

Kakum National Park, Ghana, January 1994

Elephant Encounter

Ghana has great forests
darkly layered, leaf on leaf,
impossible to photograph
with my weak flash.
Animal trails crisscross the forest
as tree roots
crisscross this path.
I'm falling behind our group.

Magnificent Diana monkeys
are somewhere above.
Forest antelope,
stately striped bongo and
dark duiker,
haunt the shadows, unseen.
The Gabon viper, leaf-patterned,
thicker than my forearm
could be anywhere
in the leaf litter.

I rejoin our line of hikers.
Architects, landscape architects,
conservationists, Ghanaian and American,
we're here to plan a visitor center
for Kakum National Park.
We are noisy, foreign, urban animals,
learned but out of place,
talking, sweat soaked, jet lagged,
bearing up.

We emerge in a somber clearing.
Elephants have dug mud wallows
among the shadows.
Fresh elephant boluses give a smell
of barnyards, but sharper,
like fear and vinegar.

Forest elephants, smaller
than their savannah cousins
are more dangerous
when people cross their path
unexpectedly.

The afternoon, the warmth,
the wetness, work on me.
Almost dream-walking,
immersed in cicada song,
nearly trusting the tripping roots,
I watch the infinite leaves
pass in procession.

Our two guides lead us
along a path so narrow
our shoulders brush leaves
on both sides.
Again the smell of barnyard.
I barely hear
a low rumble as if
the ground were speaking.

Suddenly from the front of the line
comes urgent whispers, running feet
and an elephant snort.
The guides run back along our line,
passing behind in panic.
A shadowed mass emerges above,
parting the leaves, trunk raised,
three heartbeats away.
I freeze, breathless.
The great head pivots away.
Silence.
No one moves.

Insect sounds return
along with the guides.
Profane exclamations
and anxious laughs
reclaim the moment.
We wait, hoping the elephant has left,
then continue.
The forest seals
behind us.

