

artist's statement – to story forth

...this beast killed this man killed this beast killed this man killed this beast killed this man this ...

The story I want to set forth is the dying and killing of Bernard von Wattenwyl. He was a Swiss nobleman who went to the backlands of Eastern Africa in 1923 for big game hunting, as he managed to combine his bloody passion with an assignment of the City of Berne. He walked many days through the bush and savanna together with his 23 years old daughter and several dozens helpers like gun carriers, trackers, skinners, cooks and servants. Their aim was to collect specimen and trophies for the Museum of Natural History in Bern. After killing 19 lions, twelve males and seven females, over the months he set out to check on a bait trap on the river Ruindi in the morning twilight of September 30th 1924. They came upon two females with their cubs and he wounded one lioness with his rifle. She took off to hide in the reed grass with the rest of the herd. He tried to trace her and found himself on his back under the lioness clenched in her claws. He managed to defend himself shooting at her head, but succumbed the day after due to the severe wounds. His last words are reported to have been: «This time the lion got me. It was a chivalrous fight.»

The daughter Vivienne decided, after burying her father and mourning in a feverish dreamlike state, to continue the safari, being left behind the only European and the only female, leading a troop of over forty men through the wilderness. She shot the rest of the animals on their list from the museum in the following months and brought the large prey back to Berne, the town of her forefathers, including 134 skins, 145 beautiful butterflies, and the skull of the lioness. This prey still makes up the majority of the show pieces of the African section of the museum.

Her empathy for Africa remained: she got married in England but went back on Safari – without guns but cameras instead. Her diary and memoirs were published in 1927 and 1949 under the title «Out in the Blue» and «Speak to the Earth». They are out of print but can be seen at the museum. Her biography was rewritten as a novel in German by Lukas Hartmann in 2002 titled «Die Tochter des Jägers» (in English: «The Daughter of the Hunter»)

The source: I first saw this lioness' skull in the Museum of Natural History in Berne visiting with my dad. It is in a glass box next to the bronze bust of Bernhard von Wattenwyl. I was impressed. Later on, I remember seeing the skull when I went there as an art student to sketch animals, when the weather was unfavorable to go to the zoo.

The reason why: I put this story forth because the adventures of father and daughter von Wattenwyl ignited the longing and fascination for Africa, where I went later on to live, work and play. But much more also because of its evident message: We cannot fight or mistreat nature without killing ourselves as mankind, too.

The technique: I took my original sketch (pen in glazed and washed ink) from my book of the times as a student. To replicate it I used an inkjet printer. Around it I added the writing with a woodblock print to make it look a bit like the travel certificates at their time, with a simplified crosshair like a seal or rubber stamp to focus on the shot wound in the skull. The writing goes around in a endless loop – like the circle of life.