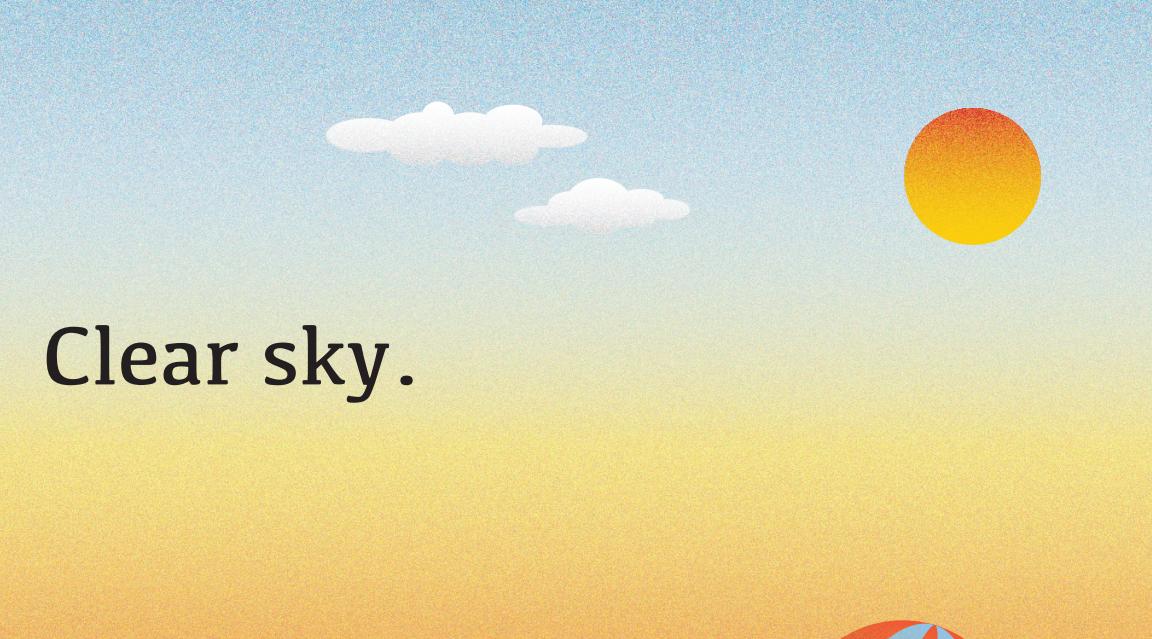
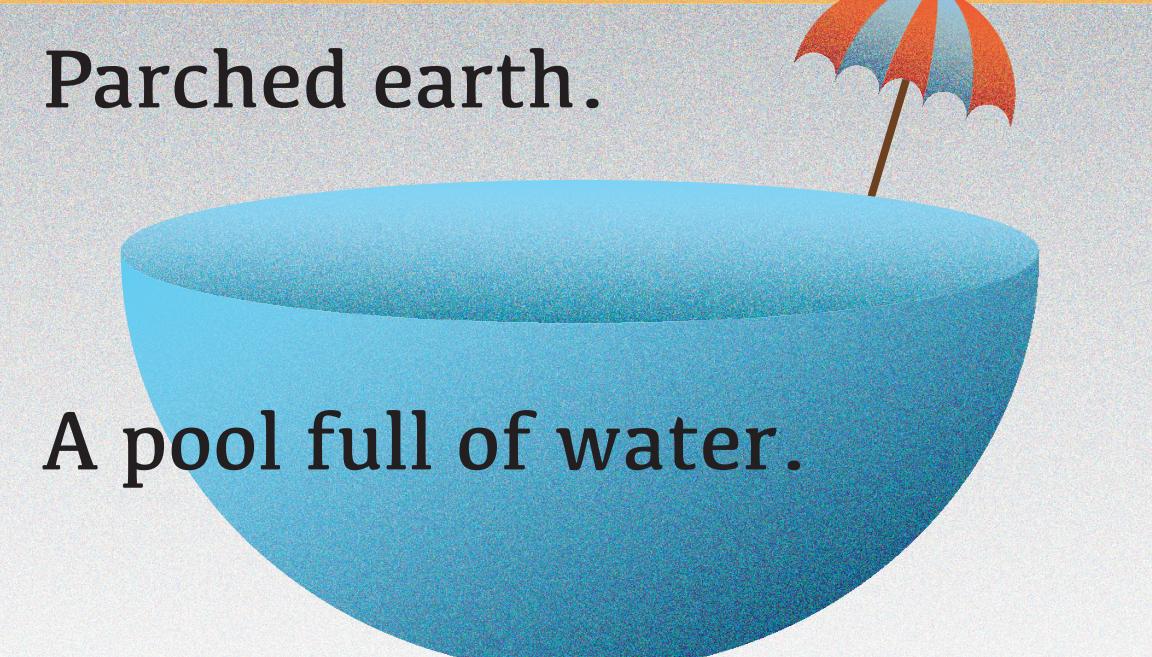


The Hornbill *Monthly*

JUNE 2014



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The Hornbill Monthly

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Contributors

Claudia Schiller (*Editor*) is trying to become a vegetarian this winter. She is currently reading *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt.

Annette Thompson (*Writer*) has moved back in with her parents and is writing a children's book. She is also planning a trip to Greece.

Lauro Octavius (*Writer*) is looking for the perfect ottoman for his brand-new armchair. He still hasn't developed a taste for whiskey.

Martin Willoughby (*Print Designer*) is learning how to play the ukulele. He hopes to perform Regina Spektor at his next dinner party.

Olga Wymann (*Photographer/Artist*) is trying to pull back from the gratuitous use of colour. She is reading *Persepolis* for the sixth time and highly recommends it.

Buying a kiwi

is always

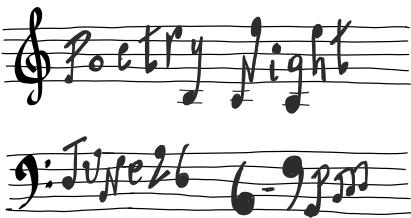
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Field Notes

SAVE THE DATE // Our annual Poetry Night is on June 26, at 6 PM, at the Bushman Inn. You're invited.



On the evening of Thursday, June 26, the *Hornbill Monthly* will host its annual Poetry Night. The event will take place in the ballroom of the Bushman Inn, and all residents of Hornbill Reserve, as well as their guests, are cordially invited to attend.

While we define poetry loosely (a string of words and sounds), we make two requests of our poets: first, that they cap their readings at five minutes; and second, that they refrain from reading work that is not family-friendly. We recognize that stage-fright is real, and we recommend that our poets come with printed copies of their poems, just in case.

As in previous years, there will be a large glass jar at the event's entrance, and everyone who is interested in reading their poem will be asked to write their name on a piece of paper

and drop it into the jar. Names will be drawn from the jar at random.

The *Hornbill Monthly*'s Poetry Night is made possible through the generosity of Jenna Heffernan and her staff at the Bushman Inn. We thank them for investing in the arts and in our community.

LETTERS // Readers react to "Urban Decay in Modern South Africa" from the May 2014 issue.

I commend the *Hornbill Monthly* for taking a nuanced view of South Africa's struggles to find peace and reconciliation as a fledgling democracy. While it is true that petty crime and gun violence have gone up since apartheid ended, these trends must be compared against the centuries of systematic, government-sponsored oppression that came before. I am glad that we are talking about the harm that was done, and how there are millions of people who still suffer the consequences of that harm in very real ways. I am a historian, and it is my job to learn from the past. Talking about the past is important because, as a nation, we cannot afford to commit the same

Send your letters to contact@hornbillmonthly.com. We reserve the right to edit your letter for content and clarity.

mistakes twice. It is my opinion that articles such as this one, while hard for many to stomach, can create a foundation for healthy debate and civic engagement.

— Martha Eidelmann

I think it is unacceptable to make excuses for murderers and criminals who break into innocent people's homes and wreak havoc on their lives. I used to live in Johannesburg. My house had twenty-foot walls with electric fencing. One day, a group of three criminals scaled the fence using a ladder from a stolen fire engine. They tied up my son and me, beat my husband repeatedly with a cricket bat, and then made off with a TV, two laptops, a bag of gold jewellery, and our family's only car. When we went to the police to report the robbery, we were asked to provide proof that we owned the objects in the first place. My husband was so badly injured that he could barely walk for weeks, and I felt like the police weren't on our side. Given my own experiences, it was extremely painful to read an article that attempts to condone the activities of South Africa's urban criminals. Criminals are evil; they have no race. The police and the government have to be more strict when dealing with them, otherwise, I'm afraid there will be no South Africa left to govern.

— Shelley Rausen

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PROFILE

Foreign Millennial Pursues Dream Job In The Bush



As a welcome present from his new boss, Sen received a thorough wardrobe makeover.

Nityananda Sen hasn't used his official first name in years. In the United States, where he recently completed his undergraduate studies, he is known as Neil. "I noticed that my Sanskrit name was a barrier to people," he says. "It made them giggle nervously, so I shortened it."

Sen isn't alone. In the U.S., it's quite common for a Hyeonsu to become a Hank, for a Pragya to become a Pam.

Some people might spot a halo of xenophobia encircling this trend, but Sen doesn't see his new identity as a sacrifice: "I believe in the essential goodness of all people. Going by Neil in the U.S. is my way of accepting people who are different than I am."

Sen's faith in humans, voluminous as it is, pales in comparison to his love of wildlife. By his own admission, nothing is more exciting than watching a cheetah pursue a gazelle. "I cheer for both sides," he says. Sen grew up in the suburbs outside Kolkata, and as a child, he spent many hours each day on the family terrace, taking care of a menagerie of exotic birds: budgies, Java sparrows, zebra finches, love birds. Sen's pets were housed in an assortment of cages, and by the age of nine, he had figured out how to determine each bird's sex at a glance. He had also realized that if the birds had some privacy—a male / female pair to a cage, say—there would soon be babies. At its height, Sen's collection had more than thirty individuals. When he ran out of space, he would release his birds, in pairs, into the wild. "It embarrasses me to think of it now," says Sen. "But at the time I knew nothing about the perils of city life, not to mention the devastation wrought by invasive species. I thought I was being kind."

It is this love of animals that has brought Sen to South Africa. He received a bachelor's degree in evo-

lutionary biology from Brown University, in frigid New England ("Basically Canada!"). Upon graduation, he says he was offered two jobs in the U.S.—biotechnology research in Boston and curriculum design in San Diego—but he turned both of them down. Instead, he exhumed his meager savings and bought a one-way ticket to Phalaborwa. "Many of my friends signed with hedge funds and tech companies," Sen says. "Maybe I'm being naïve, but I want to spend my life working to preserve our planet's natural beauty."

Last Wednesday, Sen began working for Emdes Ltd., an environmental consulting firm owned by the wildlife ecologist Conrad Venter. Sen will be based out of Venter's camp in Hornbill Reserve. "I applied online and didn't hear back for three weeks. I thought I'd been rejected, but I decided to call, just in case. Turns out, a herd of elephants had plowed down the telephone lines. Conrad's internet was down. He hadn't even seen my email. When I explained my interest in Emdes, he offered me a job on the spot."

Emdes Ltd. is a highly successful enterprise: it boasts over fifty local wildlife reserves among its clients, and it performs complex and, often, confidential projects for them. Astoundingly, Emdes has never had a salaried employee on its payroll: Venter sometimes accepts foreign students



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as interns for a season or two, but he has never before hired anyone full-time. When faced with this fact, Sen responds with humility. "I'm a college graduate with very little work experience. I know my way around a lab, and I've done a bunch of fieldwork before, but I don't have any client experience. If Conrad sees something special in me, you'll have to ask him what it is."

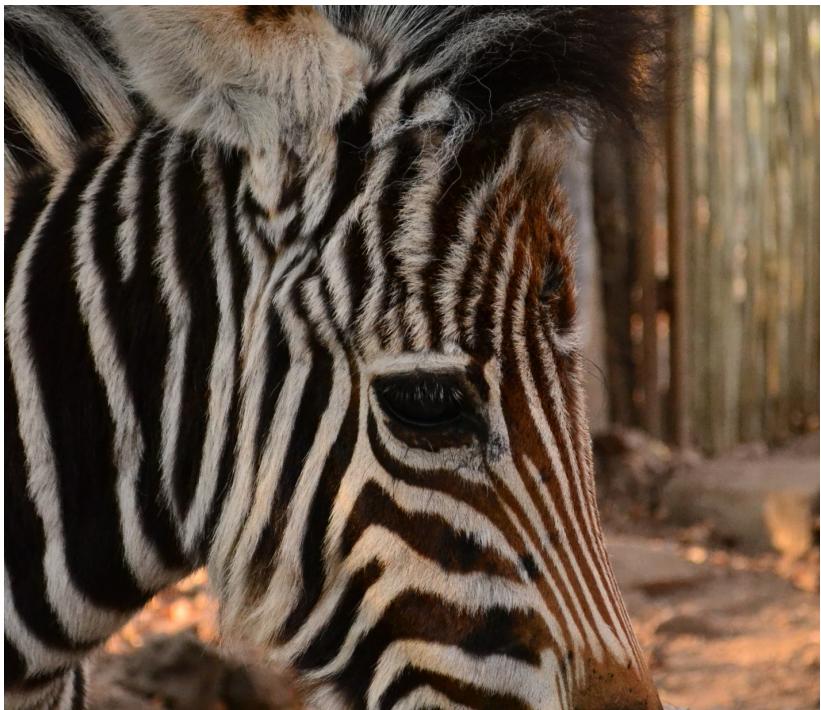
Sen is the first member of his family to set foot in Africa, and he doesn't have any local connections other than Venter. We asked Sen what prompted him to make the move. "Many reasons," he said. "The people here speak English. There's a sizeable, stable population of megafauna here, and there's a flourishing system of market incentives to preserve the wilderness. Plus, Indians have a rich history here. This is where Gandhi got famous!"

What's the first project Sen is working on? "I haven't done any client work yet. I have a lot to learn, of course. I'm good at identifying mammals and rep-

tiles, but I'm no good with plants, or insects, or microscopic parasites. For now, I'm getting up to speed on disease ecology as well as ecosystem management in the field. I'm also taking care of Conrad's pet zebra Nwana. She's still a baby, cutest animal in the world, follows me around like a dog."

Sen's eyes light up as he talks about his new gig. It is clear that he is passionate about the work he has come here to do. Venter could not be reached for comment for this article, but sources close to him say that a competent assistant will go a long way toward easing his immense workload. A neighbor, who declined to be named, said Venter usually leaves for work at dawn and returns well after nightfall. A past client, who also declined to be named, said that appointments with Venter need to be booked weeks in advance. With the dry season in full swing, the workdays will only get longer and more arduous. We wish both Sen and Venter the best of luck. •

Rescued Zebra Leads Charmed Life



Nwana the zebra lives in a wooded camp whose entrance is marked by a hippopotamus skull balanced on a pole. When we went to visit her, she was hard at work on a pile of bran flakes. Her tongue sloshed away like a serpent. For every flake that entered her mouth, dozens were nudged aside



Nwana enjoys bran flakes straight off a park bench, no spoon required.

and fell to the ground, never to be touched again.

"Nwana is the most spoilt orphan in the entire continent," said Conrad Venter, who runs a wildlife orphanage out of his camp in Hornbill Reserve. Among members of the local conservation industry, Venter is well-known as an ecologist and environmental consultant. At home, he plays foster parent to a gaggle of forest creatures. In the five years he has lived at Hornbill, Venter has successfully raised an African wild cat, a serval, a warthog, an African black tit, a lesser bushbaby, an impala, a monitor lizard, two duikers, two ververt monkeys, five terrapins, nine squirrels, and, of course, a zebra.

Although Nwana is just four months old, she stands a meter tall and weighs twice as much as an adult human. She could break my jaw with a single kick. But her current life belies a troubled start: she was only a month old when her mother was taken by lions. The Dekkers, Venter's neighbors at Hornbill, were on an evening drive through the reserve when they chanced upon her.

"In the wild, foals are hard to spot," said Pieter Dekker, who has a round, red face, like a beetroot. "The moment they see you, they are off. But Nwana just stood there, staring mournfully at us; I couldn't believe it."

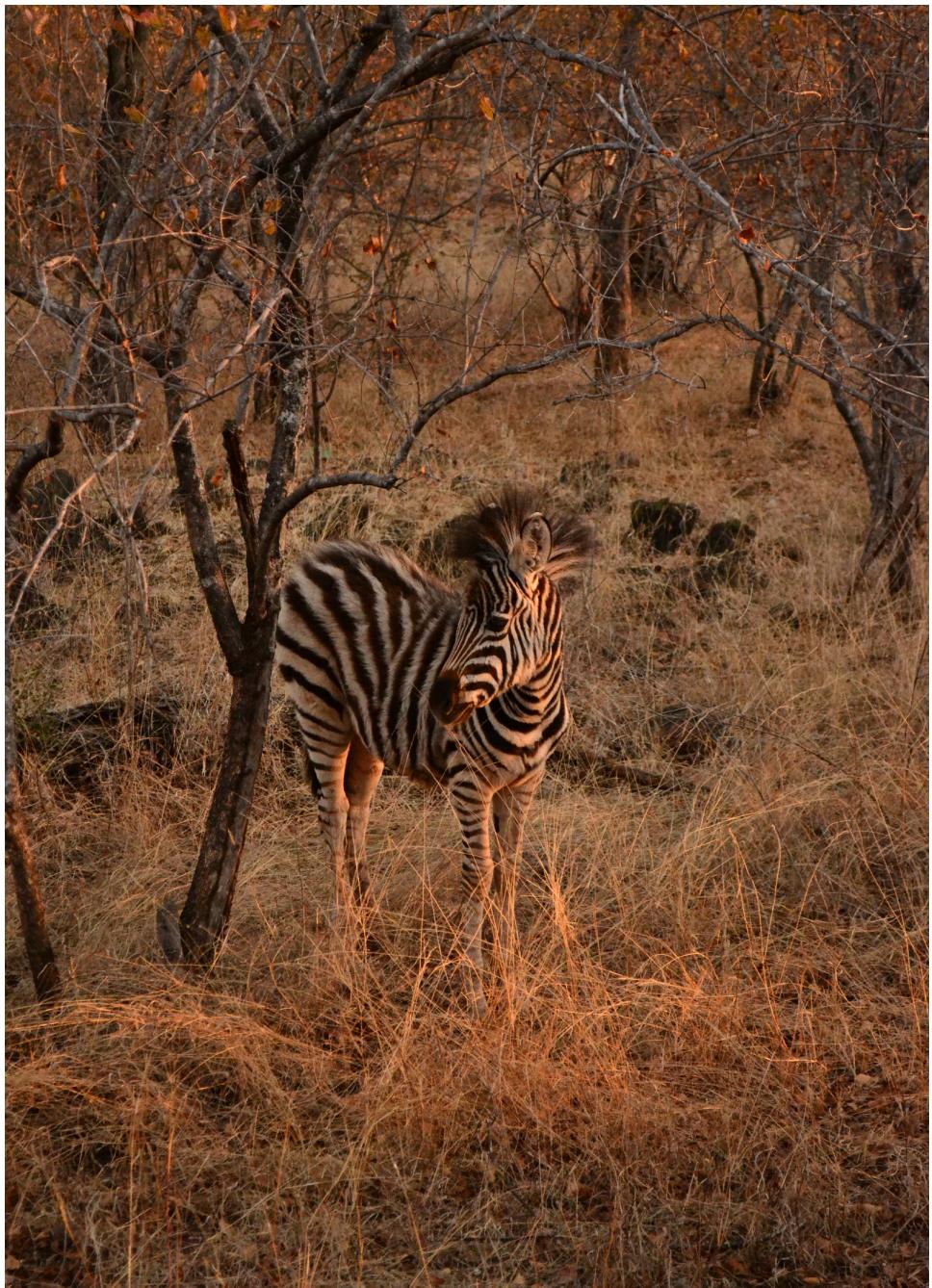
After her mother's death, Nwana spent almost a week wandering the

bush by herself. At that age, her mother's milk would have been her only sustenance. Without it, her body had begun to cannibalize itself, burning through muscle just to keep the systems running. When the Dekkers found Nwana by the roadside, she did not run away because she was too weak to do so. The light was falling, so they decided to get a closer look. That was when they saw the wounds.

"She had multiple gashes on her hind legs and rump," said Aida Dekker, fixing her watery green eyes on the zebra. "Her coat was stained dark brown with blood in places. There was more blood dripping from her wounds. It was heartbreaking."

Venter arrived from the kitchen with crumpets. "Jackals!" he said. He went on to explain that anything smaller in size dared not approach the zebra, and anything larger would have brought her down.

The Dekkers brought Nwana home in the back of their car. They dressed her wounds and gave her a blanket. All night, they tried to make her eat, but the zebra wouldn't touch anything—not bread, bananas, or fresh grass from the lawn, not even their imported fat-free milk. By the next afternoon, Pieter and Aida had a dying zebra foal on their hands, so they called in the experts. When Venter got there, the first thing he did was give the zebra a name (in Shangaan, Nwana means *the*



Everyone agrees that Nwana the zebra knows how to pose.

little one). “Names tether beings to life,” Venter said. “It’s worked for me twenty-six times so far! My only failure thus far is Oboe the aardvark. Oboe was so famished that he had crawled out of his hole—something baby aardvarks normally never do. He was too close to death to be saved, so I preserved his memory by dunking his body in a glass tank of formalin.”

Twenty-four hours after Nwana was found, she still hadn’t touched any food. Venter tried the milk formula he has used for the impala calf Maxcy, but Nwana was a hindgut fermenter and couldn’t stomach the starch-rich drink. Next, Venter tried a formula recommended by a doctor at the Onderste-poort Veterinary Institute—he drove four hours to purchase the multi-vitamins required by the recipe—but that didn’t work either. In the meantime, Nwana developed a high fever as well as severe diarrhoea. “I couldn’t afford a glass tank large enough to fit a zebra,” Venter said. “Nwana had to be saved.”

Venter realized that he would have to trick Nwana into eating food, so he did the one thing that never fails to work with children: he turned her food into candy. The new recipe was decadent: one cup of fat-free milk powder, a half-cup of vanilla-flavored instant porridge, and two tablespoons of glucose powder blended into a liter of warm water. When he gave Nwana a whiff, her ears perked up.

Venter believes that an animal cannot be saved if it has lost the will to live. So, instead of letting Nwana drink the milk, he began to step away from her. “Nwana had been lying on the ground for a day. Her eyes had glazed over. If she wanted the milk, I needed to see she could still fight for it. She got to her feet slowly. I had the milk in this same bottle”—he pointed to a large soda bottle lying on the table—“She hobbled over, her mouth closed on the rubber nipple instinctively, and then she drank.”

Nwana was standing by the kitchen now, staring at us through her black, bleary eyes. Between the jagged bones of her rump, the shadows of her deprivation seemed to linger.

“It’s time,” Venter said. At his nod, his assistant Neil Sen got up and walked into the kitchen. Nwana watched patiently as Sen boiled the water, measured out the milk powder, whisked in the porridge and glucose, clamped the nipple shut. When the milk was ready, Nwana leaped forward and drained it in nineteen seconds. *Gluck Gluck Gluck.* Unlike the bran flakes, none of the milk ever went to waste. This was the elixir that had saved her life, the same drops that she’d tasted after staggering over to Venter all those weeks ago. In a future scribbled over with doubt, this was her one streak of certainty. Nothing else would ever taste as sweet. •

Alleged Poacher Spotted Inside Hornbill

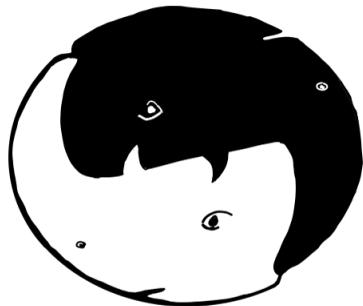


Late in the evening of May 18th, Augustus Van Wyck, a resident of Hornbill Reserve, was driving home after dinner when he noticed an elderly black woman by the side of the road. She was barefoot and carrying a plastic bag with something small and heavy inside. Van Wyck stopped his car and asked the woman what she was doing inside Hornbill after night-

The old woman was spotted on this stretch of dirt road, about a mile from the North Gate.

fall. Apparently, she ignored him and kept walking down the road, deeper into the reserve. At this point, fearing the worst, Van Wyck rushed home and immediately raised an alarm. A number of other residents responded to Van Wyck's call, but when they got there, the old woman was nowhere to be seen.

As of this article's publication, the identity of the woman is still a mystery. Van Wyck's descriptions of her have been shared widely with Hornbill's



residents and workers. There are no elderly black women who are part of Hornbill's full-time community, and no one has come forward to claim her as an acquaintance. For now, a report has been filed with the board of Hornbill Reserve, and security personnel in nearby reserves have been notified of the incident. No one is actively looking for the woman.

When we spoke with Van Wyck the morning after the incident, we

asked him to tell us more about why he raised the alarm. He said that his original concern was the woman's safety. The Hornbill Code of Conduct, which all members of the community are required to sign, expressly prohibits individuals from walking around the reserve at night. Considering that Hornbill has resident lions, leopards, and hyenas, many view this rule as a necessary precaution. "Either she didn't know the rule, which means she was an outsider," Van Wyck said. "Or she violated the rule knowingly, which makes her a deliberate offender."

Van Wyck said that he was taken aback when the old woman ignored him. He says he offered her a ride, which would have been in her own best interest to accept ("There are lions in the area!"), but she ignored that as well. Then, as she was walking away, he noticed the plastic bag in her hand. For him, that was the last straw. "Old village women are used by poachers to track rhinos," Van Wyck said. "And it looked like she might be carrying a rhino horn in that bag."

For those who aren't familiar with the politics of rhino poaching, Van Wyck's allegation might seem outlandish, so we reached out to Karl Rausen, a member of the search party that responded to Van Wyck's alarm. Rausen, who owns a small accounting business inside Hornbill, was able to shed more light on Van Wyck's per-

spective. An excerpt from his response, given via email, is reproduced here:

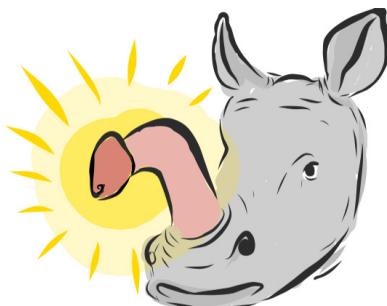
The number of rhinos poached in this country annually has risen from 5 to 500 in the last two years [we were unable to verify this statistic]. Rhino poaching is a booming trade: it brings in foreign exchange and supports families. The industry involves some very powerful people, not to mention many wildlife vets; but the poachers themselves are generally young men from poor, black areas. They operate by night, sneaking into reserves and hunting the animals on foot. An essential part of the poachers' job is to locate the rhino, and they frequently recruit trackers for the purpose. Elderly village women are particular favorites. This might seem counter-intuitive; the women could slow them down in the bush, and their reflexes could very well be diminished. But the best trackers are anything but helpless. They've grown up in the bush and can track rhinos for miles. Compared to the trigger-happy twenty-something's[sic], the trackers carry a lifetime's worth of experience. They also lend an atmosphere of innocence to the operation. The women can be used as a shield in case of approaching trouble. After all, who would suspect a helpless old woman walking alone in the bush at night of illegal activities?

In a follow-up phone call, we asked

Rausen how he responds to people who might accuse him of racial bias.

"I do not care what people say," he said. "I love rhinos and their slaughter affects me greatly. I've lived here for many years now. I understand what it's like on the inside."

Rausen's passion notwithstanding, his concern about the gravity of rhino poaching is not misplaced. The world has five species of rhino, and all of them are classified as threatened or endangered. Rhinos are hunted



throughout their range, primarily because their horn is valued as an aphrodisiac in traditional Chinese medicine. Only earlier this year, rhinos were declared extinct in Vietnam, where rhino horn costs more than cocaine and as much as gold. The plight of the animals is even more heartbreaking when we consider the fact that there is no scientific evidence of the horn's medicinal value; the lone exception was a Chinese study that found it could reduce



Two of Hornbill's resident white rhinos.

mild fevers in children. At its finest, rhino horn is the equivalent of a highly diluted aspirin tablet.

Two species of rhino are found in South Africa: white and black. According to the IUCN, the number of white rhinos has decreased by two-thirds in the last four decades; there are only about 20,000 of them left in the country. The fate of the black rhino is grimmer; there are only about 400 left in the wild globally, down from more than 100,000 at the turn of the 20th century. At the current rate of decline, experts believe both species could go extinct in the wild within the next twenty years.

Despite the bleak global trend, Rau-

sen seems upbeat about the future of the rhino in his home turf. "We have about fifty resident white rhinos here, and not a single casualty in the last three years," he said. "I'm proud to be part of the first line of defense against poachers here at Hornbill. We will do everything in our power to keep our rhinos safe."

We asked Rausen what his team would've done had they been able to track down the old woman that night. "We would have assessed the situation and taken the necessary actions," he said. "I don't like coming to conclusions about people before I've met them in person." •

Are You Prepared For Fire Season?



Every year, between May and September, over 50,000 hectares of the South African bush are burned to the ground. Bushfires do not discriminate between rich and poor, wildlife and humanity. Just three years ago, the Drakensberg Fire destroyed a tribal village as well as the nearby estate of a British billionaire. Over thirty human lives were lost, and all seven of the billionaire's prized racehorses also perished in the blaze.

Experts say that fire is ultimately good for the land. It burns dead veg-



Most native plants are resistant to fire, and some actually depend on fire for survival.



Controlled burns, such as this one from July 2009, are usually carried out after sunset.

eration and releases nutrients that are necessary for new plants to grow. In the Serengeti, in Tanzania, annual wildfires are crucial for the grassland's regrowth, which in turn feeds millions of grazing wildebeest and zebras. Closer home, in Limpopo, many farmers routinely burn their offal and scatter the ash over their fields to enrich their crops.

Notwithstanding the benefits that fire brings, the short-term consequences of unplanned fires can be disastrous. In the American state of California, for example, hundreds of people lose their homes to forest fires each year. Most of these fires are started by people, usually accidentally. In South Africa, which is similarly fire-prone during the dry months, the penalties for starting an illegal fire are severe. The shepherd who started the

Drakensberg Fire—detectives figured out that he dropped an unextinguished cigarette on a pile of dead leaves—was sentenced to thirty years in prison.

Whether you're a landowner or a city dweller, there are a number of steps you can take to protect yourself and others around you from the harmful consequences of a bushfire. Here's what the Department of Forestry recommends we all know about fires:

Home: If your home is under threat from a bushfire, evacuate to a safe area. Your household fire extinguisher is not effective against bushfires.

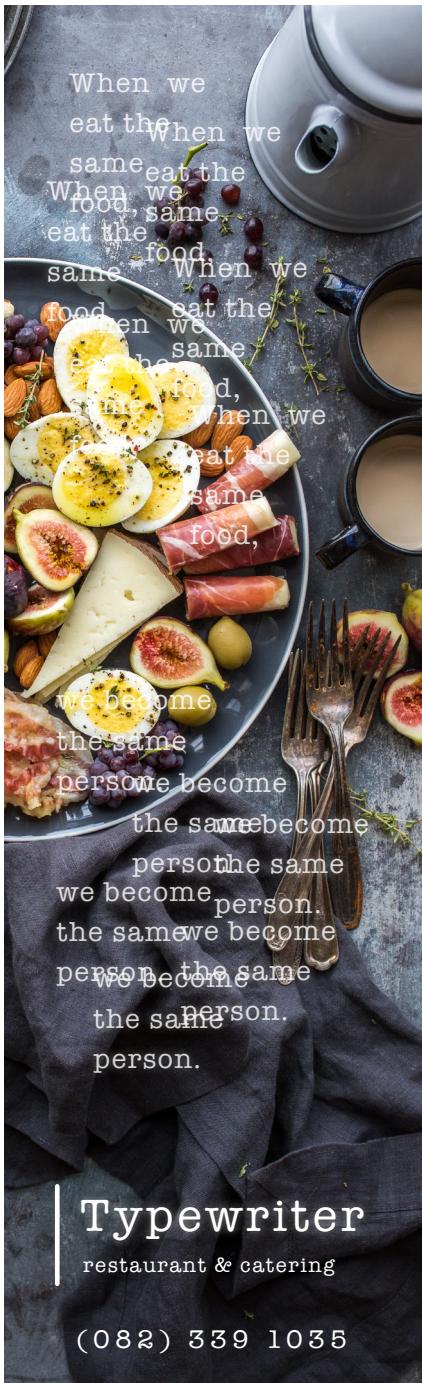
Cultivated Land: During the dry season, avoid leaving your farmland covered in large amounts of offal. If you wish to conduct a controlled burn on your cultivated land, you must obtain prior permission from the Department of Forestry, and a Forestry official must

inspect your property before you start the fire. Violators are subject to hefty fines as well as a minimum prison sentence of twenty years.

Private wildland: The Department recommends that all private bushland be burned every ten years. The Department also recommends that controlled burns be conducted at night, when the fire's spread is easier to track and control. If you wish to conduct a controlled burn, you must first prepare the woodland by digging two rows of 6-foot trenches around it. You must then obtain prior permission from the Department of Forestry, and a Forestry official must inspect your property before you start the fire. Violators are subject to hefty fines as well as a minimum prison sentence of twenty years.

Public land: Strictly no fires are permitted on public land between April and October each year. This includes campfires, camping stoves, cigarettes, hookahs, fireworks, and candles. Violators are subject to hefty fines as well as a minimum prison sentence of twenty years.

A complete list of bushfire safety regulations can be found on the South African Department of Forestry's website (www.forestry.sa/bushfire). To report a fire or a suspected bushfire safety violation, you can call the 24-hour hotline at 66-BUSHFIRE. From all of us here at the *Hornbill Monthly*, have a safe and fire-free dry season. ●



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YOUR STORY

Month 7: Of Worms And Women

The dirt paths of Plot 29, Hornbill Reserve, string one-room huts about an insincere lawn. The bush surrounds the camp, extending into Kruger's two-million hectares just a few miles away. In the distance, you can see the cattails of the artificial wetland. Blue waxbills lurk among the reeds, and antelope come to drink from the pool. Things have a way of creeping forward here. When the lights turn off every evening, the wilderness barrels in and engulfs us whole. By day, it is the trees that threaten to take over. Most numerous among them are the mopane. Their scarred red trunks rise adamantly from the undergrowth. They bend over the tops of the huts like children inspecting bugs in their backyard.

On a good day, Conrad likes to call himself a disease ecologist. For him, it isn't so much a job as the epitaph on his grave. After daydreaming about the bush through his days at prep school, he went off to college to pursue a degree in nature conservation. At the time, it was the most lucrative major in the land: it hired 30% of Limpopo's workforce. Most graduates of the program started off as game rangers at one of the province's many wildlife reserves, but Conrad would have none of it. "I love being a ranger too much to pursue it as a profession," he says.

Instead, Conrad went on to earn a master's degree in parasitology, after which he floated his own company: Emdes Ltd. Emdes stands for Environment Management, Development,

and Ecological Services; it's an acronym of Courad's invention. Over the years, what started as a trickle of odd jobs has grown into an empire of lucrative contracts and consulting gigs. Today, Emoles's clients include a majority of the local game reserves, hunting farms, and wildlife breeding projects. The who's who of the Limpopo wildlife scene, which is saying surprisingly much, have all heard of Courad Venter.

Courad has played his cards well. His life is remarkably similar to a ranger's, but he gets to lead it on his own terms. On most days, we conduct site visits to assess environmental health conditions. At each site, we drive around collecting water and fecal samples. We store the water in carefully labeled mason jars. The feces we collect is moist and fresh, soft to the touch. Occasionally, we also conduct tick surveys: walk in zig-zags across clearings, butterfly net in hand, making swift broom-like sweeps at regular intervals. Emoles can be contracted for still other jobs, but many of these are beyond the everyday, and Courad insists on doing them himself. Aerial game counts using remote-controlled aircraft, the design and construction of artificial wetlands, the removal of bat nests from people's musty attics, the capture of a problematic honey badger. These are tasks that require expertise, and they can't be delegated to a lowly assistant like me.

Courad runs his business out of his home, and the laboratory hut, located at the camp's northern edge, is the cornerstone of this enterprise. Shelves of chemicals, files, and books line the walls. The countertops house an extensive array of instruments: water quality monitors, ion-concentration measuring probes, a vortex mixer, a microscope, a centrifuge, and a fume-hood. There are two incubation ovens, one of which Courad has built himself (by hollowing out an old microwave and fitting in a thermostat and a hairdryer). Everything in the lab is reused—gloves, masks, even disposable plastic pipette-tips—because supplies are hard to

come by in the hinterland.

The most popular test conducted in the Emoles laboratory is the poop floatation test. First, the excrement is mashed up into a powder, and sugar solution is added to it. The eggs and larvae float up and are strained out. Then a few drops of the filtered solution are placed on a specially designed glass slide, called a McMaster slide, and observed under the microscope. When a wildlife reserve is struck by disease, identifying the culprit is easy if you have Emoles on your side. The lab has a two-inch-thick parasite catalog as well as labeled jars containing preserved specimens of all the local arthropods and worms. Anything you could find in the mouth, nose, gut, hide, brain, or anus of an animal can also be found in Emoles's collection.

Ordinarily, Courad needs just one look to identify a critter. "Five *Strongyloides*, three *Taenia*, and seven *Trichomonas*," he might rattle off, squinting through the microscope's tarnished eyepiece. "Wow, this cow is loaded."

In the back of the laboratory hut, beyond a set of sliding doors, is Courad's office, which houses a broken air-conditioner and an old boxy laptop. The laptop remains powered on at all times, and when it's not being used, the screen flits back and forth between pictures of parasites and naked women. The first time I walked in there, a striking close-up of a woman's lower body shared screen time with the slimy, staggered segments of a tapeworm. Next, a photo of a dark-haired woman looking back over her buttocks appeared, followed closely by an oval, hairy larval tick. In time, I have come to realize that these images represent the two central themes of Courad's life: first, the parasites that you can only see under a microscope—tiny creatures that maim and kill in a thousand ways. Courad loves parasites so much that he often reads parasitology textbooks in bed. He calls it "light bedtime reading—a great alternative to half-hearted masturbation."

And second, the women. Conrad can't stop talking about women, and he admits that he can't stop thinking about them either. His obsession with women isn't limited to sex. "I make it a point to closely observe every woman I see," Conrad has told me. "When they change their hairstyles, the shade of their lipstick, when they lose weight or gain it, I never fail to notice."

Remarkably, the ladies seem to like him too. Whenever we go into Hoedspruit (the nearest town with a supermarket), we bump into women who know him. The conversations start in earnest, touching on the weather or pleasantries. Inevitably, however, both parties lapse into shameless flirting. Conrad has a knack for picking out the best things about a woman—someone's shapely chin, another's sculpted forearm, yet another's riveting sense of humor—things their owners don't feel insecure about. He is both generous and genuine with his compliments. In the end, every woman he meets, even the curmudgeonly cashier at the hardware store, is left flattered by his attention.

On my third evening on the job, Conrad told me that he had lost his virginity at age twenty-two, the same age that his grandmother had given birth to her third child. "I think I'm peaking sexually only now, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven," he said.

"I had my first kiss at nineteen," I said, eager to please my new boss.

Conrad gave an approving nod. "Yes, that is late. But I'm sure you'll agree, once you're there, there's nothing like a good fuck. The little man down there"—he pointed toward his crotch—"has been to heaven many times."

Conrad told me about his ex, Jenna, who also lives in Hornbill Reserve. "My laptop contains a folder you must never open,"

he said. "It's called P-R-I-V-A-T-E, all caps, and it documents, among other things, some of the most beautiful things that two human beings have ever done with each other. It's a relief that we live out here in the bush. I would be in jail if anyone ever heard Jenna's screams."

Because I am, at heart, a compulsive voyeur, I immediately asked Courad why his relationship with Jenna had ended. "Because she wanted children," he said. "I hate children. They're loud and annoying. They say really stupid things, and you're expected to think it's cute. They're also selfish and evil, and they don't care about anyone else." He paused. "Also, I didn't view the two of us as a suitable pair of parents. I was forced to be Jenna's parent too often."

"Do you miss her?" I said.

"Only when I look at my PRIVATE folder. She was too much trouble. Besides"—his attention traveled to his phone, which had begun to vibrate—"I have a new girlfriend now."

I waited as Courad was sucked into his device. "It's a text from Sophie," he said. "Want to hear it?" Without waiting for a response, he started to read.

Miss you, sweetheart. Muaaaah. Spent all day thinking about you. It's lonely here. Why are you so far away? I can't live without you, baby. What are you doing? Having wet dreams about me, I hope. Hehe wink wink.

Courad smacked his lips. "Oh yes, she loves me. She really does," he said.

A few days later, I found him entertaining the salesman at the butcher's store with Sophie's texts. To me, the messages were badly

constructed, and, more often than not, asinine in their directness. But since when did wild passion bother with the nuances of syntax and concision? Conrad had met Sophie on the Internet. She lived far away in America, and her messages were forced to stand in for what would have been abundant love-making. Conrad received tens of messages from her at a time, and her crass, half-baked sentences made him quiver with ecstasy.

The two also maintained their relationship through Skype sessions. Every few days, Conrad drove to a nearby hill, where the satellite signal was most reliable. According to him, even on the hilltop, he would have to wrestle with his computer for an hour and a half to squeeze out twenty good minutes of conversation. When he returned to camp, he would be red-faced, and the paper napkins on the dashboard, substantially diminished. The morning after such calls, his laptop's screensaver included a fresh batch of nude photos. Over time, I grew accustomed to Sophie's contrived, arachnoid poses, but Conrad's commentary, as he hovered over my shoulder, was still unsettling: "Don't you just love those juicy little mango breasts?"

A short walk from my hut, on the far side of the garage, was the abode of Conrad's third lover. Her room had reinforced tarpaulin roofing and, inside, an infrared-lamp suspended above a large pile of blankets. During my introductory visit, the smell of fresh dung permeated the space, and the floor was soggy beneath my feet.

"And this is Nwana," Conrad said. "It'll be your job to feed her."

As he spoke, Nwana's striped, shapely head poked out of a gap in the blankets.

I gasped. "A zebra!"

"She looks big, but she's still a foal," Courad said. "She needs a liter of milk five times a day: 7 A.M., 11 A.M., then 3, 7, 11 P.M. The water and horse pellets need to be replenished daily. Once you two get comfortable, you may also take her on daily runs."

As I looked on, the zebra leaped to her feet and headed straight for Courad's armpits. Suddenly, his hands were all over her, moving smoothly down her flanks, under her belly, and up again over her back. He rubbed and pressed with abandon, while Nwana stood statuesque and still. When his hands reached her rump, he began to scratch in slow, deep strokes, moving in a circle around her perineum. I looked on with a mixture of awe and disgust as Nwana closed her eyes, lifted her tail, and spread her legs. Then she began to back up against Courad's arm. There could be no mistaking what was happening.

Courad chuckled. "I think she likes it."

"That's disgusting," I said. "She's just a child."

"It gets the hormones flowing," Courad said, as if that settled everything. He gave Nwana's buttocks a smart smack. I winced, but the zebra grunted with unmistakable pleasure.

"Here, why don't you try?" said Courad coolly.

I like to think I acted on impulse. Wasn't this how the self-righteous children of dictators eventually ended up succeeding them? Nwana's fur felt soft to the touch, and my fingers sank into it effortlessly. She cocked her head to acknowledge my presence. Then, after the briefest of interruptions, she began backing up against my arm as well.

"Try to enjoy it," Courad said. I'm ashamed to admit that I did

enjoy it.

For all his openness about sex, however, Conrad was fiercely secretive about everything else. There was a belt of gleaming bullets, each as stout as a thumb, that garlanded the warthog bust in the dining room. A few nights ago, long past bedtime, I heard Conrad's Land Rover rumble down the driveway. The following morning, the belt of bullets was missing. I was planning to ask him about it that evening, but by evening the belt was back in place, so I changed my mind.

No, I chickened out. I didn't want to jeopardize my relationship with my boss. He is a great mentor, and I am learning a tremendous amount. Besides, he is allowed his privacy, I think, as I am allowed mine.



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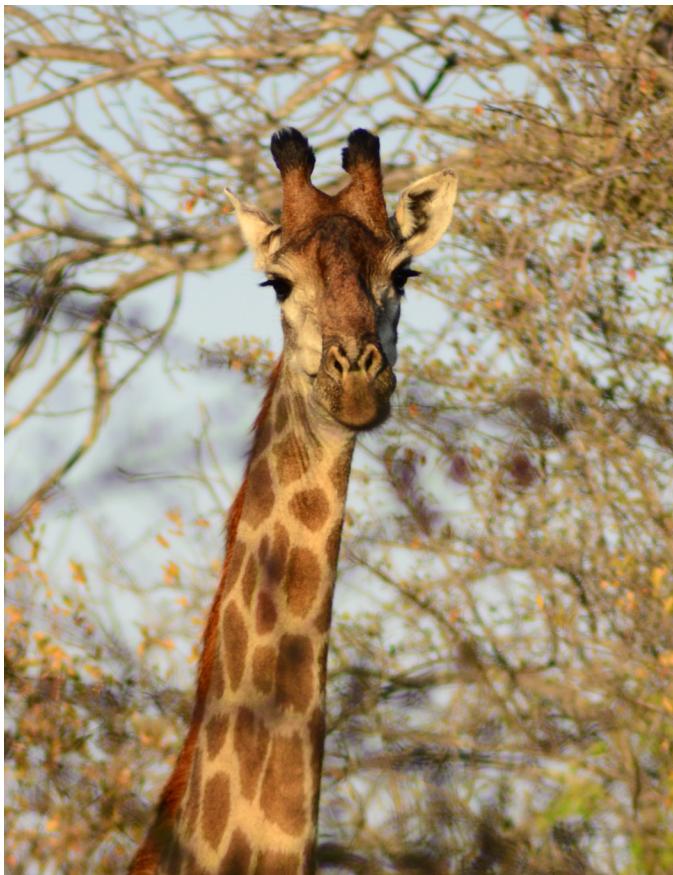
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Pixel Contest

*Each month, we invite our readers to submit photos based upon a theme. The theme for May was **Showstopper**. Here is the winning entry.*



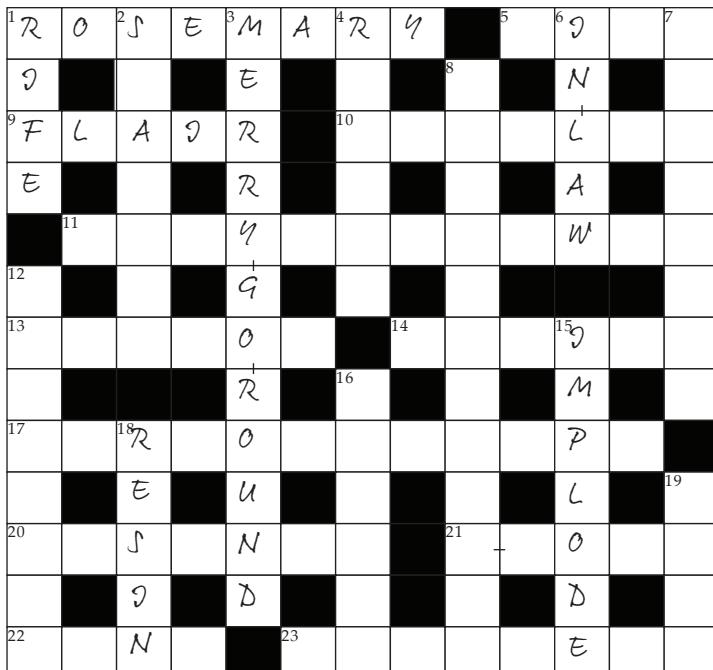
I was driving to a friend's for lunch when I was distracted by this beauty batting her eyelashes at me. I was so taken that I almost crashed into a tree. Showstopper!

— Angelo Thompson

*The theme for June is **Failed Ambitions**. Send your photographs, and, if you so wish, the stories behind them, via email to photo@hornbillmonthly.com.*

Monthly Crossword

Courtesy of *The Guardian*.



Across

- 1 Girl's name — a sorry me! (anag) (8)
- 5 Sharp sound of disapproval (4)
- 9 Natural aptitude (5)
- 10 Fishing vessel (7)
- 11 Stamina — endurance (7,5)
- 13 Russian wolfhound (6)
- 14 Confederates (6)
- 17 Close shave (6,6)
- 20 The Gunners (7)
- 21 Drug used to treat Parkinson's disease (1-4)
- 22 River running through Newcastle (4)
- 23 Trinket — decoration (8)

Down

- 1 Prevalent (4)
- 2 First course (7)
- 3 Fairground ride (5-2-5)
- 4 Non-commissioned sailor in the Royal Navy (6)
- 6 Relative by marriage (2-3)
- 7 Something unexpected (8)
- 8 Dry red Italian wine (12)
- 9 Plentiful (8)
- 15 Collapse inwards (7)
- 16 Kitchen gadget — old policeman (6)
- 18 Sticky substance from pine trees (5)
- 19 Breathe noisily after running (4)

*Next time, love, just get me
the whole damn plant.*



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