

Satao, a bull elephant who lived in the arid plains northwest of Mombasa, had tusks so long that when he walked they nearly scraped the ground. Mark Deeble, a filmmaker who spent weeks curled up in a box by a watering hole, waiting to catch a glimpse of Satao, described him as materializing out of the haze, as in “Lawrence of Arabia”—“a magnificent, dusty behemoth.” Satao was born sometime in the late nineteen-sixties, and by the time he reached forty he was one of the largest elephants in Africa. Just the weight of his ivory topped two hundred pounds; all told, he weighed probably more than seven tons. By the logic of the savanna, Satao’s size should have made him immune from predators, but by the logic of the market it made him that much more vulnerable.

In February, Satao was wounded by poisoned arrows. (Poachers have increasingly turned to arrows because gunshots betray their location.) A vet who examined him through a pair of binoculars concluded that trying to treat the elephant would be more dangerous than leaving him alone. Satao recovered, only to be hit again, in May. This time, the arrow pierced his left flank, and he died. Poachers cut off his tusks, leaving his face so mutilated that it took Kenyan authorities ten days to confirm his identity. In June, Deeble, who wrote in his blog about Satao, went to see the body, which he found splayed on the red earth, white with vulture droppings.

Satao was an exceptional elephant; his story is not. Africa, after years of progress in protecting its wildlife, is again in crisis mode. In 2011 alone, an estimated twenty-five thousand African elephants were killed for their ivory; this comes to almost seventy a day, or nearly three an hour. Since then, an additional forty-five thousand African elephants—about ten per cent of the total population—have been slaughtered. Long thought to be one species, African elephants probably belong to two. Forest elephants, which are slightly smaller than bush elephants, live only in West and Central Africa. Their numbers have plunged by more than sixty per cent just since 2002, and if this trend continues they could be gone entirely within a decade.

The plight of elephants is paralleled by an equally gruesome situation for rhinos. Three of the world’s five rhinoceros species are listed as “critically endangered”; one of them, the Javan rhino, is probably down to fewer than fifty individuals. The most numerous rhino, the white rhino, survives primarily in South Africa. Until recently, it was considered a conservation success story; however, poaching has increased to the point that the white rhino, too, is at risk. In the first few months of this year, nearly four hundred rhinos were killed in South Africa for their horns, most of them in national parks. Although rhinos can live without their horns, which are made of keratin, like your fingernails, poachers generally leave them so mangled that they die. In May, a baby rhino from South Africa’s Kapama Private Game Reserve made international news when it was found mourning over its mother’s bloody body.

Driving the slaughter is desire. Ivory, most of which ends up in China, can fetch fifteen hundred dollars a pound on the black market. Rhino horn is sold in Asia for medicinal properties (of which it has none). It has also become a status symbol in Vietnam, where it’s