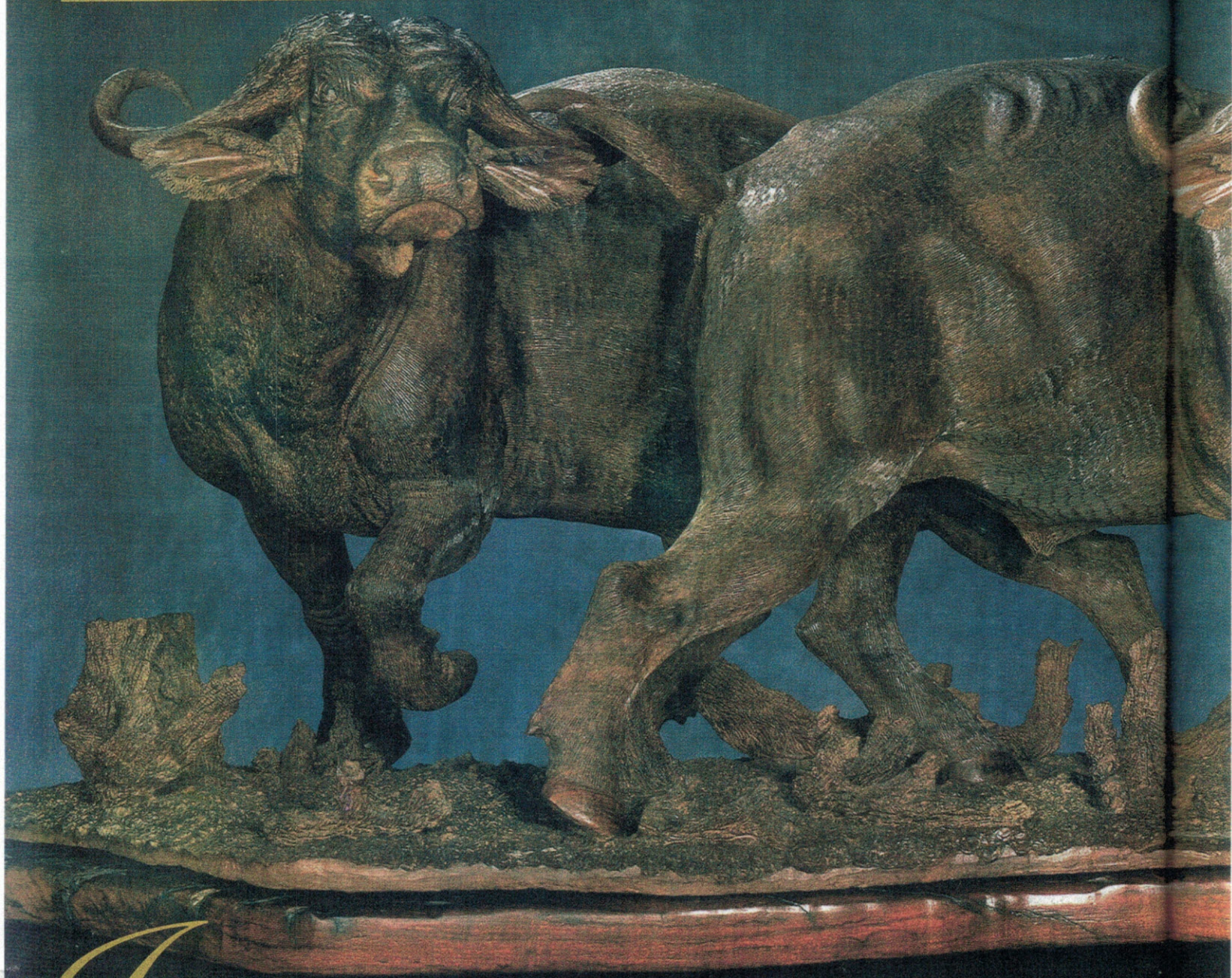


Zimbabwean woodcarver Mopho Gonde continues to overcome adversity in letting the world know that despite political turmoil, hope endures for Africa's majestic wildlife.



I can say with some real-life authority that sometimes the challenges confronting great wildlife artists are no less perilous – and inspirational – than the pursuit of the same magnificent animals that inspire their work.

Consider the story of Mopho Gonde.

Under a full African moon, we travel northwest, leaving the city of Bulawayo in an old Land Rover, bound for a remote place the locals call Tsholoshu. American Ross Parker, an expatriated Zimbabwean raised in the former Rhodesia, sits

in the driver's seat next to Mopho, who in just a few years has achieved widespread acclaim for his carvings of wildlife.

The three of us are venturing into the early morning darkness, well past midnight, to avoid detection by the so-called "war veterans" – young, jobless Zimbabwe men who are leading a notorious takeover of white- and black-owned farms, and who continue to harass and intimidate anyone they encounter.

"Times are really tough for people from all walks of life in Zimbabwe," Parker says with sadness in his voice. "I honestly

An African Original

By Todd Wilkinson



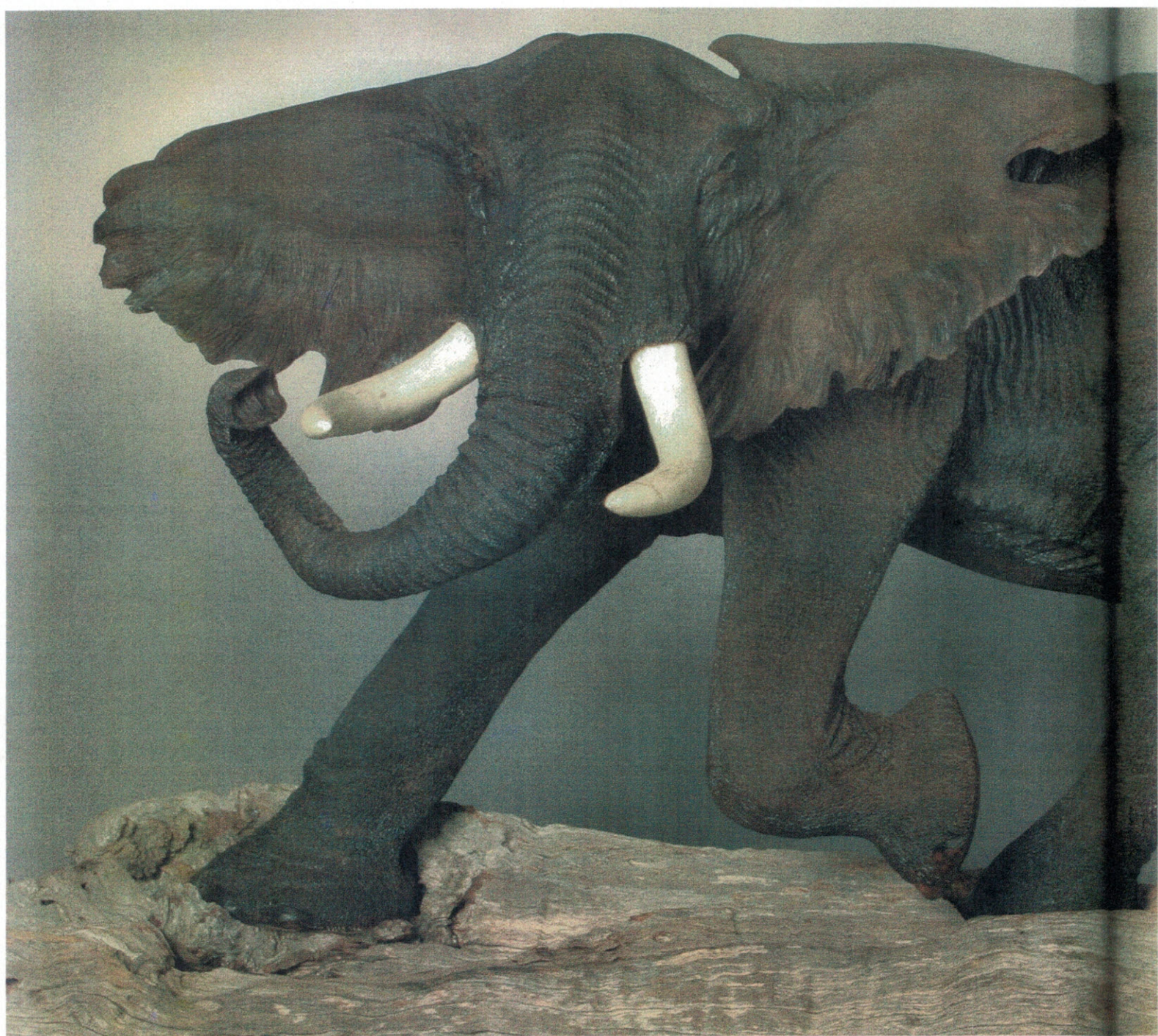
believe that not even President Robert Mugabe himself is aware of how out of hand some of these vigilantes have become. It is a pure test of courage for Mopho when he must resort to something like this merely to gather his art supplies."

Speaking to Ross in broken English, Mopho replies, "Do not worry. It is okay. They [the war veterans] will not be in the forest where we are going, because it is still nighttime."

For months, I had been looking forward to seeing, with my own eyes, the magical location where Mopho Gonde

collects thousand-year-old pieces of ironwood, which back in his studio he shapes into riveting portrayals of Africa's most exciting wild beasts.

Born in 1968 near Plumtree, Matabeleland along the border of Zimbabwe and Botswana, Mopho says it was his father, Bagani, and mother, Esnat, who bestowed him with a first name that literally means "blood." While his connection to the land courses



deep inside of him, the real fluidity of Mopho's talent is recognized in his visions of wild animals that seem to lunge off their armatures toward the viewer. Somehow he is able to manipulate his medium into striking illusions of movement, rippling muscles, texture and mass that many would not believe possible with wood.

The Gonde clan, a blood-line extension of the Kananga tribe, was influenced in its reverence for art by one of Mopho's uncles, Samuel Songo, also a carver. Mopho remembers well their forays into the bush as a child, when it was not uncommon to encounter a prowling leopard or lion.

As a boy, Mopho met American sportsmen passing through on safaris, never forgetting how they stopped at roadside stands

in the rural villages to buy cheap trinkets and hand-carved animal figurines to bring home as souvenirs. Mopho, who had higher ambitions and who often checked out art books from his local school library, vowed that he would someday create "true art" that the foreigners could own with pride.

"What has always impressed me about Mopho is his humble temperament," says Ross. "He is a soft-spoken man, whose love for Africa and its wildlife is evident in his creations. His designs represent pure genius, especially when one considers that he received no formal fine art training at all."

Ross pulls a stack of photographs out of his shirt pocket featuring snapshots of wildlife sculptures by Ken Bunn, T.D. Kelsey and Kent Ullberg and Britain's Jonathan Kenworthy, all of whom have gone on extended research trips to Africa.



Flipping through the photos, Ross laments that original native artists like Mopho are still being overlooked. Why?

"Most sculpture by Black artists is still considered purely 'airport art' and appears primitive and crude," Parker explains. "Mopho's works, on the other hand, possess a maturity that would make one think he was trained at the finest art schools in Europe or America."

As a successful art gallery owner in Fort Lauderdale and Naples, Florida, Parker specializes in paintings of African landscapes and wildlife, as well as bronze and stone sculpture. Ironically, there was a long stretch of time when he would not consider even looking at the works of Mopho Gonde.

After opening his Call of Africa Galleries in the 1980s, Ross fiercely refused to represent traditional woodcarvers, because of the link between that art form and rampant deforestation, which continues to wreak environmental havoc in Africa.

"On most issues involving the environment, I consider myself a conservationist, with basically the same philosophy professed by Theodore Roosevelt. When it comes to deforestation, I am a committed tree hugger," Parker says. "One cannot just replace thousand-year-old trees that took root when Europe was still in the Dark Ages."

Indeed, years ago Parker rejected Mopho's work, on principle, when he was shown a photograph of a Gonde carving. Then, during one of his annual pilgrimages back to the country of his birth, Parker was encouraged by his own father to take a look at Mopho's big game pieces firsthand.

"I saw kudu and gazelle sculptures and a dramatic but very complex design of three buffalo and I almost flipped," Parker recalls. "I couldn't believe what was in front of me."

His initial impression was that they were finely chiseled and polished stone – before he looked closer. When Ross was told that Mopho recycled ironwood that had been pushed to the ground by elephants decades ago, he became intrigued. He realized that Mopho's work was not damaging the natural environment, but providing a dramatic statement about the need to protect it, especially in volatile times like these.

Relying on downed trunks that are nearly a millennium old and weigh several tons each, Mopho has made ironwood, also called leadwood, his medium of choice. These raw materials, which appear almost fossilized, are able to endure the elements and, with only minor surface treatment and care, have the same longevity of other fine art.

Mopho was originally introduced to the almost legendary



Zimbabwe sculptor Mopho Gonde carves his dramatic portrayals of wild animals from old ironwood trees felled by elephants. Above: Kumbaku, the artist's six-foot-long carving of a legendary South African elephant. Gonde whittled the tusks from kudu horn.

mystique of ironwood by his grandfather. "The wood is very dense and hard," Mopho says. "In your hands it feels like stone."

For centuries these deciduous trees – comparable in majesty to the redwoods of the North American Pacific Coast – were treated with religious reverence in Africa, based upon the belief that spirits existed within them. From a practical standpoint, ironwood was easily fashioned into hoes and other crude implements for field-work, as knives to dress animals, and heaped upon campfires because it could burn for weeks.

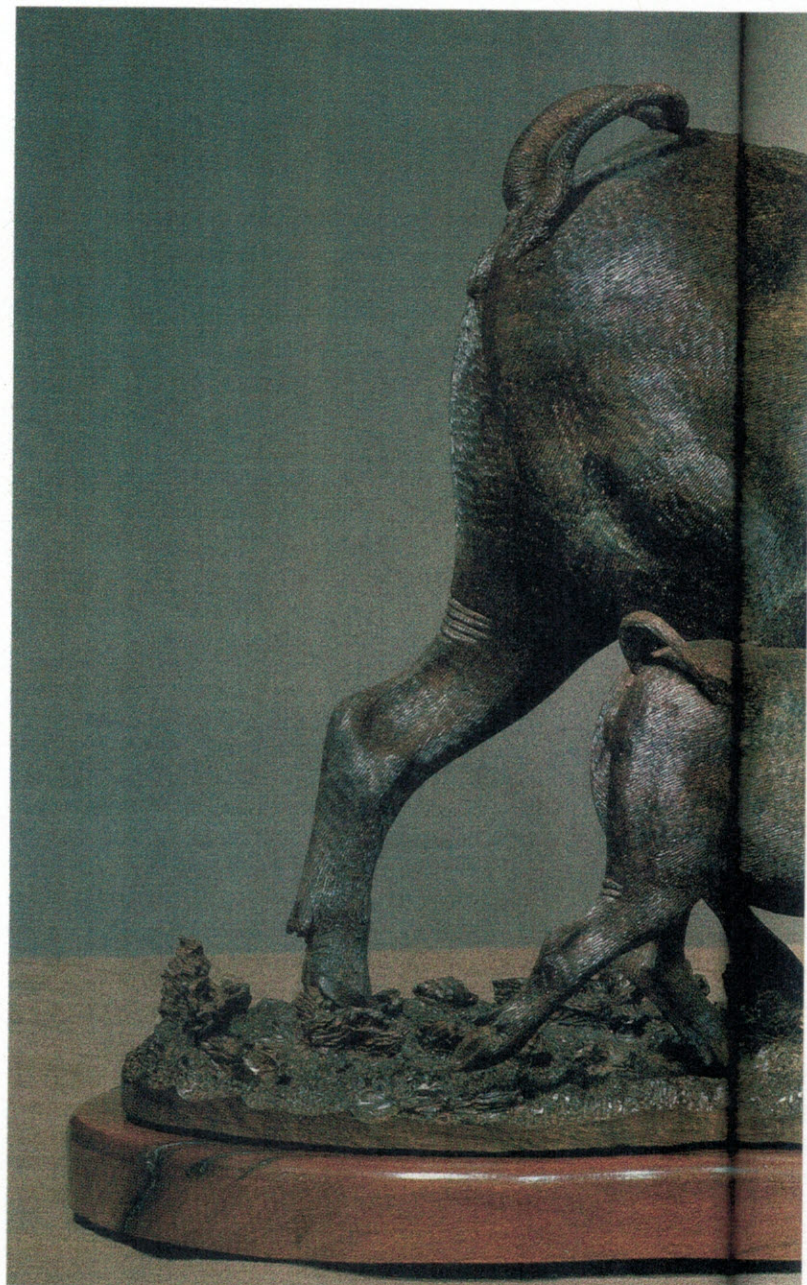
After we bump our way down a dirt road for two hours, snaking a path into the bushveld, Parker at last is instructed to turn off the rutted two-track, and then we walk, for a long time it seems, aided only by the miner's lamp on Mopho's head.

In the twilight before sunrise, we finally arrive at our destination: several massive, arboreal deadfalls which glow like the headstones in a graveyard. Evincing a toothy smile, Mopho plays his fingers along the trunks of ancient ironwood trees, which years ago were convenient rubbing posts for elephants who eventually toppled the trees to earth. The great herds of truly wild elephants are gone now, having been relegated to private and public preserves. Ross and Mopho both hope that his sculpture will help draw attention to the plight of elephants and all African wildlife.

North Americans have a chance to see Mopho's work and convert their own emotional response into action through groups like Safari Club and other hunting organizations. These organizations are now waging quiet, but influential battles to safeguard wildlife and wild lands by using one of the rarest of commodities in Zimbabwe today – hard foreign currency – to show that animals have value and that Westerners care.



Gonde showcases a dynamic sense of motion in Bull Kudu. Opposite: For these warthogs, he used a handmade diamond point grinder to impart a texture that looks and feels like real hide.



In turn, the attention Mopho has received for converting precious ironwood into fine art has sparked local officials in his district to be more zealous about protecting live trees from illegal loggers who sell them as firewood.

Ironwood logs are not easy to obtain. Mopho must secure a permit to gather limited quantities from a local district land manager, who guards them from poachers. In approaching one trunk six feet around, Mopho fires up his chainsaw, gingerly skins off the outer bark, and examines the underlying grains to determine where he will begin the sculpting process.

"Ironwood is a durable material, but it is unforgiving when the process of reduction begins," Parker says over the growling noise of the chainsaw. "Mopho has to get his cuts right the first time. There are no second chances."

Later, Mopho will use a chisel and diamond-headed grinders in his small studio, a squat lean-to strewn with ironwood sculptures in several stages of completion. One piece, *Regal Cape Buffalo*, was ready for Ross Parker to take back to



Florida as a commissioned piece for a new Gonde collector.

Ross has a steadily growing number of clients who have become avid collectors of Mopho's work, including hunters, the wives of corporate executives, and a retired financier from Phoenix who displays a Gonde Cape next to a bronze by Frederic Remington.

In 2006 Ross is hoping to debut several new Gonde wildlife pieces – all part of an ambitious new series – at the annual Safari Club International convention in Reno.

"Mopho's ability to convey dramatic gestures with his subjects always elicits the attention of sportsmen who have experienced the real animal in the wild," Parker says. "As gifted as Mopho is, the novelty of his material has made his work that much more collectible."

According to countryman and renowned wildlife painter Kim Donaldson, Mopho stands without peer today in Zimbabwe. "For an artist who celebrates wildlife three dimensionally and realistically, Gonde's creations are

the best I've ever seen coming out of Africa among contemporary sculptors," Donaldson says. "The remoteness of Zimbabwe in the world has made him one of Africa's best-kept secrets, but what's truly amazing is that the medium he's mastered happens to be wood."

With the back of the Land Rover weighted down with ironwood, we set out for Bulawayo. "Life is difficult, especially in Matabeleland," Mopho says as we pass through a village overlooking a sand river. "Maybe one day the real truth about the challenges facing Zimbabwe will come out."

For now, Mopho Gonde's tells his story through his art, and what tales it has to tell. To the artist, his sculpted animals are symbols of not only solace, but of hope and salvation. One thing is certain: no matter what happens, Mopho likes knowing that his ironwood creations will serve as testaments to a lifetime devoted to celebrating the beauty of our natural world. 