rhodes, whose expressed concern that lions be allowed to roam 'about in their natural state…not cooped up in a little den',[7] was at odds with the way in which they were forced to live at his zoo.

Faced with this criticism, running costs and a statutory prohibition on charging entry fees, the provincial administration closed the Groote Schuur Zoo in 1975 and relocated the animals to other facilities. The twice daily whistle and roar of the lions were heard no more.

---

[5] Baratay, E. & Hardouin-Fugier, E. *Zoo: a history of zoological gardens in the West* Reaktion Books 2004. Pages 222-234.
[6] O'Toole, S The closing of Tygerberg Zoo *Mail and Guardian South Africa* 21 December 2012
[7] Rotberg, R.I. *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the pursuit of power* Oxford University Press 1988. Page389

Until the Kruger visit, I had not given a second thought to the fate of the lion cub after he had been returned to the Groote Schuur Zoo. I never associated the cub with the lions I saw there or wondered how he would have survived without a mother's love. Yet there was a chance that, at the time the zoo closed, he was still alive. Lions can live up to 25 years in captivity – almost 10 years longer than a lion in the wild – thanks to medical care, a reliable source of food and water, and protection from animal and human predators. I may unknowingly have seen him on my zoo visits, reclining on a boulder in the pit, his spots since faded to beige and a luxuriant mane tumbling down his neck and shoulders. In lieu of parental affection, he may have bonded with a zookeeper who came to know his habits and quirks and loved and respected him for the majestic animal I imagine he turned out to be. Internment may have been a sad fate for my beautiful companion-for-a-day, but releasing him into the wild would almost certainly have cut his life short.

If bringing the cub into our home was the strangest thing my father did, it was not entirely out of character. My father was always a soft touch when it came to abandoned animals. Patients who did not know what to do with unwanted or difficult pets often left the surgery with more than their health problems resolved. Many of the animals that came to us via this pathway were cats. I believe that while Dad mounted the idea of the lion's visit as family entertainment, he was equally motivated by giving him a modicum of freedom and a lather of affection.

After it closed to the public, the Groote Schuur Zoo became an attractor of a different kind. The bush invaded the site and, with it, came the snakes and graffiti. Homeless people camped in the empty buildings until the responsible authority bricked up the openings. Cape Town's

youth counterculture gathered there to play loud music in the lion's den, smoke cannabis and watch the sun rise. More recent attempts to repurpose the zoo saw it host theatre productions and art exhibitions, but the site is difficult to adapt, and its future use remains uncertain. I have driven past it more times than I can remember on return visits to Cape Town. On occasion, I have turned off to meet friends or conduct research at the university. Not once have I felt compelled to walk the few hundred metres to the place where, more than fifty years ago, I moved from enclosure to enclosure in awe of the wildlife confined therein. I have dug deep within myself to explain this avoidance, concluding that if I had stopped going there long before I emigrated from South Africa, nothing had changed to make me want to go there now. Also, knowing that the zoo had fallen from grace, wouldn't it be ghoulish to gawp at its remains?

Eighteen months after arriving in Sydney, we started looking for a house to buy. Having rented an apartment in the Inner West, we focused our search on this area we'd come to know and like - but it wasn't to be. The pretty Victorian terraces with their polished floorboards and modern amenities were beyond our budget and we had no stomach for a worn-out property that stank of pet excreta. We abandoned the Inner West and went north across the Harbour Bridge.

There was an uncanny similarity between the houses here and the first houses I'd lived in in South Africa. Both were built during the era of new dawns – the Federation of Australia in 1901 and the Union of South Africa in 1910 – and were indicative of a vernacular architecture that borrowed from other styles to fulfil the practical needs of living, while responding to the challenges of landscape and climate. The eight-sided star depicted in the front gable of the Sydney house – the Southern Cross of the Eureka flag – is as definitive of its context as the Cape Dutch idiom of the gable at 81 Upper Orange Street.

Our Sydney home had access to plentiful walks and was within walking distance of an unusual feature. I'd discover that if the wind blew from a particular direction and the lions were in the mood, I could hear their roars from Taronga Park Zoo.