The Institute of Current World Affairs

FOUR WEST WHEELOCK STREET
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03755

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Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

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John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of KiSwahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995 He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

John B. Robinson is an Institute Fellow studying the struggle of the people and island of Madagascar to survive.

Happy Bull's 66-Zebu Sapphire

ANTSIRANANA, Madagascar July 30, 1997

By John B. Robinson

Lonny was up around 30 miles an hour, still in third gear, just starting down a stretch of open macadam that was flanked by smoldering, burned-over hills and dry, fetid rice paddies. He had the throttle wrenched back, the clutch lever squeezed in, and was in the act of kicking the fluorescent Japanese road pony into fourth. And it was just a glint of blue. A hallucinogenic sparkle of phosphorescence in a cross-hatched sea of burnt brown, ochre red, and ash gray. And the hand which held this miraculous shimmering glint unscarred by the cold fire thrust aloft like a painted beacon.

The motorcycle coasted along at a roar as Lonny's eye processed the glint and his professional instinct welled up like a balloon inside his chest. His intellect told him to push on now, to get to the sapphire fields by early noon while the light was still solid and the miners were returning from their hand-scraped trenches. But the curse and the salvation of Lonny's life was his eye. Lonny had a seeing eye. An eye that could weigh, shape, cut, mount, set, and sell a gemstone just by holding it to the sun. The eye of an artist. An eye that could see into things and ken their weft. So although the rational part of his brain told him to proceed as usual, to drive on, buy in quantity, return at high speed, and export on account—his eye, his love of beauty, and his professionally cultivated instinct, told him to downshift, turn around, and search out that curious sparkle that promised a glimpse of the divine.

"Lonny had a seeing eye. An eye that could weigh, shape, cut, mount, set, and sell a gemstone just by holding it to the sun. The eye of an artist."

He cruised by the area where his eye had picked out a disturbance in nature's pattern, yet it was only on the third pass that he actually spotted the middle-aged peasant sitting away from the deserted highway beneath a mango tree the height of a four-story building. A small figure who watched Lonny's curious turns without understanding and without trying to understand. The peasant had been holding the blue stone up to the sun, as he had seen the traders do in the sapphire camps, trying to see what he could feel instinctively.

Lonny climbed off his plastic-covered conveyance and left it parked on the baking blacktop, absolutely without worry that his gleaming machine might disturb the rare truck grinding its way toward the far-distant capital. He removed his mirrored helmet and walked woodenly toward the giant mango and the sitting peasant.

Bonjour, greeted Lonny in French. His language skills were shaky but he had all the phraseology necessary to work his way through a purchase or a sale. He had taken a three-month crash course at New York University

before being sent to Madagascar to trade for his father.

Bonjour, returned Jaoravo, a blessing his parents had named Happy Bull.

I buy sapphires, said Lonny.

Joaravo listened to Lonny and heard nothing malevolent.

Do you have a sapphire? said Lonny.

At the time of independence Jaoravo had already finished his schooling and he was proud of his ability to speak French. The young men of the nearby village called him The Frenchman because they liked to tease him. He did not mind the teasing. He was proud of his ability to communicate with strangers. His own father could speak French and Jaoravo did not feel ashamed before the ancestors.

Yes, he replied in French.

Lonny's legs were not yet stiff, as he had only been riding a short time, but he lost balance when Jaoravo rotated his palm and extended his arm to reveal a luminous sapphire the size of a duck's egg.

This is a real sapphire, Joaravo said. And he knew it was. For although he knew nothing about sapphires in particular, he sensed the force of the stone, and from what he had heard, all the good stones were sapphires. The stone had a presence not unlike the sacred tree where he offered white-faced male ducks to the departed. He had discovered the blue stone in his rice paddy as he bailed it dry with a plastic bucket. He had been carrying it for months, but now he felt himself unaccountably sad and he wanted to make a tribute to the ancestors. He wanted to sacrifice a zebu in their honor and he thought that if he took the disturbing blue stone to town surely one of the strangers would give him a zebu for it.

Lonny picked the wondrous sapphire from Jaoravo's work-beaten palm and held it against the washed turquoise sky. The stone was the color of a delphinium on the summer side of a mountain and as clear as the love he felt for the mother of his first child. He closed his eyes briefly in delight and behind his eyelids he saw the magnificent sapphire well up melodiously like a musical note. The gem did not filter the passage of light, rather it seemed to give value to the light itself. In one bright instant the contours of his soul seemed to shift their shape and Lonny felt exhilarated. He knew, like a caged cockatoo who encounters her mate for the first time, that he was looking at the very conception of beauty.

It is beautiful, said Lonny, against all his professional training and all his father's warnings about showing emotion in the presence of something valuable.

Thank you, said Jaoravo. He held out his hand to take it back, but Lonny had the gem up against the sky, plumbing its depths and calculating the type of cut that would bring out the excellence in the stone's best nature. He had the impression he was gazing into one of God's tear drops.

How much? asked Lonny. He held the stone up to the sky a third time as if to check if he had really seen what he thought he might have imagined. But he had not imagined such beauty nor such value. Despite its massive size the sapphire had no deep fractures that would diminish its worth on the grinding wheel. The clarity and luminescence of its character assured that only a come-again Caesar, an artist, or a thief would ever appreciate it truly.

Jaoravo wore a thin piece of linen wrapped around his waist and a rude vest of woven palm fibers. Against his calf lay the local version of a machete which had a long wooden handle and short iron blade in the shape of a worn L. He was barefoot, and despite a diet of plain rice, an intestinal tract full of worms, and recurrent bouts of malaria, was in pretty good health and harmony for a middle-aged man who lived in an isolated hut removed from a village and days from town.

"He knew, like a caged cockatoo who encounters her mate for the first time, that he was looking at the very conception of beauty."

The refracted heat of the glazed earth baked Lonny's puffy, unathletic body as efficiently as a pottery kiln. The long grasses had just been burned, razing the vegetation to the level of an ant and preparing it for the short tender grass shoots the zebu preferred. He felt sweat running down his cheeks like dusty rivers, realizing at the same time that he was too drained to defend himself or even run in the case of danger. But standing there, like a neon lighthouse on a pillaged plain, next to an armed peasant, in one of the poorest countries in the world, carrying enough local money to last ten local lifetimes, Lonny felt safer than when riding public transport in lower Manhattan at noon.

Lonny chose a root and sat beside Jaoravo beneath the towering mango tree whose oviform yellow fruits were prized for their salty taste. On the periphery of the shade spot two zebu stood dumb and mute before a wooden cart with wooden wheels. Across the smoldering fields Lonny could see Jaoravo's square hut. A few walls of cross-hatched palm mats attached to seven vertical poles coifed with dead leaves and raised above the exhausted earth by a series of miniature stilts. Lonny estimated that if he stood in the middle of the hut and jumped up and down about twenty times the whole con-

traption would implode as completely as his neglected marriage.

Having grown up on the seventeenth floor of a skyscraper Lonny found visits to the Malagasy countryside disorienting. The only time he had stayed overnight in a village he was obliged to have sex with an unmarried peasant girl to honor the ancestors. Her mother, father, grown brothers, little sisters, cousins, and neighbors, all waiting outside the sieve-like walls to discuss the event. Even more dirty gossip than at my unannounced civil ceremony, he wrote a distant friend.

Lonny's mind imagined the look on his father's face when he returned with The Stone. How many adventurers discovered something worth discovering? And although Lonny was not, strictly speaking, an adventurer, his wholesale gem buying on the red brick island was the extreme end of the business, far removed from the cutting rooms, spectrographs, calibrated scales, display cases, sales pitches, magazine models, and auction houses of New York, Brussels, Geneva, Bangkok, and Tel Aviv. It would be something to see, his father's reaction. When Lonny showed him The Stone he wanted to capture the scene on video, where the words would be recorded, and could not be denied or altered at a later date. He wanted physical proof he could replay at family birthday parties, a proof that he was worthy of his father's confidence and trust, not just an erratic dreamer at pains to cover the expenses of his own mistakes.

Jaoravo was thinking not of his father but of all of his fathers. His father's father, and his father before, and his mother, and his mother' mother, and her mother. He would need to honor them properly to wipe away his melancholy. To open the family tomb, recover their bones in fine white cloth, offer them the blood of several zebu. If he did these things right, on an auspicious day, with the agreement of his brothers and sisters, and in the presence of a good witch doctor, he was sure to be well received by the ancestors. There would have to be big plastic tubs of rum. And salegy music. And dance, and sex. Divinity, happiness, harvest, and fertility. If it was done strictly according to custom, as it would be, the ancestors, the living, and the unborn would all be satisfied. There would be a whole and he would be part of it.

How much? asked Jaoravo. He sat next to Lonny on the mango root and he placed the gem in Lonny's hand. When the stone, its surface temperature warmed by the heat of Jaoravo's hand touched his soft pink palm, Lonny suspected the peasant was selling more than just a precious stone, he was selling a part of himself.

No, said Lonny, reluctantly forcing the finest object he ever hoped to own back into Jaoravo's hand. You tell me how much you want to sell it for.

How much is it worth? asked Jaoravo.

It is worth any price you wish, replied Lonny. But I cannot set the value for you. You must decide yourself how much the sapphire is worth. You are the owner, only you can decide its value.

But how much is it worth? repeated Jaoravo.

To whom? Asked Lonny.

To you, he said.

Lonny shook his head. My friend, this sapphire is worth the esteem of my father and the salvation of my marriage. I am willing to pay you what you think it is worth to you. As a commodity it has no intrinsic value.

A sapphire has no value?

No, said Lonny.

Then you don't want to buy the sapphire?

"He tried to think of how his ancestors would have talked with this other, this tricky stranger with a silver tongue and eyes like piercing thorns."

No, that is not what I said. The value of an object, such as this sapphire, is without price in the sense that no single price can be fixed upon it. What I am willing to pay and what you are willing to receive are two separate ideas. Perhaps I am prepared to pay nothing for this stone and you place a great value on it. Perhaps I place a great value on it and you do not care for it. You are the seller and I am the buyer, together we must arrive at a price. The price is only a temporary approximation of the stone's worth.

Jaoravo listened carefully.

So what is it worth? he asked.

You tell me, said Lonny.

Jaoravo looked toward the exposed earth for support. He was the master of himself and his two wives and his six sons and his seven daughters and more than nine zebu. He had always been fortunate. The stranger was being very evasive and Jaoravo did not want to be tricked by a fine orator. He tried to think of how his ancestors would have talked with this other, this tricky stranger with a silver tongue and eyes like piercing thorns.

Jaoravo walked to the ox cart and came back with a small container of white rum. He offered it to Lonny, who put the scuffed plastic jug to his lips and let a mouthful enter. The homemade concoction was so bitter Lonny choked, and to keep from spitting on the ground, and to

keep from offending the ancestors, he forced the nauseating fire down his throat in a tremendous effort of will power. His head went light and a sweat broke out all over his body. For an instant, when he saw Jaoravo spilling a tribute to the ancestors in the dirt, he thought he had been tricked into swallowing poison.

Jaoravo sluiced the divine spirit into his belly, shuddered, coughed, and tried to remember what he would need to satisfy the ancestors, himself, and his wives.

How much will they give me for the sapphire in town? asked Jaoravo.

Lonny, eyes closed, head swimming, rum vapors swirling through his nasal passages like surgical anesthesia: It does not matter what they give you in town for the sapphire. I will follow you wherever you go and buy it from the person you sell it to. I will buy this sapphire for any price.

Jaoravo wedged another shot of the divine spirit into his soul and reflected upon Lonny's declaration. To insure both his wives would give tributes to him when he departed, and cover his bones in fine white cloth, they would need one good rice paddy each. He owned a small rice paddy of poor quality, but he knew that nearer the village there were many fine rice paddies of good quality, and if he had twelve zebu he could buy enough land that each wife would have a rice paddy. Twelve zebu is a good price for the sacred stone thought Jaoravo.

While fighting through the layered meanings of the stranger's words he came upon the number 6 somewhere in his brain. 6 was a celestially whole number, the number of sons a man needed to carry his coffin to the family tomb. The sacrifice of 6 zebu as a tribute to the ancestors would be the most glorious thing ever done in the village. 6 white headed zebu. 6. He thought around the number 6 several times. When he had finished thinking, Jaoravo concluded that the meeting with the stranger was divine. A stranger guided to him by the ancestors. A stranger who would satisfy the hunger of the living and the warmth of the missing.

Lonny hated waiting for anything. For planes, slow drivers, indecisive women, hesitant buyers. He hated waiting but now he waited, and would wait a for a week perched on a mango root if he had to. He would satisfy his sexual obligations to the Jaoravo's daughters, sleep in the squalid little hut, eat badly hulled rice, and give blood to malarial mosquitoes. He was willing to do anything to capture the most sublime rock he had ever held to the sky. He felt the bargaining process would go on for days. During the year he had spent in Madagascar he came to understand that his special conception of time, based on the rotation of the sun, measured by vibrations of a cesium atom, and spread throughout the industrialized world like a religion made of wall calendars and digital watches, had not yet reached this part of the planet. In his experience, the peasants had no sense of the past, other than it was past; no conception of the future, other than it had not yet occurred. They lived in the present as if it was all that had ever existed or would exist. Patience had no more sense to a peasant than to a zebu. It was impossible to wait for something to happen in Madagascar simply because waiting was impossible. So as the sun rode the far side of its arc, and Jaoravo struggled to put a price on his sacred stone, Lonny just sat and tried to live the moment.

But he could not. Lonny's mind was busy thinking about his marriage, and his daughter, and a career that would keep rising upward. When he returned to New York he would be known in the gem trade as Lucky Lonny. His reputation would be made for now and forever once he wrapped his hands around that ephemeral blue song. The foundation stone of his career. And would she be there then? Had the papers for mental cruelty and physical abandonment been filed? Had his search for the essence of life wiped out the seeds of love planted years ago, like Jaoravo's fires torched the medicinal plants with the weeds, leaving behind nothing but secondary growth and the cindered shadows of what used to be?

"A profit is a profit was his father's maxim, but to his father's bitter disappointment Lonny did not enter the precious-gemstone trade to make a profit."

Lonny didn't know how luck worked. Since he had started in his father's business he had always searched for the exceptional stones. A profit is a profit was his father's maxim, but to his father's bitter disappointment Lonny did not enter the precious-gemstone trade to make a profit. Something in his soul, either a generation-skipping gene or a door opened by a first love, compelled him to seek beauty. He found no satisfaction in wholesaling kilos of low-quality precious stones, and maybe because of that, or maybe because he believed in possibility, or maybe because of his gifted eye, this was not the first time he had found an exceptional gem right in the midst of dozens of other dealers and hundreds of thousands of carats of costume jewelry destined for teen-age mall rats and unsatisfied prom queens.

Just as Jaoravo sought constantly to appease the ancestors, and to keep in contact with them, and to consult with them, Lonny searched for beauty. That is to say Lonny kept in contact with the beautiful things in life: women, books, films, gems, paintings, oriental rugs, wood boxes, carved statues. As long as he was near a city with museums and discotheques Lonny was satisfied. His embarrassing marriage and subsequent exile to an impoverished agricultural country with little material history was distressing, but his faith that he would find rare beauty here had kept him vigilant to opportunity.

And now opportunity had found him and he would return triumphant. Was luck managed or fate predestined? Lonny had no clue. He wondered if his four year old girl would be lucky like him.

How much? asked Lonny impatiently.

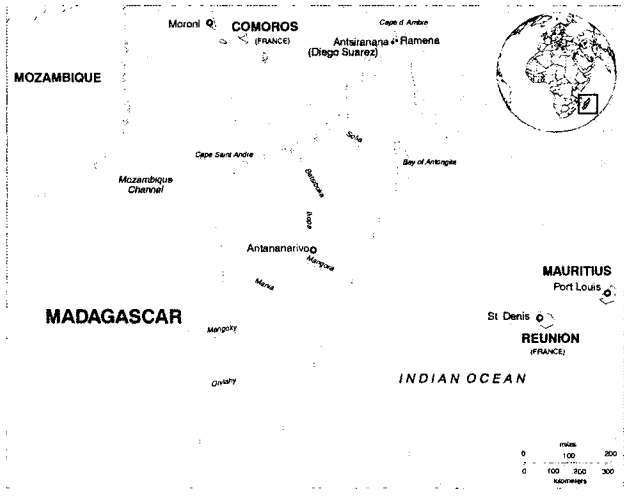
Jaoravo held up his hand to ask for silence in the European manner. As the ancestors had directed this stranger to him to satisfy their needs he must not forget a single thing. The cost of much rum, the special shrouds, sacks of rice from town, crates of beer, cigarettes, the musicians, the witch doctor, a tribute to the king. It was quite a lot to think about.

Jaoravo thought of the wonderful image of 6 zebu, and a patch of forest needed to feed them, and out of his mouth, unwillingly and far too quickly, as if it were not him at all, but really the ancestors who forced his tongue, he said to Lonny, I want 66 white-headed zebu.

I agree to your price, blurted Lonny without an instant's hesitation. Lonny reached over and squeezed Jaoravo's knee hard and the peasant touched him kindly on the shoulder. Neither could speak for want of an adequate vocabulary. A vocabulary in which joy and exultation would only be an approximation of their simultaneous state of grace. A moment that would change both their lives and the lives of their descendants forever.

Jaoravo placed the sacred stone, what would later be a named and internationally catalogued sapphire, in Lonny's outstretched fingers.

Thank you, said Lonny. He was supremely happy to



hold such a sublimely beautiful object, to have the desire of his dreams so close to his skin for a period of time before anyone else knew of it, to touch the essence of something transcendent while knowing he could never possess it. He would be the talk of jewelry houses and amateur prospecting magazines around the globe and the look on his father's face was going to be priceless.

Jaoravo offered him another slug of white rum and Lonny spilled a tribute to the ancestors and drank with them without caring about the burning sensation sliding down the back of his throat or the cold, painful tears sawing free of his eye sockets. He realized his father would never trust him and there was nothing he could do about it. He was among pagans twelve thousand miles from home, but he was going home, and he would find out, now that he thought he knew where he was headed, if she was still willing to travel with him. ❑

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Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

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Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [East Asia]

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