

THE ATLAS OF FORGOTTEN PLACES

by Jenny D. Williams

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A Conversation with Jenny D. Williams

*What inspired you to write **The Atlas of Forgotten Places**?*

I was living in Uganda in 2006 as a long-term volunteer for a humanitarian organization when I visited Kitgum for the first time. It was a period of relative peace—a cease fire was in effect between the LRA and the UPDF—but hundreds of thousands of people continued to live in government-mandated camps, and the scale of suffering caused by this entrenched conflict astounded me. I was struck, too, by the simplistic way the situation was portrayed by the media, the depiction of villains and victims, as if we can only ever be one or the other. It seemed to me that there was room in this conversation for a messier, more-nuanced exploration of the northern Ugandan conflict—especially one that acknowledged the larger regional and international forces at work.

I knew there was a novel somewhere in there. But what story to tell? And who would tell it? When it comes to war stories, the literary canon skews heavily in favor of the male experience. Yet in Uganda, among refugees and former child soldiers and aid workers, I was drawn most urgently to the stories of the women I'd met: their lives, their losses, their complicated truths. Here lay, for me, the intersection of the personal and the political, the tender questions of family and love and compassion and redemption. This was the novel I wished I could read—and so it became the one I needed to write.

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How much of the novel is based on real life?

The narrative particulars of *The Atlas of Forgotten Places*—the story of Lily and Ocen and Sabine and Rose—are entirely fictional. But the novel references several real historical events, including the 1996 abduction of 139 schoolgirls from St. Mary’s College in Aboke, northern Uganda; Operation Lightning Thunder, the military action by the Ugandan government against the LRA forces in Garamba National Park; the Faradje Christmas massacres; and the LRA attack on Garamba headquarters on January 2, 2009. The Author’s Note at the back of the book includes books, articles, and other resources for learning more.

How long did it take you to write the book?

I wrote *The Atlas of Forgotten Places* over a two-year period while living in Marburg, Germany. I’d written “around” the novel for years—short stories, fragments, and vignettes—but it wasn’t until I finished my MFA and moved to Germany that I felt ready to tackle a novel. My schedule was ideal: I wrote for three to five hours every morning, took my dog on a long midday walk through the Marburg forest, then spent the rest of the day and evening doing my “real” job as a copy editor for a book publisher. I was still working nearly full time but had the flexibility to carve out large periods every day to get lost in the world of the characters, their voices and their thoughts.

During those two years, I wrote two very different versions of the novel—so different, in fact, that I don’t consider them drafts of each other. But it was necessary to write the first version in order to

throw it away and start anew with the manuscript that became *The Atlas of Forgotten Places*.

How did you do research?

Much of my research came from published materials—books, NGO reports, articles, and documentary films. I am extremely indebted to the journalists, academics, and humanitarian workers who have a far deeper and more nuanced understanding of the region than I do; their work gave me the structural framework of the novel's setting, which I could then furnish with characters and storylines of my own devising.

But this novel could not have been written through armchair research alone. Maybe I'm just not that imaginative, but I need to be in a place physically to know how to write about it. I need to listen to people's voices, taste the food, smell the air, ride the buses, use the local brand of soap, navigate the minutiae of everyday life. My time in Uganda in 2006 was augmented by two return trips, in 2010 and 2013. It was in 2013 that I also visited Garamba National Park, which altered the course of the novel and helped shape its final form.

And, of course, I would never have ventured into this narrative territory without trying my best to understand the people I was writing about. During my various research trips to Uganda and the DRC, I was humbled by those who were willing to speak to me about their experiences with the LRA and by the rangers in Garamba who allowed me insight into their daily lives. I hope that *The Atlas of Forgotten Places* honors their stories and pays tribute to their courage.



What's your writing process like?

I don't have a process that works the same for every project; my approach shifts to accommodate the needs of the story and the limitations of my schedule. For the first version of *Atlas*, I created a detailed synopsis and then set out to write the novel sentence by sentence, page by page, chronologically until I'd reached the end. This approach taught me the value of habit and steadiness, of having a stubborn commitment to seeing a project through.

For the second version, I wanted to capture the freshness and excitement of my research trip to Garamba, and so I spent the month following my return in a feverish writing frenzy, creating a "gesture" draft: writing fast and loose to get at the impression of a story without getting bogged down in the specific details. (Rachel Howard describes this concept beautifully in her *New York Times* essay on "Gesture Writing.")

Interestingly, I found myself using two different mediums to access Sabine's and Rose's narratives: I wrote Sabine's story on an old Rheinmetall typewriter, built by the same company that manufactured weapons in Germany during WWII. But using the typewriter for Rose felt stiff and wrong; instead, I hand-wrote her chapters on loose sheets of white paper. The two narratives merged in the second draft, when I typed up all those notes on my laptop and began the painstaking, happy labor of fleshing out each gesture from its bare essence into prose.

“I wrote Sabine’s story on an old Rheinmetall typewriter, built by the same company that manufactured weapons in Germany during WWII.”

Who are some of your favorite writers?

Too many to name! I was lucky to grow up in a family where reading voraciously was not only encouraged, it was almost a prerequisite for full participation in family discussions. My mother passed on books she was reading in her book club—rich, intricate novels like Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Ursula Hegi’s *Stones from the River*. But I grew up, too, under the influence of my Scottish grandfather, whose shelves were filled with the classics of science fiction: Asimov, Butler, Heinlein, Le Guin, and Bradbury. Now my own shelves house Naomi Novik, George R. R. Martin, and N.K. Jemisin alongside Lily King, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Andrea Barrett, Lauren Groff, and George Saunders.

What’s next after *The Atlas of Forgotten Places*?

I have a few projects simmering. My husband has respectfully requested that I refrain from planning any more research trips where I have to have a military escort. We’ll see.



An atlas of forgotten drafts...

The first year I lived in Germany, I wrote a novel that in many ways resembles *The Atlas of Forgotten Places*: both include Marburg and Kitgum as settings; both juxtapose the story of a German aid worker and a young Ugandan person affected by the LRA; and both explore the complicated realities of war, family legacy, and humanitarian work. The differences, though, are legion: ivory, for example, doesn't appear in that novel at all; the German protagonist left Kitgum not because of guilt but because of a failed love affair; and the Ugandan perspective centers on a young Internet cafe owner with big ambitions and a complicated relationship with a young American Peace Corps volunteer.

When I set that manuscript aside to write *Atlas*, almost nothing came with me—not character names nor plot points nor story arc...with one exception: a scene from the opening chapter, in which a woman watches a man as he saves a swan that has gotten caught in a frozen river. I find it fascinating, now, to return to that first novel and reread the scene and the pages surrounding it, as if I might pinpoint the moment of divergence when a single creative idea became two distinct paths forward.

I hope you find this excerpt equally interesting—something to spark discussion, perhaps. If you were this writer, which path would you choose?

Jenny D. Williams
Seattle, Washington
May 2017



A Note from the Author

“Excerpt from *Birds of Africa*”
(unpublished manuscript)

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PREFACE

South Sudan, near the border with Uganda

Over the mountains, a plane is crashing.

A thin rope of smoke trails from the left wing, tracking the plane’s descent across the otherwise cloudless sky. It’s a small plane—eight seats, no more—yet it plummets toward the ground with all the weight and speed of a much greater machine. Whatever chaos has erupted in the cabin, in the cockpit, stays there, contained by metal and drowned out by the high-pitched drone of the engine as it strains to give them lift.

Below, it is late afternoon and the day is slow with heat. A dik-dik with tiny antelope legs and wet black eyes nibbles at a leaf; small turtles poke their heads out of puddles that have collected in the potholes of rarely used roads now turned to mud in the rainy season; somewhere nearby, a fox pricks her ears at the noise of the plane, then yawns, goes back to sleep.

The passengers know they are going to die. They each face this certainty in their own private way. It is never a beautiful thing to behold, the knowledge of death, but one girl aboard faces a deeper sadness than the others, a sadness sharp with the horror of the mistake she has made. For she has a secret—a secret that was never hers to keep. And now that everyone around her shares her fate, there is no one left to tell.

The plane swerves, wobbles, rights itself—but no matter. There are only seconds left before the collision of metal and earth. Seconds that stretch themselves out into minutes, minutes into days, days into years. In this suspended time anything is possible: the reversal of gravity, relief, release.

Their story will end, as all stories must. But for these few seconds—this eternity—maybe, perhaps, it will only ever be: a plane, over the mountains, falling toward grace.

Chapter 1: Katrine

Marburg, Germany: January 2010

All around her, the world was white and bright and hushed; a pale sky pressed upon red-roofed buildings and was pierced by thin, reaching branches of trees made bare by cold. Katrine nuzzled her chin closer to her scarf and clenched and unclenched her hands inside her gloves to keep the circulation moving, though her fingers were already stiff and painful. She knew they wouldn't get warm again until she was back in the Tierheim and could run them under the animal shelter's hot-water faucets. She still had twenty minutes until then, and she couldn't make the time go any faster.

That was okay; she had become accustomed to numbness. Winter this year had come early and hard to Marburg, and Katrine both hated the cold and relished it. Hated it because she had lived so many years without it, had adjusted to the thick, heavy heat of a different continent and forgotten how bone-biting a northern wind could be. But she

loved the stark nakedness of the forests through which that wind swept. She hated the layers of clothing she had to don and discard every time she left or entered a building—but loved the city when it was buried beneath a layer of snow, clean and quiet.

Hated it because it wasn't Africa. Relished it because of the same.

Aside from a few cars driving idly past, the streets were deserted as she walked the last few blocks down to the River Lahn, pausing every few steps to let Billy sniff a clump of dirty snow or raise his leg against a frosted bush. Billy the Bully, the other Tierheim employees called him. They'd given him the nickname originally because of his breed, English bulldog, but he'd earned it, too. At the shelter he had to be kept in a separate kennel and was only let into the yard with two other dogs with whom he'd already proved compatible. Katrine hadn't been at the Tierheim when Billy was dropped off six years ago, by a man coming from Gießen who claimed he couldn't deal with the dog's unpredictable aggression. The animal shelter staff suspected abuse. But in the three years Katrine had been working there, she'd gotten to know Billy better than any of her colleagues, who had given up on getting him adopted. For good reason, Katrine knew: he had seen too much of the world, too much of its cruelty. She didn't think many people here in peaceful, placid Marburg would understand.

She'd wanted to take him on a longer walk today, through the forest at the edge of town, up into the hills. She often took him out on Saturdays during visiting hours, when the Tierheim became crowded



with families inquiring about the younger, cuter, friendlier dogs. Occasionally someone asked about Billy after seeing his picture on the website, but the staff had an obligation to warn them about his hostile tendencies. The visitor's attention turned inevitably to the next dog on the list. Katrine didn't like the noise and the bustle of visiting hours anyway, and it was satisfying to trek into the lonely woods with unloved, unwanted Billy at her side.

Today, however, she'd been busy with the arrival of four puppies from Romania—Bucharest was overrun with street dogs, some of which were captured and brought to Germany for rehabilitation and adoption—and her walk with Billy had started late. Normally she wouldn't mind returning after dark, but this evening she had an appointment with a real estate broker, and she'd promised her sister Bierta that she'd be there.

"Like you promised last time?" Bierta had said.

"Like I'm promising now," Katrine replied.

It would not do to displease her sister again. Bierta had, after all, been generous these three years. When Katrine left Uganda that terrible autumn, she'd had nowhere else to go; her sister's guest room was small and sparse, but the only thing that registered in Katrine's addled brain was that it was somewhere else, somewhere far. Far was what mattered. She'd been in such a state that even in Germany, where things should have been easy, the most mundane tasks seemed impossible: small talk with a neighbor was like speaking a foreign language; going to the bakery for a loaf of bread was a feat of monumental proportions. Bierta had been patient with her, and for that Katrine was

grateful. She knew that Bierta had heard little of the events in Uganda that had precipitated Katrine's sudden departure, only the news that briefly made international headlines—an American girl, killed in a tragic accident. Katrine never volunteered the whole story. Bierte, mercifully, never asked.

Katrine descended the steps to the river and Billy followed ploddingly behind. He was getting older now, his joints not what they were. The riverbank along the Lahn was swathed in snow, the skeletal trees traced in lines of white where the flakes hadn't yet melted. The path, at least, was packed down—with his short legs, Billy couldn't navigate the softer stuff. Katrine saw that new parts of the river had frozen over since last Saturday. How quickly the water turned to ice. She knew, too, given a sudden rise in temperature or even a light rain, how quickly it would turn back.

After leaving Uganda, it had only taken a few months under the nurturing care of her sister before Katrine had “recovered” enough—Bierta's words, meant as a kindness, Katrine was sure—to look for something to keep her busy; the Tierheim seemed just right. The dogs had simple, transparent needs. Even the difficult ones really only needed food, exercise, leadership, affection. Katrine never asked herself if she was doing the right thing. She never wondered if the dogs were better off without her. This was not aid work. This was not Africa.

At home, she helped her sister cook and clean and even paid her share of rent out of the substantial savings she'd cultivated during her years abroad.

Bierta had been surprised by how much money Katrine had been able to save working in the humanitarian industry. The price of guilt and cold showers, Katrine had replied. Bierta took it for a jest.

In any case, three years was a long time for two women over forty to be housemates, particularly sisters who hadn't seen each other for more than a few days at a time in the previous two decades, and so Katrine understood why Bierta had given her the ultimatum at the beginning of the new year: find your own apartment in sixty days, or I'll find one for you. Her phrasing, of course, had been softer around the edges—such was Bierta's way—but no less clear.

Katrine had no intentions of moving into a new apartment in Marburg. No; she had other plans. She would meet with the broker this evening only to assuage Bierta's fretting. She uncovered her watch from beneath layers of glove and sweaters at her wrist and, noting the time, whistled at Billy to pick up the speed as they followed the path along the river's winding curves.

But as they turned the next corner Billy tensed and stopped, his eyes trained ahead. Katrine followed his gaze, looking through a screen of slender, tangled branches, and was momentarily startled by movement at edge of the river on the opposite side. A tall, broad man clothed in all black stood out boldly from the whiteness of the scene. Apparently unaware of Katrine's presence, he floated his arms away from his sides into a kind of T, then awkwardly took one tentative step onto the frozen river. Billy began growling softly, low in his throat, and Katrine quickly shushed him with a hand

on his head. The man took another step. Then another, this even more careful than the first two.

Katrine was baffled. The man seemed to be crazy. There was no way of knowing how thick the ice was—it could be newly frozen, fatal if it cracked and he went through. No one else was around. The man was silent as he took another step. Katrine held her breath. What was he doing? The moment felt uncanny, this strangely solitary man breaking into her own strange solitude.

Then she saw the swan. Obscured by the branches in the way, the swan's colors had blended in with the blue-white of the river and snow. Now Katrine could make out the shape of its back, the writhing limb of its neck. *Cygnus olor*, commonly called Mute, though the swan quickly proved it was anything but, as it began to hiss and strain its orange and black beak forward as if hoping to pull the rest of its body free.

Which, Katrine could see clearly now, would fail: the bird was trapped, frozen into the ice. The river here was wider than elsewhere—shallower and therefore quicker to freeze. Even the swan's wings were pressed tight against its body. She knew this happened sometimes, with ducks and other water birds that choose poorly where they slept the night. Usually they died. But swans seemed so big, so powerful; surely this one would have been able to thrash its way out?

Katrine looked again at the man's clothes and realized that he was wearing full-body waders, like fishermen. When he turned slightly away from her to evaluate his distance from shore, she saw a hand-axe tucked into his back belt loop. She

dared not move, both for fear of agitating the swan further and because she didn't want the man to know he was being watched. Billy had sat down and was sniffing the air. Katrine hadn't removed her hand from his head.

The closer the man got to the swan the harder the swan pumped its neck. The man seemed to know the danger of getting too close; he stopped a few feet away, just out of reach, and pulled out his axe.

He knelt and began pressing the tips of his fingers against the ice, testing its firmness. Then, as gently as if stroking a cat, he began tapping the axe against the ice. Bit by bit he chipped the frozen river away, taking care not to shift his body weight nor come within range of the swan's angry beak.

Katrine watched, enthralled. Time was lost to her. The man's fierce concentration was contagious; Katrine hardly breathed. The world whirled down into the scene before her. The noise from the axe, scrape scrape scrape scrape knock knock tap tap scrape scrape scrape scrape, grew so loud that when she finally noticed Billy's soft whimpering she wasn't sure how long he'd been whining. The man, thank goodness, hadn't heard. Katrine could no longer feel her fingers, but that was okay.

A crack broke the trance; bits of ice bobbed in the water, suddenly loose; and the bird surged forward like a beast uncaged. The man got to his feet quickly and stumbled back, out of range of those massive, miraculous wings. He made it to shore just as the swan beat its way out of the river and into the air, and the ice broke away beneath them both. The swan was gone in seconds.

Stillness returned to the sky, the river.

Then Billy barked and Katrine remembered herself; she looked over at the man just as he noticed them for the first time. He waved, unembarrassed. She blushed and felt grateful for the cover of brush and her scarf, pulled up close around her face. She brought Billy farther down the path, out from behind the tangle of branches, while the man got up from where he'd fallen.

As the distance between them lessened, Katrine could see the man's face more clearly. He was older than she'd thought, maybe even her age. His face was creased but in places that could have been laugh lines. He waved again; nervous habit?

"That was quite a rescue," she called across the river. "For the sake of a swan."

"Malicious, ungrateful creatures," the man called back, but she could see he was smiling.

"So why do it?"

The man picked up his axe, which he'd tossed aside in the tumble, and slipped it back into his belt loop. "It's my job."

She had to laugh. "Savior of stuck birds?"

"Fireman," he said. "And you?"

I thought I was a savior once, she almost said, but that was a lifetime ago.

She lifted Billy's leash. "Tierheim."

"He's a beauty."

"That's Billy," she said. Then, because she didn't know what else to say: "I'm Katrine."

He nodded. "Per."

She liked the name: firm, assured. Contained.

Like the man it belonged to. Had she known a Per before? She wasn't sure that she had.

"Have you worked in Marburg long?" she asked.

"Not long," he said. "A few months."

"And how are you finding our charming little town?"

"Cold." Still smiling. "In Hamburg at least the birds said thank you."

Billy was getting restless, but she wasn't quite ready to go. "I was in Hamburg for a conference once. Lovely city."

"Animal rights conference?"

She paused. "No. It was something else."

After a moment he called again, "Katrine." He gestured to the river. "I'm sensing a distance between us. Would you like to go for a coffee?"

The invitation felt bizarrely natural, as if the surreality of the last half an hour had carried forward and this was merely the final wave in the swell.

"I can't," she said. "Tonight, anyway."

"Tomorrow morning then—Rosenpark Café."

"Eleven?" she said.

"Eleven is good."

She coaxed Billy to his feet. "So then," she said, "bis morgen." They began to walk.

"Tchüss," Per called, and turned away.

That was that; as common as sunrise. And equally extraordinary, now that she thought about it, which she did, indeed, as she and Billy completed the



A Note from the Author

river loop and climbed the stairs back up to the street. Night was descending quickly and Katrine urged Billy on. The streets were still empty—it was a quiet neighborhood—but as she looked out over the tarmac and sidewalks, the hedges and snow-covered lawns, the compact cars and clean driveways, reality seemed to ripple and gain a kind of tangible presence, an anchor, just for a second. Just slightly. Just so.

And then back to what it had been before: weightless, drifting, suspended; moments upon moments upon moments, one after the other, shaping no whole. These three years in Germany were, Katrine had told herself time and again, a collective null. A transition period. A pause along the vast arc of her life, which happened necessarily elsewhere. Per—this evening—was no exception.

By the time they returned to the Tierheim, visiting hours were over. The lobby was warm and Billy became excited by the scents of all the other dogs that had passed through. Cindy, Katrine's coworker, said that a young couple had already shown great interest in one of the Romanian puppies; the couple would be back Monday to meet her again and start filling out the paperwork. They'd interviewed well, Cindy told Katrine; the wife worked at home and could attend to the puppy during the day, and the husband seemed calm and compassionate. It would be a good match, she finally declared with satisfaction.

Yes, Katrine thought. A good match. Certainly the puppy was as impressionable and innocent as they come; she would need plenty of affection and care. But wasn't that all Billy needed, too?

She checked the clock on the wall of the lobby and saw that she was already twenty minutes late for the broker. She had lingered too long, caught up in the drama of the trapped swan. It would take her another twenty minutes to walk from here, longer if she took the bus, as it only ran every quarter hour. She walked Billy back to his kennel and removed his leash and chest collar.

“Off you go, you big brute,” she said. He waddled straight to his bed and lay down with a huff. Malicious, ungrateful creatures, she could hear Per saying. So why do it at all?

In the lobby Cindy was preparing the evening feedings for all the animals—dogs, cats, birds, rabbits. Occasionally they got wilder creatures, hedgehogs and squirrels and turtles that swam. Once they even had a herd of goats, though that hadn’t gone over well with city authorities. Katrine had already told her she couldn’t help tonight as she usually did; Cindy said that was fine.

In the bathroom she turned on the hot-water tap and tugged off her gloves, gently because her fingers were still stiff, and she could see when her hands were exposed that the skin was a ghastly white. The sight was familiar: hyperactivation of the sympathetic system causing extreme vasoconstriction of the peripheral blood vessels, the doctor told her during her first winter in Germany—in other words, poor circulation. Katrine had never known before because she’d never wintered as an adult outside central Africa. Bierta was appropriately appalled the first time she saw it. “They’re like—dead people’s fingers,” she said, stricken.

"I'll live," Katrine had replied. Later she'd thought: yes, perhaps that was exactly right. There was a kind of deadness inside her. But it hadn't killed her yet.

She caressed the blood back into her fingertips under the running water, which by now had begun to steam the small mirror in the cramped space of the bathroom. She didn't want to know how she looked in any case. The cold was not kind to her skin, which had become accustomed to warm, humid weather. Two decades of chronic sleep-deprivation had had its effect, too; even when she got dressed up, a rare occurrence in any case, she couldn't hide the strain of half a life lived under an equatorial sun. How had Gregory put it, that night in Kitgum? I love your skin, he'd said, it's like a fine wine, textured, complex. He'd stroked her cheek, run a thumb along the wrinkles on her forehead. Come here, little starling, let me taste you.

But that was gone, now. Uganda was gone, Gregory with it. Now there were only dry lips and weathered skin; certainly no thumb against her cheek, no warm body in her bed.

Her fingers throbbed and ached as the blood returned. Back to life, back to feeling. The tips of her fingers swelled, reddened and burning. This was the most painful part—not the numbness, but the thaw.

There was no point in meeting the broker now. Bierta would have to be appeased. Katrine wasn't ready to tell her sister the truth: that she didn't need her own apartment in Marburg because she wouldn't be here to live in it. She was done recovering. She'd already started looking at openings in the aid industry, sniffing around at

some of the organizations she'd worked for in the past. Rumor had it that the International Rescue Committee was looking for a new country director in Myanmar. The IRC was one of the good ones, she knew. Surely she could set aside her qualms, her doubts; surely she only needed to get back into the field. Uganda was over, frozen, buried beneath three years of Marburg.

Some things that had frozen were best left so.

Finally Katrine dried her hands and put on her gloves. The rest of her winter gear she hadn't bothered to remove. On her way out she waved at Cindy, who was sprinkling a dose of powdered antibiotic into a cat bowl.

Katrine braced herself for the cold and opened the door. Outside the world was newly dark, but the streets were well lamped. Bierta had probably already gotten a call from the broker; she'd be angry when Katrine arrived.

She decided to walk. She was in no hurry to arrive.

 *Atlas Book Club Kit*



Welcome sign at the edge of Kitgum Town, Uganda



The author with a six-foot ivory tusk recovered from poachers by Garamba rangers (image credit: Preston Nix)



The author with some of Garamba's rangers (image credit: Preston Nix)



Weapons and ivory recovered by Garamba rangers while on patrol (image credit: Preston Nix)



Images of the lodge destroyed by the LRA in the January 2, 2009 attack on Garamba National Park headquarters



Murals outside the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre in Kitgum, Uganda

If a book club chooses to read *ATLAS*, the author would be happy to join via Skype (or possibly in person if in the greater Seattle area). Contact her directly at jennywilliamsauthor@gmail.com.