

## Among Savannah Baboons

—for Benson

Those sunset safari drives,  
we kept as quiet as we could  
so as not to intrude—everyone  
going about his/her business of  
turning in or coming out.

My favorite stop a spot where  
a troop of Cape baboons socialized  
on a heap of fallen tree branches,  
the babies taking chances climbing  
higher, jumping farther than ever,  
mothers sitting square on their bare  
bottoms watching while preening  
and snacking on bark and roots.

Silence broken by frogs croaking.  
In the distance, a tower of giraffes  
against a backdrop of flame thorns.  
We'd stop for sundowners in the midst  
of a copse of bushes, under a tree—  
pure tranquility—a Pearl-spotted owl  
right above our heads eyeing us as if to ask,  
*What's all the fuss about? or Who do you  
think you are, invading my space?*  
Our proximity to pure wildness fixing  
a permanent smile on my face.

Savannah, shallow pans, cool forest.  
Our fearless guide, Harrier hawk-eyed,  
never missing a thing—pointing out  
every bird, mammal, insect within and  
nearly beyond sight. And there we were,  
the only humans for miles around, off-  
season the very reason we came, the rain  
most often as soft as mist, and always  
followed by sunshine.

Dusk, the baboons all lounging.  
No tension yawns. A male grooming  
a young female, biding his time.  
A few foraging for seeds, roots, leaves.

These were not the Hamadryas,  
natives to Arabia, considered sacred  
by ancient Egyptians—depicted on  
temple walls as reps of Thoth, god  
of writing and knowledge. But watching,  
I felt the urge rising within me to  
honor them, to pray they would stay  
safe and never be poached for those  
desiring them for a delicacy—that  
they'd never end up live and tied  
to a table with a hole cut in the middle,  
just the right size for their heads  
to push through.

I could have stayed there among them,  
shape-shifted till I drifted  
into their world as one of them—  
a young one tumbling among fallen  
limbs, or a mother keeping vigilant  
watch. But alas we packed up  
our empty glasses and drove back  
through the hush of dusk, the bush,  
to our camp by the Zambezi,  
lighter and more easy-  
going, knowing who we are  
and what we're not.

—Diana Woodcock

*Note: Chacma, or Cape baboons, are among  
four species known as savanna baboons.*

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