



# ROB TAYLOR

The Cyclist

SOMETIMES the motorcycle accident is just that, an accident. A thing that happened in the past, neither inevitable nor unlikely. It's the speed of the motorbike, the assumption of the driver, the cyclist's swerve. Then it's velocity and angles. Inertia. The texture and thickness of clothing. The various materials. The distance to the clinic and the procedures that followed. Police reports and recovery time. Sometimes it's a story I can tell people and be understood.



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is me and Richard on the road. Richard driving with my legs crooked in behind his, my hands leaned back onto the metal rack welded behind the pillion, our mouths running.

After inspecting the school and playing a bit with the kids—miming animals while they guessed the English names: *el-eee-phawnt*, *geee-raff*—we'd returned to Richard's bike to find its front tire flat. We gave it a couple spins and it offered up the offending nail. We let David and Marta travel ahead while Richard patched the hole and we took turns pistoning the air pump. Richard was the faster driver, anyway—half David's age and with less to fear losing. A local newly returned with his big-city education and the accompanying restlessness. How many times had we waited behind David as he nuzzled speed bumps or wound his way around sandy stretches? And the cows—*oh God*, we both agreed, back on the road—they'd be slowing him down today. We passed so many, gaining speed and ground, and laughed at the thought of David hunkered over the handlebars in his black windbreaker and beanie helmet, stopping and starting his way through the herds, with Marta, my wife, patient and comment-less behind him. We were sure we'd catch them before they made it back to our office, the small room attached to a schoolhouse from where we managed a rural

education project. *We'll pass them any minute* now, I smiled to myself. I was about to say as much to Richard when he received the call.



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is David, wiping blood from his face and looking back at Marta, still pinned under the bike. How many times he described to me his fear in that moment, lifting the chassis off this white woman he'd pledged to protect, her shirt and pants torn, open wounds on arm and leg, cuts and bruises all down her right side. How many times he'd reviewed his choices: to honk at the cyclist, then pass on the right. *Why would he swerve right? The idiot! Rob, I do not know why the idiot swerved!*

And here's the part I wonder about still: the moment when David, having helped my wife off the road, gathered up his phone and made the call, turned back towards the cyclist. The *idiot*. David, with all his caution and compassion—the former mayor with parliamentary ambitions—watching the dazed cyclist stumble about and grasp at his brow, half the skin on his forehead and cheek sheared off. What did David feel in his heart before it rose to his throat and settled in as screaming?



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is Marta, gripping David's windbreaker and processing the inevitability of the slow-motion crush and drag. Then seconds later motionless, the motorcycle cool and heavy on her skin. For a moment wanting nothing but to lie there in stillness under the idling machine. Then later, checking herself for wounds, tearing open pants and blouse to find them. Putting pressure on the gash in her elbow, trying to keep her face upbeat and free from pain for when I'd find her. *I wish they wouldn't have fought*, she said, *not then at least. Not yet.* David as much an *idiot* as the cyclist. She was the only innocent one there (even taking these jobs was more my idea than hers), which made her feel the most idiotic of all.



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is Africa, and I don't want to talk about it. You've heard many of the reasons before: the continent is too vast and diverse to be summarised in one word. But use more than one, and it

becomes unknown, unknowable, meaningless. It becomes backdrop. Flavour. Allegory.

And even if it could be spoken of, who am I to do it? How long, and how, do I have to live in a place to have the authority to tell its stories, even if those stories are also my own?

Then, of course, there are the particulars of *this* story: white couple goes to Africa, calamity ensues, a lesson about our greater humanity is revealed. Because what other story could there be? Let's face it, most people don't know the first thing. And neither do I.



After seven months living in Accra, Ghana, I thought I knew a little about Africa. I said as much. I wrote an article in a student newspaper. Six years later another seven months, this time in Zambia's Eastern Province, and I knew less than when I'd started. Each bit of understanding undermining the last, and toppling a few others with it. But that's how it goes, isn't it? Take love poems, for instance. When I met Marta in high school I wrote her dozens of them. Most of them rhymed and are now thankfully

forgotten. Midway through university, I'd stopped. What little I'd known of love I'd used up. For five years Marta never asked me why. We both knew. New learning, then new poems. They started coming to me again a few years ago, after our wedding and just before my first book was accepted for publication. The book is filled with love poems for her, most written in a flood before my publisher's submission deadline. I spaced them out evenly throughout. None of them mention that the first place on earth Marta and I lived together was a maid's quarter in a middle-class district of Accra, or that the first times she ever sported a ring of mine—as a warm-up act, a signpost for potential suitors—was in the bars and restaurants of Ring Road and Nkrumah Circle. You can only fit so much into a book, or a poem, or an essay.

It's been a while since I last wrote a love poem for Marta. I'm only now writing about Africa again. One day those two cycles of knowing and unknowing, speaking and remaining silent, will synchronise. Perhaps then I will be able to make plain and compelling the truth that if we have a home, the rural road where David and Marta crashed into a cyclist and skidded out is as much a part of it as anything. That the *idiocy* that befell us was ours, and that the word *idiocy* gets it incredibly wrong.



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is the cyclist, the *idiot*, turning his head towards the sound of the horn. His right arm dropping, instinctually, and his front tire following. Later taking that abuse from David, and the persistent questions of the police. Thinking about his luck. Saying little. Stitched up hastily at the clinic—his wounds still half open—and released.

Sometimes it's the villagers, watching us pull into the clinic. Richard riding in with me perched painfully on the back rack, my arms wrapped tight around Marta, who is pressed between us – her elbow tied in her torn-off pant leg and bleeding through. David and the cyclist following minutes later, their mangled bikes strapped into the trunk of an early '90s Toyota Camry turned taxi cab. The two of them hobbling up to the clinic door side by side, a generous silence between them. All the little flourishes of our procession.

Sometimes it's Miriam, the nurse assigned to Marta, needling in the local anesthetic that wouldn't take and swabbing out the dirt. Improvising cotton balls for tissues and running them softly under Marta's cheeks.



Making room behind the bed where I could sit and reach through the headboard's metal bars to grip Marta's left hand.

Miriam worked mostly as a midwife, but relieved us of that detail in the moment. That day, and in the week that followed, she got so many things wrong. Scrubbed away healing tissue she confused with infection; prescribed ineffective antibiotics. *That woman delayed your recovery time by at least a week*, the British doctor told us when Marta insisted we seek a second opinion. He sighed and I guessed that that noise was the closest he ever came to cursing.

We returned from the hospital, an hour's drive away, and Marta told Miriam she didn't need to come in for cleanings anymore. Miriam saw the fresh bandages and paused, then said *Well come for a visit at least*. So we did, every week for the rest of our stay. She'd take a look at Marta's scars and be pleased with the progress. She'd feed us sodas and crackers and we'd play with her kids and talk with her husband about the next year's groundnut harvest.



Sometimes the motorcycle accident is Marta's scars. It's funny, actually: the deepest wound, on her elbow, the one that caused such pain and worry that day, has all but vanished. The pain of road rash on her thigh, though it was only a few layers deep and hardly bled, is as large as ever. A keloidal scar. The body overproducing collagen, filling and filling a wound long after it's covered over. The rest of her injuries have disappeared in all but photographs.

Mentally, I keep three of them.

Sometimes the motorcycle accident is the first of those photographs. Richard has just hung up his phone and sparked us racing toward the crash. We've crested the last small hill and are looking down over the tableau: David's motorbike in the middle of the road. Two men quarreling. A few villagers stepping out of the cornfield to help or gawk or settle things. And Marta nowhere to be seen.

Sometimes the accident is the second photograph. David has just finished dabbing a handkerchief at the gash on the bridge of his nose, and points down into the ditch. I turn and see her there: blood on every exposed patch of skin, arm not yet elevated above her head (*Why hasn't anyone said something about that? Why hasn't she remembered it herself?*), her chest

wrestling against the deep breaths she insists it take, tears rebelling, her unconvincing smile quavering out.

Most often, though, the accident is the third photograph. Shamefully, I am at the centre of it. We are in the hospital room and Miriam has stepped out for more thread and gauze. I had gone to the window for a break—to look out at the village and the countryside behind it and, for a moment, forget—and have turned back to face the room. It suddenly seems cavernous, and there in the small metal-frame bed is my wife, tears streaming down her face. The photo is not taken from my vantage point. It is from outside either of us, somewhere near the door. Marta is in the left corner, the top of her head visible, ponytail spilling over the pillow, her right arm raised, her wound half-stitched, loose ends springing out. The room is painted eggshell blue and there are tables, sinks and chairs positioned around it accordingly. In the middle I am standing, my arms at my sides. My mouth is shut and my face is calm. I have just said *I'm sorry* and am about to say it again. I don't know why I am saying them but the words come out. They are the only words I'll remember saying that day.

In the years following the accident I've wondered about those words many times. Each time they mean something new, and I'm sure I've finally figured it out. And then the next time comes.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Taylor is the author of the poetry collection *The Other Side of Ourselves* (Cormorant Books, 2011), and the co-founder of *One Ghana, One Voice*, Ghana's first online poetry magazine. His stories, essays and poems have appeared recently in *The New Quarterly*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Hayo*, *The Capilano Review* and *Grain*. In 2015, Rob received the City of Vancouver's Mayor's Arts Award for the Literary Arts (Emerging Artist). <http://roblucastaylor.com>

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