

An Embarrassment of Riches

I

Our first full day in Zambia, a family in an old oil-burning Beetle called to welcome us to town. While the grown-ups talked, I opened crates

and boxes: found a pile of Marvel Comics, scale model die-cast toys, the Field Commander Action Man with life-like hair and gripping hands

I'd got for Christmas. The shoeless, wide-eyed neighbour boys stared openly, stood mesmerized, as if suddenly exposed to works of alien

pornography, or posing in an amateur tableau evoking Sodom, Lot's defiant wife. My new friends left with borrowed Beanos, dog-eared

Famous Five adventure books, a stack of Captain Britain weeklies—said they'd pay me back. That night I slept uncovered, left the light

on in the hall—awoke to a cacophony of crickets, croaking frogs. In the shadows, tailless geckos moved sure-footed on the walls.

II

Food shortages were commonplace. Rhodesia cut off milk and meat, blocked the open trade of cocoa beans, preserves and packaged sweets.

Cars were much the same—my father searched for weeks to find an old estate, bought a third-hand Morris Minor crank start off of Jimmy Crabb,

a Scotsman fond of crimplene, garish stay-prest slacks—short-sleeved shirts and belted jackets in the style of early African explorers. Along

with outsized hedgehog flies and bees came painted locusts, mixed varieties of lizard, praying mantids, raids of army ants—our garden

was a lush and unspoiled paradise of sub-Saharan fauna flanked on every side by cyclone fencing topped with razor wire. A neighbour told my father

that the local Bemba children often shimmied underneath to steal ripe fruit—
claimed he kept a rifle in the kitchen, said it put the wind up thieving munts.

III

The motionless agamas found on rooftops, wide-trunked mango trees
and flowering acacias often plagued me in my dreams, freed fight-or-flight
anxieties, released inchoate feelings of aversion, fear, hostility. Blue-throated
alpha-males would bob their heads aggressively, engage in combat—use
their armour-piercing tails as deadly weapons. When chased they reached
alarming speeds. The one I chance-encountered after running to retrieve
an errant cricket ball was monstrous—hissed like a corn snake, made
my muscles seize. Though charmed, I kept my wits and backed up slowly,
called for the garden boy in Bantu—found him underneath the shade trees
rubbing wax on our estate. Once murdered the agama lost its colour, left no
ornament to decorate its death—just lay there flattened in the dust. We left
it belly up, went in—ate pickled beets and tinned ham sandwiches for lunch.

PHILLIP CRYMBLE