

Ghosts

by Stephen Salisbury '09

Casey Shearer Memorial Award for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction, Honorable Mention

"You forgive because you have to," Abe says as we rise with the hills, squeezed in a van row two to a seat. Rwanda sprawls out in front of us like a crumpled blanket, a green quilt with patches of banana trees, cornrows, and sugar cane, stitched with small clay houses that cling to its slopes.

We drive on a Chinese-built road. A well-engineered and well-paved apology, one of many public works funded by a regretful international community. It is listed like a tourist attraction in the guidebook. We are impressed. "This is a really great road," Garret says. I agree.

"If you look at the facts" Abe says, "If you were male and over fourteen you must have took blood." I look around the cramped van at the men we're riding with. We share sweat; our shoulders dig into each other's ribs and our knees into thighs, thin legs too bundled for the heat. No man wears shorts in East Africa.

Abe is generous with answers. At this point we don't know where he was, who he knew who died, who he knew who killed. We met him the night before on the street; he pointed us toward a shopping mall food court, and by chance he was taking the same trip. He was around seven when the genocide happened, the same age we were.

I am not asking him questions. Mike is towering over him, knees high and jammed into the seat in front, head craned down to avoid the ceiling. He turns to Abe intently, arguing his points with facts from books he's read, documentaries he's seen. Each "Tutsi" and "Hutu" Mike utters stabs my ears and I look around expecting to be eyed down or kicked out. Abe doesn't use those words.

We are on our way to Kibuye, a town where ninety percent of the Tutsi population was killed thirteen years ago, mostly in huddled masses on the floors of churches and hospitals. We are going there because it has a beach and a genocide memorial. Two birds, one stone.

I was dragged here. Led by a friend eager for data and a friend hungry for passport stamps. Rwanda will go nicely with his Israel, his Syria, his Sudan, collected like concert tickets or vintage t-shirts. "It's a free visa stamp," Garret said. "Why wouldn't we go?"

We came from Uganda, "Home of the Nile," after working in Kenya for a month. We packed into a bus, bags on our laps and under our feet, sharing space with burlap bags of grain and charcoal. We fed ourselves cooked bananas bought through the windows from young boys hoisting baskets bigger than themselves.

The vegetation thins as you near the border; trees give way to sparse grasslands. The Uganda we saw was overgrown, all green but the sky, fed on raindrops as big as your fist. It was like death had crept out of Rwanda, leaving a dry brown ring as a warning.

The green returns with the hills, which grow in number and height as we reach the center of the country. Homes start dotting the farmland, growing denser as we reach the capital, Kigali, messes of houses and apartment buildings that cover the hillsides like snowcaps.

Kigali bustles. Cranes frame the skyline like holy icons, gods of development. Public vans flow in and out in a rhythm, up the hill to city center and down again. The city beats like a heart; scores of people flood the streets to be swept out once more, into shopping malls, embassies, hotels, and other buses. Only the poor stay, men on street corners waiting for whites they might help to a hotel, beggars at bus stops who show their severed hands and fingers without a word.

We do the touristy things. We try the omelets; we find the internet. I send some emails with phrases like "I'm just chillin in rwanda no big deal." We go to the genocide museum.

You have to rent a private van to get there. It isn't on any public route. Travelers flock like seagulls, snapping pictures, clasping the shoulders of the loved ones next to them. An African overland tour pulls up and people flow off the bus, in a jumble of khaki and polyester, loud voices about food, cramped legs, and authentic wooden art picked up from street vendors near frequented tourist spots. They exchange sunscreens and slather it on their white and sunburned skin, trying out their Swahili words for thank you and hello even though Rwandans don't speak it.

We learn that convicted genocidaires wear pink uniforms, like they are working in a beach resort in the Caribbean. They tend the roadsides in clear sight, in the midst of the people they once lived with, cleaning up what is left. In a case we see the weapons of their crimes. Farm tools, pitchforks, machetes, grass cutters, handles, hoes.

One video displays footage of the dead in the street and machete head wounds. Skulls opened up like fruit. I had to pass

it without looking. "I thought that was the most effective part of the exhibit," Garret said. Mike lingers, reading every line of text, inspecting every picture. I sit in the lobby and watch the tour guides joke with each other. They look like Tutsis, or how we're told Tutsis look. Tall, slender features, mocha skin. The museum says in 1935 the Belgians reclassified the Rwandan population. Everyone with ten cows or more was a Tutsi. Less than that, a Hutu. The tour guides look like they could own ten cows or more.

Outside there are mass graves, over two hundred and fifty thousand buried under large slabs of salmon concrete. Walking over them you feel your feet burn. I make sure we get a group picture before we leave.

We go for a drink at hotel Milles Collines, of *Hotel Rwanda* fame, where over a thousand people were saved. We watch a father play catch with his son, and a mother lead her toddler through the grass. Around the pool business meetings are conducted with four-star service.

We sip one cup of tea between us for over an hour until happy hour starts. We drink Primus, Rwanda's national beer. It's having a promotion, giving away a cow as the grand prize.

Kibuye is hidden. The bus stop is a gas station and a few stores wedged between hilltops. Greenery eats at the roadside. There is nowhere to go except up or down. How hard it must have been to run in this town, I think. How hard it must have been to carry a weapon, to carry a child.

Lake Kivu extends to the horizon, still and dark. Miles of sparsely populated land precede Kibuye, and only cloudy water meets it on its other side. Whatever goes on here goes unseen, trapped by the silences of waves and trees.

We take a one-way road around the bend of peninsula and grab a coke at the hotel the Chinese men stayed in while building the road. Someone reminds us, "that was a really great road." No one is there for us; we have to seek out the servers by calling into the back rooms.

We walk up to the peak of the peninsula. A group of Rwandan girls follow us, clad in vibrant blue one-piece uniforms. White range rovers with white passengers pass to our left. The girls are young, age ten to twelve, smiling and giggling to each other. I wonder if they know what happened right before their births. I want to take them all home with me. We pass men filling up a boat with empty coke bottles just before the nice hotel where the range rovers stop.

The memorial is an isolated church at the base of the peninsula, back toward the bus stop, framed by high trees and sky, postcard worthy. The green slopes surrounding it are fitted with large stone coffins of the properly buried, like giant stepping-stones in a path down to the shore. In a glass case in front of the church there are skulls lined up like shoes in a window display, all shapes and sizes. Longer bones rest near the edges like bookends, bones I remember from fourth grade science class. My feet take me only far enough to make out the skulls. Garret and Mike go up the steps and try to open the door. I walk back to the road and face the other direction. The sign says over 11,000 were killed on April 17th 1994.

Some Rwandans pass by. I expect them to be embarrassed, to hang their heads, knowing from my skin that I am here to either gawk or patronize, in a tour van or a foreign SUV. They laugh at me, making fun of my shorts.

We hop on a motorcycle before we leave. We want to ride around the main outcrop. We haggle over the prices; Garret and I hate to over pay. It cost us about 80 cents. I make sure my driver is under fourteen.

We pass the church, the skulls in the case, the coffins on the hill. We pass the hotel for the Chinese, the empty stores, and the boat with the cokes. We pass the turnoffs for nice hotels; glimpse the cars in their parking lots. We turn where the girls turned, up and around the hill to the center of Kibuye, sprawling towards the water, filling all flat land and rising up with the hills. We pass stores, school children, and a sign for ten thousand more deaths adjacent to a makeshift soccer field. I spot them on a hill by the roadside, picking at weeds and wearing all that pink. I turn my head and close my eyes. I want to keep them shut back to the bus, back to Kigali, away from Rwanda, and out of Africa. There are ghosts in these hills. They cling to their slopes like the banana trees.

People like us come to wake them, to pick at a scab, a wound so grotesque that we can't help but keep looking, awestruck. Clean skulls in a row, signs with clear numbers of the death written on them. We snap pictures. We send emails. We go home.