‘The small man with the big weapon’: An examination of representations of the great white hunter in South African English-language poetry

Fiona Zerbst
Department of English University of Pretoria South Africa fionaz@mweb.co.za

Abstract

The literary and cinematic trope of the great white hunter, which was prominent in the mid-twentieth century, had its roots in the trophy-hunting traditions of predominantly Europeans who visited southern Africa in the 1900s. While sport hunting reached its apogee between 1870 and 1914, a new breed of hunters (many of them aristocrats, tycoons or industrialists) was subsequently drawn to southern Africa for the ‘safari’ experience. Great white hunters were ‘safari guides’ with sufficient knowledge and experience to guide hunting parties in the region, which became a playground for wealthy elites. This article examines a selection of South African English-language poems that engage with the great white hunter trope. It contextualizes the ‘legend’ of the great white hunter within the history of sport or trophy hunting in South Africa, from the 1800s to the present.

Key words: Tatamkulu Afrika; conservation; Stephen Gray; great white hunter; hunting; Douglas Livingstone; William Plomer; Andrew Renard; South Africa; trophy hunting; Wendy Woodward

When the last of ‘Africa’s renowned white hunters’, Harry Selby, died on 22 January 2018, *The New York Times* was quick to point out that the South African-born safari guide was nothing like the ‘great white hunter’ of legend, largely created by the film industry in Hollywood:

> In the Hollywood-inspired popular images of the 1950s, the great white hunter was a fearless Clark Gable or Stewart Granger, tall and deeply tanned, who brought down a charging rhino with a single shot while his arrogant client cowered behind him, and who later romanced the client's neglected wife after saving her from a snarling lion. (McFadden 2018)

The trope of the great white hunter, which first arose in the late nineteenth century, gained significant currency in Western art, literature and popular discourse. It found expression in the novels of Ernest Hemingway, Geoffrey Household, H. Rider Haggard and others, where the hunter was romanticized as both an adventurer and a hero.

Hemingway's 1936 short story 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' gave impetus to the trope, with the 1947 film *The Macomber Affair* (later re-released as *The Great White Hunter*), starring Gregory Peck, entrenching it within popular culture. Household's 1939 novel *Rogue Male* was twice adapted for the screen – once in 1941, with the title *Man Hunt*, and again in 1976, titled *Rogue Male*.

The great white hunter trope had its genesis in the 1800s, when big-game hunting in South Africa (and southern Africa) was a source of revenue for the British colonial government. The large number of European men visiting South Africa hunted for subsistence, trade, or to clear land of 'vermin' such as predators. Hunting was not considered an elite preoccupation at this stage – however, these white hunters were held up as an 'ideal' – manly empire builders representing the 'march of civilisation' (Ritvo 1987, 254). They explored new lands hitherto undiscovered by Europeans, and formed the vanguard of Europe's conquest of Africa. The great white hunter arose out of 'the many hunters in literature who have been emblematic of imperial invincibility' (Maddy and MacCann 2011, 71).

Hunters such as William Cornwallis Harris (1807–1848), Roualeyn Gordon Cumming (1820–1866) and Frederick Courteney Selous (1851–1917) gravitated towards South Africa with the purpose of shooting as much game as was humanly possible, indulging in an orgy of 'unmitigated hunting' (Brown 2002, 77) that eventually led to the extinction of the quagga and the bluebuck (and the near-extinction of the bontebok). Lieutenant-Colonel James Stevenson-Hamilton, the first warden of South Africa's Sabi Nature Reserve. Puts it thus:

> These were the good old days of free hunting and no tiresome game laws. Wild animals existed to be killed with as much profit as possible to the killer, and biltong, then as now, commanded a good price and ready sale. There were no hunting ethics whatsoever. If a man did not succeed in killing an animal he had fired at, the next best thing, for his own glorification, was to have wounded it. ([1952] 2008, 8–9)

In June 1850, Cumming's account of his exploits was published in *Five Years' Hunting Adventures in South Africa*, but, as John Clare notes, *The Quarterly Review*'s response was: 'The endless and too often useless slaughter of God's creatures will be

revolting to most minds'. According to Clare, in a single afternoon in Limpopo in 1847, Cumming

> [S]hot three crocodiles, discovered a 'troop of five or six beautiful leopards', 'came suddenly upon a lion and lioness lying in the grass, and took a couple of shots at the lion, missing him with my first but wounding him with the second barrel', and shot a hippopotamus, 'putting three balls into his head, where he sank, but night setting in, we lost him'. (Cumming in Clare 2010, 111)

The book was hugely popular, suggesting that the romance of the hunt was much favoured by its European readership. When Cumming returned to London, he went on to dramatize his accomplishments. According to Harriet Ritvo,

> Those who wanted more than just a look at the trophies and the large canvases that Gordon Cumming commissioned to illustrate his most dramatic adventures would pay from 1s. to 3s. to hear the 'lion-slayer' describe his adventures to a musical accompaniment; he lectured nightly, with a Saturday matinee. (1987, 250)

Sport hunting caught on quickly, as Stephen Gray (Gray 1979, 98) has pointed out:

> The wilderness becomes a playground for inflated bullies who measure fun in terms of the humbling of brutes greater in size than themselves. Hunting is seen as a contest, to be won by the small man with the big weapon. (1979, 98)

It was no accident, as Gray also notes, that these hunters referred to wildlife as 'game' (1979, 109). The entertainment value some of these men provided to the public led to the rise of the great white hunter and his admittedly short-lived cinematic career.

According to Angela Thompsell, sport hunting reached its apogee between 1870 and 1914 (2015, 8). However, it began to decline once the decimation of wildlife became a concern and steps were taken to control the slaughter of wild animals. The Convention for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa was drawn up and signed in London on 19 May 1900 and several game laws were subsequently passed in South Africa regarding the hunting of a number of species (Carruthers 2001, 104). This curtailed the ambitions of many hunters.

Ironically, the disappearance of much of the wildlife in South Africa was blamed on indigenous hunters – and yet, as John Pringle has pointed out, large herds of wild animals disappeared precisely when well-armed white hunters ran amok in the country: 'Natal reached a state of environmental crisis in only 60 years. Before that there had been no whites in Natal' (1982, 10). Jane Carruthers points out that the Transvaal Game Protection Association 'blamed the disappearance of wildlife entirely on black Africans, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. The Association spent most of its time targeting Africans and trying to curb subsistence hunting' (2001, 105).

Trophy hunting grew out of these largely ignoble beginnings. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the shenanigans of leisured sport hunters appear questionable at best – and today, trophy hunting is frequently conflated with canned hunting in the public imagination, despite the fact that many professional hunters have made a point of distancing themselves from captive-bred or 'canned' hunting, as witnessed in the recent split in the Professional Hunters' Association of South Africa (PHASA) – a number of members left the organization after it appeared to endorse captive-bred lion hunting (Avery 2017). According to Wayne Pacelle, former president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States:

> Forward-thinking African nations have already charted a new course and put aside wildlife slaughter as an economic activity . . . It's hard to imagine that a compassionate society, concerned about vanishing wildlife, would continue to tolerate the far-flung missions of these self-indulgent international trophy shooters. (2016, 230–231)

United States President Donald Trump's sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, may be considered to fall into this category. They have been vilified for their 'well-documented love of hunting' at a time when big-game hunting provides 'fresh cause for social media shaming' (Lauerman 2016). Trophy hunting has long been considered an elitist activity for the idle rich – Harry Selby, for example, held safaris for clients such as 'Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, the Maharajah of Jaipur, Prince Stanislas Radziwill of Poland and Western tycoons, industrialists and chief executives seeking thrills and self-fulfillment' (McFadden 2018).

It is difficult now to conceive of a time when trophy hunting was considered heroic, yet the 'great white hunter' only really began to fall out of favour during the late 1980s, when the first World Conservation Strategy was drawn up by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Hails WWF). The 1995 film of Karen Blixen's book *Out of Africa* represented great white hunter Denys Finch Hatton (played by Robert Redford) as an unambiguous romantic hero – the aristocrat who took wealthy tourists on safari and, true to form, seduced other men's wives. Blixen's husband, Bror Blixen, was also a hunter and was perhaps the model for Ernest Hemingway's Robert Wilson in 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' (Hendrickson 2012, 223). Yet the narrative was changing – the formerly swashbuckling hunter was now a relic of European hedonism, increasingly seen as tasteless and somewhat *de trop*.

When William Plomer (1903–1973) satirized the great white hunter in his short poem 'The Big-game hunter' (Plomer 1960, 20), he represented him as a 'bore' rather than a villain, which is telling.

> A big-game hunter opens fire once more,
> Raconteur, roué, sportsman, millionaire and bore –
> But only shoots his mouth off, knowing how
> He's safer on a sofa than on far safari now. 4

The swaggering hunter is more comfortable bragging about his exploits than risking life and limb 'on far safari now' (line 4). Although animals are not explicitly mentioned in the poem – the focus is the 'heroic' hunter – who is hyped as '[r]aconteur, roué, sportsman, millionaire' (line 2) but then bathetically labelled a 'bore' – their presence is felt by virtue of the fact the 'big-game hunter' (line 1) has received his nomenclature at their expense. He *is* because they *were*. The speaker deflates the hunter's supposed 'greatness' in two witty couplets. He is supposedly a '[r]aconteur', but there is a suggestion that he no longer much good with a gun or in conversation – he merely 'shoots his mouth off': he thinks of himself as a great storyteller but is, to the speaker, extremely boring, perhaps because he has told the stories many times before. 'He's safer on a sofa than on far safari now' (line 4) employs alliteration to bathetic effect – the sofa is as safe as a safari is potentially dangerous (home comforts were likely anathema to the manly hunter intent upon demonstrating his vigour, bravery and disdain for the conventional trappings of civilization). More figure of fun than hero, the hunter is a remnant of dying Empire, reduced to storytelling on the couch (both hunter and Empire are in decline).

Even so, the poem does not savage him. A touch of the former glamour of his profession is alluded to (his wealth, his success with women). To go on safari was to take one's life (and the lives of one's clients) in one's hands. The poem pays an odd kind of homage to the great white hunter, whose prowess with a gun was presumably legendary. The shooting metaphor acknowledges this even while suggesting that 'shooting his mouth off' is the only vital activity the hunter is capable of now.

Douglas Livingstone's 1965 poem 'The Fall' (Livingstone 2004, 350) also considers the trope of the great white hunter. Like Plomer, Livingstone (1932–1996), was a gifted social satirist.

This is a whipcord man in
a flab-muscled generation;
he followed the game trails;
has walked, rifle ready, the wilds;
he has a plainsman's slow manners. 5

His eyes are narrowed leopard's eyes
tightened on waves of heat haze;
his speech is tight lipped
with hints of a tough wryness;
he drinks too much and talks of rhinos. 10

Last runt of the fighting unicorns.
A porcine wither quivers, shrugs
the massively armoured rug.
When his tail lifts: shoot, climb, or get torn.

Trotting, brisk as a tank, 15
lightfooted and quite fantastic,

he wheels. Stops. 2 tons of balancing ballast.
The bloke's in his sighting stance.

Skin tattered from the thorns,
you peer down at him – 20
you and the tree shuddering
to the stropping of his horn.

He likes his meat skewered
But his is the short crushing rage.
And his vegetarian tastes 25

preclude his eating you.

Much sought after that horn,
as an aphrodisiac.
But not much good at that
in injection form. 30

He leans forward unsteadily,
the famous white hunter;
under neon ads and stuffed heads,
between the rear-sight shoulders
of percolator and cash register. 35

He knew it all once: dew on
the elephant-grass at dawn;
actresses under canvas…
when they stopped coming
he retired and bought this café. 40

Although 'The Fall' is clearly satirical, the first stanza suggests that the hunter remains a romantic figure as he represents an era in which men were risk-taking adventurers, not sitting in air-conditioned offices in cities. This came to seem like an heroic endeavour in an age of stultifying urbanization. It also sets the 'famous white hunter' (line 32) up for the fall suggested in the title – his grandness is deconstructed and, in the final stanza, he is revealed to be a washed-up, actress-seducing anachronism who 'retired and bought this café' (line 40). The poem could thus be said to symbolize the way in which the colonial era comes to an end with a whimper rather than a bang.

The bathos shows the hunter's earlier impressiveness to be hollow; his physical prowess does not confer moral greatness, the speaker seems to suggest. He may have been held up as an unspoilt Adam, familiar with the untamed spaces of 'the wilds' (line 4) beyond the reach of civilization, yet already in stanza two he is revealed as flawed – he 'drinks too much' (line 10). 'The fall' thus hints at a biblical descent, a 'fall from grace' that shows the hunter in an especially unredeemed light. The poem seems

to suggest he is one of a dying breed, threatened with extinction, yet this is not viewed with any particular pathos – on the contrary, there is a touch of satisfaction that hunters themselves could 'go extinct'.

The speaker tells us the hunter's eyes are 'narrowed leopard's eyes' (line 6) – proximity to wild animals has clearly given him the appearance of an animal. However, although the hunter appears alienated from the niceties of culture – 'his speech is tight lipped / with hints of a tough wryness' (lines 8–9) – he is in fact quite capable of a lengthy disquisition on rhino, echoing the verbose boor in Plomer's 'The Big-game Hunter'. His account of his adventures is highly entertaining, because the poet combines the hunter's laconic, masculinist perspective with linguistic flights of fancy that emanate from the speaker.

The hunter's speech is a device that allows Livingstone to play with personae – who is speaking when the poet calls the rhino '[l]ast runt of the fighting unicorns' (line 11)? The tongue-in-cheek blend of inventive metaphors and plain-speaking anecdotes is an amalgam of perspectives, allowing Livingstone to meditate upon the nature of wild animals. They invite both levity and terror: they can amuse, but they can also kill: 'When his tail lifts: shoot, climb, or get torn' (line 14). Is the hunter really removed from the reaches of civilization? Although he seems to be more at home in the bush, what kept him there was evidently the tourists rather than any particular rejection of society. Pragmatically, he has 'followed the money', retired and bought a café.

Formally, the poem makes a clear distinction between the speaker and the hunter – the poem is comprised of five-line stanzas, except for the hunter's rhino speech, which is delivered in five four-line italicized stanzas. The hunter's speech begins with a fairly strict rhyme scheme –'a b b a' – and internal rhyme (the rhino's 'wither quivers' in line 12) which effectively disintegrates in the next stanza, once the narrative of being charged by a rhino gets under way (suggesting that instinct predominates over rationality). The larger-than-life account of human-wildlife contact has a touch of the comical about it, with the 'you' in the story climbing a thorny tree to get away from the rhino; despite its 'vegetarian tastes' (line 25), it is exceedingly dangerous (compared to a tank and ballast, and 'massively armoured' in line 13).

A touch of anthropomorphism creeps in: 'He likes his meat skewered' (line 23) – but the hunter recognizes that human beings are frail and are also animals. There is therefore some playful dismantling of the barriers between species taking place, with rhino accorded taste and preference, and human being a creature of flesh and blood more than intellect (the flesh in this instance is not to be digested, but to be pierced).

Ultimately, however, the hunter is removed from the domain of nature – he lives his life 'under neon ads and stuffed heads' (line 33). In his world, he has only taxidermy to contend with (live animals have vanished from his world). Bathos and irony prevail as he leans forward unsteadily (drunkenly?) 'between the rear-sight shoulders / of percolator and cash register' (lines 34–35). Constrained by his urban lifestyle, his survival skills are redundant; he is himself the '[l]ast runt of the fighting unicorns' (line 11), a dying

breed of questionable usefulness. Yet although his 'glory days' have passed, Livingstone suggests that a touch of the exotic still clings to him.

In light of what Wendy Woodward has written about animal subjectivity (Woodward 2008), what is also striking about Livingstone's poem is the role that animals play (or do not play) within it. They are adequately described by the speaker ('brisk as a tank', line 15) but their inner world is entirely irrelevant to him – and, by extension, to the reader. As Woodward has noted, the representation of animals as subjects is a recent phenomenon in South African writing, and it is perhaps specious to point out that 'The Fall' does not pay much attention to animals as anything other than mirrors for human desire (Woodward 2008, 13). They are very much symbols, not sentient beings. Only later did South African poets begin to explore what animals may have wanted to say (a vexed endeavour, since speaking for animals is also potentially problematic) – but it is worth noting that this shift in consciousness was not arrived at much before the late twentieth century.

Mark Swift' (1946–2013) provides an interesting twist to the narrative of the hunter and the hunted in his poem 'The Last Lion' (Swift 1996, 17). The poem may be read as speaking to both Plomer's 'The Big-Game Hunter' and Livingstone's 'The Fall', with an important corollary – hunter and lion are almost fused into one beast, but it is time itself that is the 'alpha predator'.

Long in the tooth
the killer of lions sat glaucous-
eyed in his hide-strung chair. Burned
to the bone, his skin was eroded
by wildlife trails 5

on the watering-hole
of his face. In his rough-baked
house the sun etched its
shadows of thorn. His trophies
bared their rib-breaking fangs: the leopard, 10
the cheetah, the Last Lion
in his pride of place. Now, no grief attaches
to the dusty, worm-riddled head. The hunter,
with his great, cuffing paws, his low-slung
gait and vacant snarl, was 15

the last of the beasts. Holed up
on his hill, caged by empty
spaces, he talked of the ambush; the oiled
snick of a worn bolt, the howl triggered
deep in a heart-stopped throat. Stalked 20

by every dawn, cornered
in the dark, with his shaggy mane
and blunted eyes, he was prey
to the one unerring assassin; time
with its claws unsheathed 25

for the kill.

The title 'The Last Lion' is ambiguous, appearing to apply to both the hunter's trophy that stands 'in his pride of place' (line 12) – with an ironic pun on the word 'pride', since the lion has been removed from his family unit – and the hunter himself, with 'his great, cuffing paws, his low-slung / gait and vacant snarl' (lines 14–15). It is the hunter who is 'the last of the beasts' (line 16), with a 'shaggy mane / and blunted eyes' (lines 22–23). The hunter has consorted with animals for such a long time that he has all but transformed into one. However, there is no sense of kinship in the poem – instead, the ageing 'killer of lions' (line 2) is a solitary predator, nostalgic for predation (the poem seems to suggest that the only reason why he no longer hunts is his advanced age).

The poem, which is one long stanza made up of irregular lines, appears to meander back and forth, perhaps mimicking how time, 'the one unerring assassin' (line 24), stalks the hunter, but also how the hunter's powers are waning with age. The disconcerting phrase 'his skin was eroded / by wildlife trails / on the watering-hole / of his face' (lines 4–7) implies damage due to the passage of time. The hunter himself is a landscape that has suffered attrition, even destruction. He is 'caged by empty / spaces' (lines 17–18), the lines mimicking the vast emptiness itself as the word 'empty' hangs in the empty space at the end of the line.

The poem suggests that the hunter's life is effectively meaningless now that he has 'retired' (perhaps because there is less demand for his services and not just advanced age?) and is simply awaiting his death – yet the pathos is muted, given that the hunter feels what his prey once felt: defenceless in the face of a threat from a greater predator. There is a sense of *schadenfreude*; the hunter deserves to taste what he himself dished out. Time, personified as a lethal predator, has 'its claws unsheathed / for the kill' (lines 25–26) – 'unsheathed' forces a line-break, mimicking the deadly revealing of time's weapon, while the last line dramatizes the final clash between predator and prey.

The animals in 'The Last Lion', with their 'rib-breaking fangs', appear as trophies only; they are not vital, powerful, embodied creatures (again, they are mere symbols). Stephen Gray (b. 1941), however, attempts to present an animal's point of view in his poem 'Big Cat's Ambition' (Gray 1984, 82) – even if the animal itself is not actually described and so also lacks embodiment. Framed within a dreamscape, the poem is spoken by a leopard – or what we assume to be a leopard, since Gray has inverted the proverb 'a leopard cannot change its spots' to 'a human cannot change his freckles' in line 3.

On the prowl through my dreams
come humans, fine, predatory, vain –
a human cannot change his freckles –
I shall wear a human all the same

once shot by my gallant hunters 5
I'd turn her over, peel off her nails first,
then slice up the inside arms,
through the breasts and viscera,
and pull the legs up through the hips

then fracture the skull without skin 10

breakage, ease it down the throat
and out of the chest cavity,
and dispose of all innards

then tan till the smell's gone.
I'd set my merchants onto sewing – 15

200 pelts make a fashionable coat –
and I'd go on till there were no more.

The animal emerges from the locus of culture, rather than nature, since it thinks and speaks. In this way, Gray subverts the trope of the heroic hunter, with savage irony – the hunted leopard is now the hunter, collecting human trophies. The leopard appears urbane, cultured, recognizing humans as 'fine, predatory, vain' (line 2); however, the poem quickly turns to the promise of barbarism: 'I shall wear a human all the same' (line 4). Would an animal speak thus? The colonial flourishes merely serve to underline the postcolonial context, in which the hunted is no longer at the mercy of the hunter, and animals are acknowledged as subjects in their own right. The poem establishes the leopard's agency and intentionality while stripping humans of their skins and humanity. Although Gray has anthropomorphized the leopard, imbuing it with ambition and a hunger for revenge, his poem provides an interesting twist on the hunter-and-hunted genre by 'granting animals their wildness and otherness', as Roman Bartosch puts it (in Herman 2016, 260). There is a radical shift of consciousness at work here – one which prefigures a poem such as 'Shaman' (in Schonstein 2012, 112–113), by Tatamkulu AfriKa (1920–2002), which undermines the traditional binaries we are accustomed to when it comes to our relationships with animals – hunter and prey being just one of these.

The leopard lay,

long and dappled, under the leaves.
He saw me when
I still saw only the leaves.
His eyes, alerted, flamed 5
with more of wonderment than rage
He had sheathed his claws and, once,
he swiped a paw across his nose.

'I know you', he said,
looking at me through the mask of shadows round his eyes. 10
I saw him wholly, then,
his languid grace and power, yet
was not afraid, his voice being mild
as any mewing kitten's, which meant
that I could love him if not yet trust, 15
and I dared to tremblingly scratch an ear.

He closed his eyes and roaringly purred,
frightening my hand, then grinned
a little, baring the black
slobber of his gums, the fangs 20
whiter than the white bones of the hill,
then again looked at me, a daze
of pleasure drawing back from his eyes, and thanked
me with a leathern tonguing of my skin.

'Yes', he said, 'it was a long time ago. 25
This hill was then a living thing.
You, shaman, danced on it till you dropped
as one dead and a leopard leapt
from your ruin and ran,
slavering, under the holy moon. 30
What has become of you, brother man?
Does the magic herb no longer grow among these stones?'

I wept, then, huddled on
the rigid hinges of my knees,
hearing only silence thrum 35
through the shattered pipelines of my bones.
Below, the alien city threshed
and howled and he looked
at me as at a wounded beast and slid
out the filial pity of his claws. 40

'No!' I shouted. 'No!'
stammering like a frightened child.
'You exceed your station; it is I

that flow and flower under a moon.'
He looked at me with sorrowing eyes. 45
'But it is leopards that die
as shamans should,' he said and crashed
out of the leaves as out of an ice of time.

A shaman is traditionally a healer who can commune with the spirit world and animals; in this poem, the speaker can telepathically communicate with a leopard. There is a suggestion that the speaker is in some kind of shamanistic trance, perhaps with the help of a 'magic herb' (line 32). An intimate conversation between shaman and leopard conveys the kinship that exists between the two. To the leopard, the speaker is 'brother man' (line 31) – but also a 'wounded beast' (line 39) that has lost its way. To the shaman, the leopard is both frightening and familiar, a creature 'I could love . . . if not yet trust' (line 15). The poem's complexity stems from its opacity – the reader is unsure of whether the shaman is hallucinating, occupying this world or another (the spirit world, the world of the dead?), or simply remembering an encounter with an animal. Mystical and prophetic, the poem almost seems to hint at the oneness of shaman and leopard: 'a leopard leapt / from your ruin' (lines 28–29).

Gray's poem holds out no such possibilities, since big cat and human are sworn enemies. Although the structure of Gray's poem is for the most part formal and restrained, the second stanza is so caught up in the grisly process of skinning the human that it runs to five lines instead of four. The gory linguistic excess is contained once again in the third stanza, which coheres with the overall structure. However, the second stanza explores the sadistic delight with which the leopard flays the woman (one could argue that there is an element of misogyny within the poem that is mitigated by the fact that a non-human animal is responsible for the violence). Gray sets out to demonstrate that, when the situation is reversed, the idea of skinning an animal makes us squeamish – yet as a species we are by and large quite comfortable treating animals in the same way. The poem could be read as an animal rights statement, with Gray protesting the gruesome practice of killing animals for their skins ('200 pelts make a fashionable coat', line 16). The chilling final line, delivered casually – 'and I'd go on till there were no more' – expresses genocidal intent.

Here, Gray could be drawing attention to the threat of extinction that hangs over many endangered species, including the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) itself, which is classified as Vulnerable according to *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. The poem has historical resonance, harking back to the days when colonial hunters were quite happy to 'shoot out' animals in South Africa. The title of the poem, 'Big Cat's Ambition', is anthropomorphic, but it also suggests that the animal has both agency and intent – this becomes clearer still when the reader realizes that the animal is the speaker. The poem's savagery is shocking, but Gray cleverly mitigates the effect thereof through the use of satire – the phrase 'gallant hunters' (line 5) is ironic, and the cat's 'fantasy' is

purely imaginary (he has not carried out the actions in the poem – he merely dreams of doing so). However, Gray makes his point: the human beings are merely getting what they deserve.

In recent years, as many animals have begun the long slide towards extinction, trophy hunting has been viewed as an activity than raises the extinction risk significantly, despite the argument that it can be an important conservation tool (De Minin, Leader-Williams and Bradshaw 2016, 100). This argument arose shortly after the first white hunters formed game reserves and began to speak of preserving wildlife – even though in many instances this was because wanted to reserve game for future (white) hunters.

It is interesting to note that many of the so-called preservationists were, in fact, 'penitent butchers' – former hunters who were aware that the tide of public opinion was turning and the senseless slaughter of wild animals was no longer in vogue. Wildlife was viewed, somewhat ironically, as an imperial asset. Harriet Ritvo points out that late nineteenth century colonial administration throughout the empire began to place legal restrictions on the human exploitation of big game animals for this reason:

> Gradually the point of view that had accepted the elimination of wild animals from appropriated districts as an inevitable by-product of progress was replaced by one that viewed them as a valuable resource requiring protection. Still symbolic of uncivilized nature, game no longer represented a serious threat; instead, it evoked the special kind of property – ambiguously neither public nor private – that Britons felt they possessed in their Asian and African territories. (1987, 284)

Today, wild animals (particularly the 'Big Five') are considered national assets (Pinnock 2016). Trophy hunters and poachers alike are vilified – poachers for 'asset stripping' (Kahumbu and Halliday 2014) – the language itself acknowledging the commercial value of wildlife – and trophy hunters for bringing the national brand into disrepute (particularly when it comes to canned lion hunting). Animal rights and animal welfare groups are particularly vocal in this regard – the documentary *Blood Lions* (2015) claims to target game farms where lions are 'bred for the bullet'. Little wonder, then, that professional hunters tend to avoid public scrutiny where possible.

In Andrew Renard's recent poem 'A villanelle of indifference', hunters are 'cowards who claim they are men' (line 1) – a far cry from the heroic great white hunter whose exploits were celebrated on the silver screen. The poem is included in the anthology *For Rhino in a Shrinking World* (Owen 2013, 18), the proceeds of the sale of which have been donated to the fight against rhino poaching in southern Africa.

> Hunted by cowards who claim they are men,
> Slaughtered and butchered, left writhing in pain.
> How long before the final amen?

Solid as centuries, peaceful as Zen,
Coloured like landscapes and older than Cain. 5
Hunted by cowards who claim they are men.

Medicinal powers reputed and then
Rhinos lie scattered across the terrain.
While we silently wait their final amen.

Exported in secret and shame to Phnom Penh 10
Singapore, Hanoi, Saigon or Bahrain.
Hunted by cowards who claim they are men.

Horns grounds down as cures to believers for when
Love life is poor or health starts to wane,
Indifferent towards their final amen. 15

Watch extinction take place live on CNN
Just leaving behind a guilty bloodstain
They were hunted by cowards who claimed they were men
Who just laughed as we breathed their final amen.

Although it is unclear whether the hunters in the poem are trophy hunters or poachers, despite the reference to illegal trade – rhino poaching is illegal in South Africa, but the trophy hunting of black and white rhino is legal and regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) – what is clear is that, given the imperilled status of rhino in the twenty-first century, any hunting may acquire the status of 'slaughter'. The hunters are represented in the poem as insensitive brutes who laugh in the face of the extinction of the species, which seems like hyperbole but may not be, given that the rhino may well become extinct within our lifetime. It is rhinos that are celebrated in the poem, not 'brave' hunters: 'Solid as centuries, peaceful as Zen' (line 4). They are harmless victims that cannot defend themselves and will likely die out as a result.

The villanelle is an apt choice in terms of poetic form – it allows the speaker to build his argument while increasing the sense of tension and pathos within the poem. The 'final amen' (line 3) – rhino extinction – approaches with a sense of inevitability. Indeed, in the last line of the poem, a mere change of tense announces the event: '. . . we breathed their final amen'. The title of the poem suggests that humankind's indifference may be as much to blame as the cowardly hunters themselves – we have waited 'silently' (perhaps not enough people have spoken out?) and allowed the rhino to be exploited by the Asian market's conviction that ground rhino horn cures illness and disease (in fact, the poem does not address the issue that rhino horn has other uses – jewellery, carvings, and so on – and seems to suggest that the animals have died because of superstitious beliefs).

Perhaps most tellingly, the poem refers to ‘shame’ (line 10) and a ‘guilty bloodstain’ (line 17) – but these belong to humankind, not the cowardly poachers, who feel nothing. Like the great white hunter of old, these hunters assume it is their right to kill wild animals (one should not forget that the great white hunter killed for money just as poachers did). The extinction event will ‘take place live on CNN’ (line 16), exposing humankind’s culpability – in a sense, we are all to blame.

The great white hunter will never be rehabilitated – his is a historical role, and his legacy appears uncomplicatedly brutal – yet it must be pointed out that competing discourses around trophy hunting and conservation do emphasize the fact that not all hunters are cowardly and bloodthirsty, nor are they all alike in terms of conduct and ethics. It has also been suggested that a blanket ban on trophy hunting would result in ‘worse conservation outcomes’ for developing countries (Di Minin, Leader-Williams and Bradshaw 2016, 100–101), largely because financial resources for conservation are limited. They argue that ‘the revenue from trophy hunting can empower communities to protect their resources by the employment of more antipoaching rangers or the construction of disincentive infrastructure’. This creates a somewhat more nuanced picture of the role of trophy hunting in southern Africa today, where the aim is not the wholesale slaughter of hapless wildlife, but improved biodiversity outcomes and carbon-friendly land use. However, if there is an absence of a more nuanced assessment of trophy hunting in South African English-language poems about this topic, the reasons are clear: the great white hunter’s greed and hedonism invited satire at a particular moment in history, but he and his heirs became less fascinating in the face of an increased global concern about the welfare and survival of wild species. Indeed, their fall from grace appears to have ushered in a more moral approach towards wildlife management, in which the lives of animals are finally worth more, in public opinion, than mere trophies.

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FIONA ZERBST is the author of four poetry collections to date: *Parting Shots* (1991. Cape Town: Carrefour Press), *the small zone* (1995. Cape Town: Snailpress), *Time and Again* (2002. Cape Town: UCT Younger Poets Series No 1/Snailpress), and *Oleander* (2009. Cape Town: Modjaji Books). She received an MA in Creative Writing from UCT, studying with the late Stephen Watson, and was awarded a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Pretoria in 2018, under the supervision of David Medalie.