ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

*ZIMBABWE RUINS:* A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES ABOUT LAND REFORM IN ZIMBABWE

and

A CRITICAL COMMENTARY

‘VOICES FROM THE ZIMBABWE FAST-TRACK LAND REFORM’

KATHY MANSFIELD HIGGINS

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

*ZIMBABWE RUINS:* A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

&

A CRITICAL COMMENTARY: VOICES FROM THE ZIMBABWE FAST TRACK LAND REFORM

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# Abstract

My PhD submission comprises a collection of short stories, *Zimbabwe Ruins*, and a Critical Commentary. Zimbabwe is a postcolonial state, gaining Independence in 1980 after a violent liberation war. From 2000 war veterans and others, frustrated by the decline of Zimbabwe’s economy, increasing poverty and unemployment, overseen by a government widely perceived to be uncaring and corrupt, began to drive white farmers from the land and occupy their farms. The Accelerated Land Reform Programme was developed by government to legalise the repossession of land. The violence of some of the farm occupations was widely shared by the international media, generating support for the whites and outrage against the black insurgents. The socio-political and historic forces which generated the re-possessions were largely omitted from general analysis. There is no substantive body of creative literature which focuses on these events.

*Zimbabwe Ruins* uses the malleability of the short story form to present a range of experiences to capture different perspectives on the national trauma that engulfed the nation. The collection explores a question: is it possible to write about the land reform process, avoiding stereotyping the protagonists and deadening the stories with factual overload? Based on extensive technical research into the continuing effects of the changes in land tenure, and ethnographic observation in Zimbabwe on a number of visits, I use a range of techniques and styles to write the stories including monologue, epistolary, flashbacks, immediate action. A focus in the Commentary is my use of a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices. I also acknowledge the challenges involved in attempting to write from the point of view of another culture.

My stories are located in the contemporary landscape of a deeply divided nation and explore the historical and contemporary context in which ordinary people, black and white, are forced to negotiate an existential transformation in their circumstances.

Key words: Short stories; Zimbabwe; Voice; Land; History.

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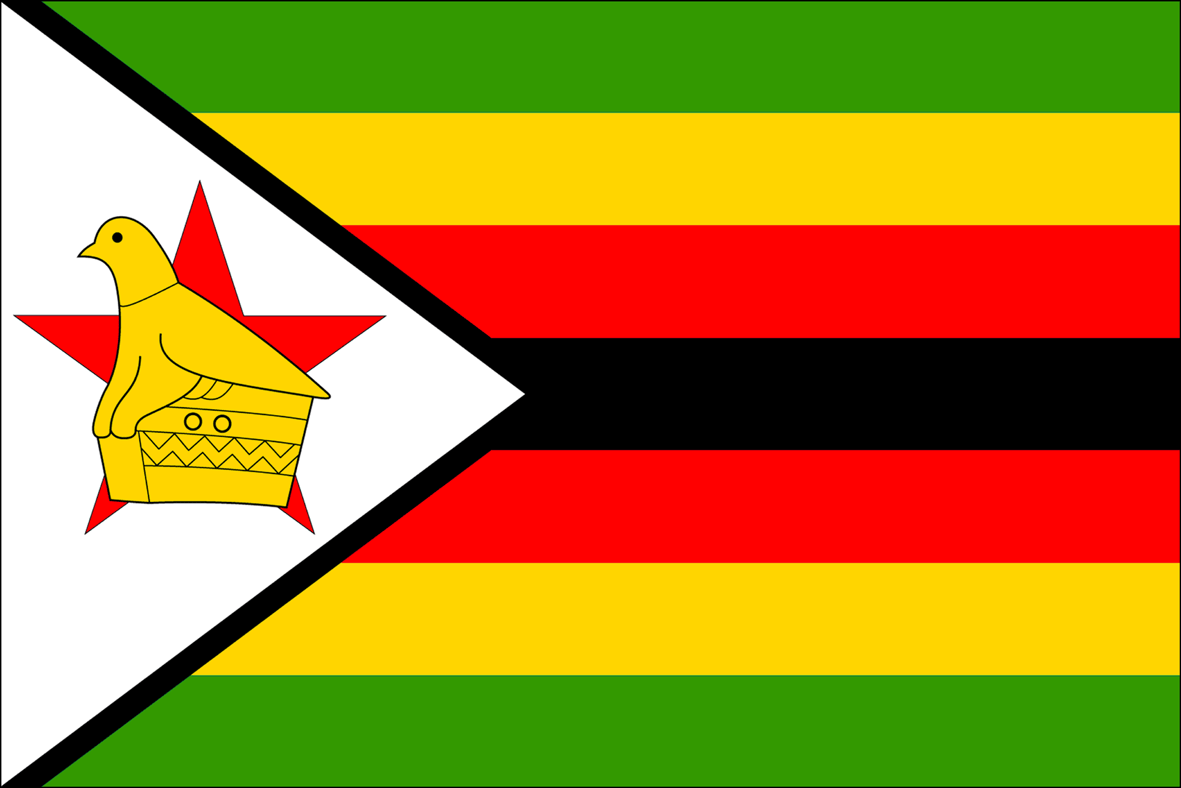
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*ZIMBABWE RUINS*

STORIES FROM ZIMBABWE’S FAST TRACK LAND REFORM

***Kathy Mansfield***

**THE FLAG**

****

**THE COUNTRY**

‘Bloody missionaries!’

‘Bloody whites!’

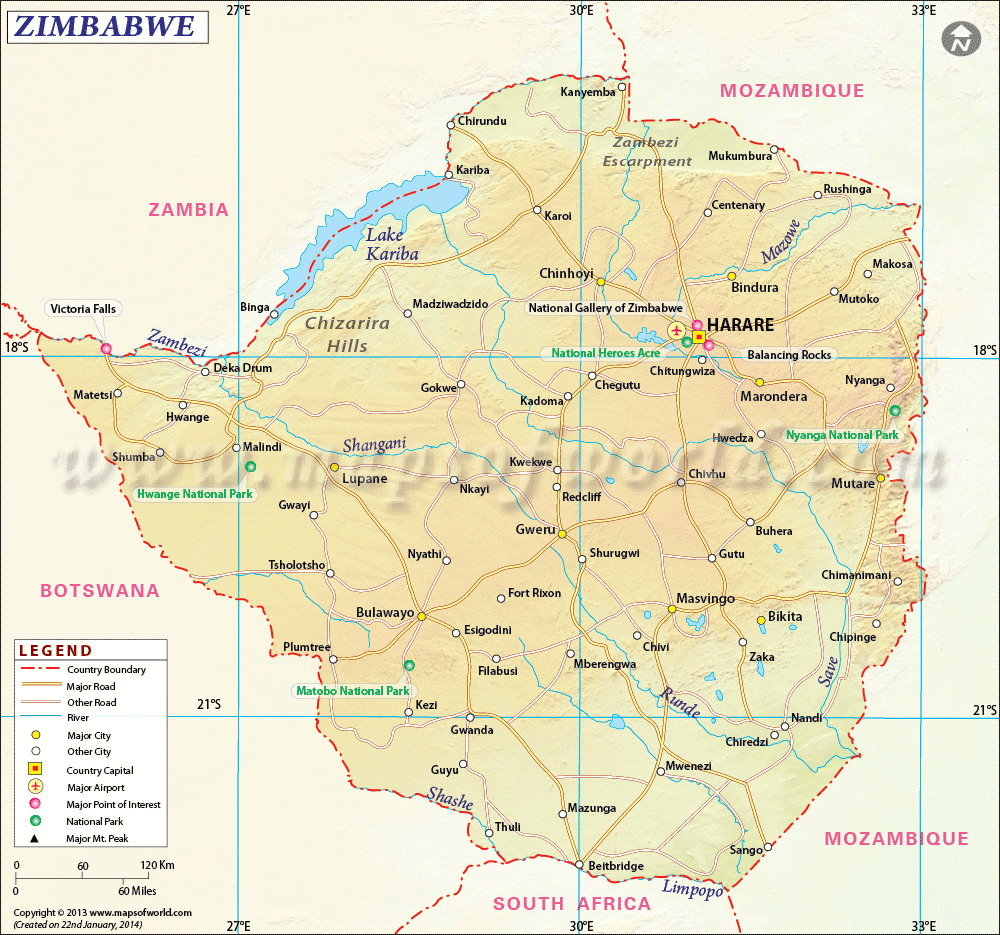
‘They had the Bible!’

‘We had the land!’

‘Now they have the land!’

‘And we have the Bible!’

(Dambudzo Marechera).



THE ZIMBABWE RUINS

‘The truth is we don’t really know yet who the original builders were,’ the Guide expanded, warming to his exposition. ‘It could have been the Chinese, and we think this is the most likely, or the Phoenicians. More research will tell us.’ And Izzy could see he was completely serious.

‘Keep up now folks. The locals believe the ancestors are active on certain hills. This is bound to be one of them. We don’t want to upset the spirits,’ and he led the laughter of the tourist group, taking them higher still up the rocky hillside, glowing amber under the sun.

She was panting now from the climb, following the group through the steep maze of stone walled passages, built into and around the boulders and bare rock faces of the hill itself. The intricacy of the masons’ work and the engineering design of the massive walls were astonishing; the whole group kept exclaiming – how astonishing! Clearly it must be the work of Chinese – or Phoenicians – civilized invaders who had made their way to the interior of this part of Africa in the distant past and built this incredible settlement.

‘I didn’t know the Phoenicians were supposed to have had anything to do with southern Africa, did you?’ she whispered to Ken as the Guide strode round a bend in the narrow path ahead of them.

‘What the fuck’s a Phoenician?’ he replied in an almost whisper, Izzy shushing him. These Peace Corps guys – they didn’t have any sense of propriety at all - all the swearing. But they were so easy to get to know, filling the school staff room back in Botswana with exotic accents and open hearted hospitality, so it seemed to a girl from back-street Manchester. And now she was on a road trip in Africa with a couple of them.

They caught up and the Guide was describing the archaeological digs being carried out by the University of Rhodesia, that the fragments of Chinese pottery on show in the museum at the bottom of the hill would prove beyond doubt the external origins of this lost civilisation: you only had to make the connection between the type of walls here and the similar stone construction of the Great Wall of China and the conclusions were pretty clear.

‘Is it possible the pottery could be an indication of trading links with the East Coast – traders coming up here from the Indian Ocean markets – you know, from Mozambique?’ Izzy raised her voice to ask the question.

‘No, no,’ the Guide half smiled at her, and with a sweep of his tanned arm encompassed the entirety of Rhodesia and the immense landscape below them. ‘The munts were subsistence farmers at most, cattle keepers, savages really. There’s no possibility they were traders – what did they have to trade anyway? They certainly couldn’t have built anything like this in any case.’

It was her first visit to Rhodesia, four years into Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Izzy hadn’t heard this particular word before, to describe Africans. She had noted the sign language of South Africa on her one journey through that place to her posting in Botswana: Blankes and Nie Blankes directed to where they could sit, what queues and Post Office doors they should use, what part of the bus or train they could travel in, but still, she hadn’t quite expected the same sort of thing in this country. Everybody said Rhodesia didn’t have apartheid, but she couldn’t really see much difference. And why would it be much different? Ian Smith had decided this place was having nothing to do with African Independence: never in a thousand years he’d promised a couple of years ago.

The tour went on and the group scrabbled through doorways, topped by massive lintel stones held up on carved pedestals, works of art and feats of engineering speaking to them, but too faintly, from a different past. At the top of the hill, on what was termed the Temple Edifice, where, perhaps, human sacrifices were made - or not, thought Izzy - they looked out over a landscape stretching forward to a distant horizon: Africa shimmering into the edges of the 360 degree panorama spread before them.

‘Isn’t that just fucking something else?’ Ken breathed into her ear, but to her surprise she was dealing with an unaccustomed tear, dabbing at her eyes behind her sunglasses. She didn’t understand herself, this reaction, ridiculous, weeping for goodness sake. It was probably just too much sun. But really, the immensity of it, the beauty, awful in some way, and vulnerable even in its vastness - lying open under the skies.

The group tumbled about in twos and threes looking over the site and the views, and then gathered again in a bunch round him while their Guide, with his sweeping arm gestures, pointed out the views, the places where the famous Zimbabwe Bird sculptures might have been situated. ‘Zimbabwe means House of Stones in the local language,’ he explained and passed round a photograph of the smooth sphinx-like creatures that had gazed out over these plains, centuries ago. ‘You will be able to see one of these in the museum when we get back down the hill.’

‘Aren’t there a lot of other stone sites like this in other parts of Rhodesia?’ Izzy persisted. ‘Were they all built by the Chinese?’

‘That’s what we’re finding out,’ and he was snappier this time in his reply. ‘There’s a possibility of Portuguese influence of course. They were on the East Coast in the sixteenth century. Let’s make our way down now, folks – there’s a tea shop at the bottom and we’ll be able to go round the museum, and then our little questioner over here can have her fill of facts. Right folks, watch your steps, and look out for snakes – the mambas like to sun on the rocks at this time of year. It’s not a pretty experience to get a mamba bite.’

They followed him back down the hill, sliding and stumbling down the rocky path, holding on to the hot granite for support, even more sweaty by the time they reached the simple building in the shade of a grove of acacia trees. Izzy detached herself from Ken and his comments and wandered on her own in the semi-darkness of the displays: a large-scale map of the Hill Complex, with speculation about its purpose – for defence, for religious rites, for status; some fragments of indecipherable pottery. Was it Phoenician, Chinese? The information went only so far. And there was a poster of the Valley site showing the huge, circular construction of The Great Enclosure, the mysterious conical tower towering above the walls, thirty feet high, where she had early stroked her hands over the smooth rectangular stones, each perfectly placed and fitted. And there was the Zimbabwe Bird, as tall as her, in its own shadowy case – poised, expressionless, carved from smooth soapstone – by whom? An enigmatic find from a history it was difficult for white scholars in Rhodesia to reconstruct in a way that made sense of their own present.

She and Ken trudged back to the campsite to join Jon in the grounds of the fancy Zimbabwe Ruins Hotel, so far out of their budget there hadn’t been a single moment of discussion about where they would sleep: they would sleep in their tents as usual. Jon still seemed to have his head in the engine where they’d left him. Or had he been up the exhaust earlier? She knew she’d only been asked along to share the petrol costs of the guys’ journey back to Malawi - to pick up some Land Rover they’d left behind at their last teaching job - and what a great way to see Africa it was turning out to be. She was loving every uncomfortable minute of it, and scratched around in her rucksack to find a clean T-shirt and knickers, soap, listening to Ken recounting the guided tour.

‘Fucking awesome man. You shoulda come.’

‘Had to get the exhaust fixed. Done now.’ Jon was wiping his hands on a bit of oily rag, his constant accessory: a guy with a slighter build than Ken, from Boston, less hair, more…understandable somehow.

‘Did ya enjoy it, Iz?’ he called over to her.

‘It’s great. You should take a walk up if you can before we leave. It’s a shame for you to miss it.’

‘An I’m telling you,’ Ken grinned over the bonnet of the road splattered Land Rover, ‘She didn’t miss nuthin man. Whole bunch of questions she was asking up there. Thought the guy was gonna punch her.’

‘Do you think he was that annoyed?’

‘He sure fucking was. How come you know so much about this place anyway?’

‘I don’t. That’s why I was asking the questions. I don’t know anything about this place at all. It just seems strange to me that they talk about the Chinese, or the Phoenicians building it. Don’t you?’

‘Well,’ and Ken leaned his long body over to take the packet of Lucky Strikes out of Jon’s grubby top pocket, patted around his own trousers for matches. ‘You know how fucking racist you Brits are. He ain’t gonna tell you Africans built this place.’

‘Excuse me, these are Rhodesians, they’re not British. And have you made some kind of a pact with yourself to swear in every sentence you speak?’

‘And excuse me back. What’s the fucking difference? Anyway, I’m just saying you can’t see this lot accepting Africans could build like that. And when are you going to learn to swear, Isobel?’

They all laughed.

‘I hardly think you have any room to talk, calling us racists anyway, when your country has just assassinated Martin Luther King.’

‘That was a mad fucking lunatic, not our country.’

‘I’m just saying, America has problems, doesn’t it? With relations.’

She found her toilet bag and wandered off to find the shower block, away from further confrontation. There were still hundreds of miles to travel to Malawi and back to Botswana towing their precious other Land Rover. They’d left it behind at the school and now their two year Peace Corps posting there was finished they’d arrived in Botswana, at her school, looking for work. Just like that. And got it: Ken maths, and Jon English. They were no way going back to the United States just yet. Who’d want to go and fight in Vietnam?

There was hot water in the shower block. She was careful with her small supply of shampoo, rubbing it through her dust encrusted hair. Was she losing weight on their frugal rations? She definitely felt thinner; she’d never managed before on so little food. Honestly, if her mum and dad could see her now.

That day she’d told them, only last year, steeling herself. They’d been sitting either side of the tiled fireplace, the coal burning steadily, the way her dad liked it. He’d been smoking his pipe - Erinmore tobacco - reading the Daily Mirror, all his paraphernalia next to him on a small side table, placed just so to hold it all: pouch, cleaners, matches and his mug of sweet tea. She could smell it through the shampoo bubbles (though it turned out to be the wood smoke from the Rhodesian boiler heating the water tank). Her mother, opposite, knitting; if her dad didn’t fall asleep too soon after his tea he would sometimes have the job of holding out his factory hands while her mum looped the hank of soft wool between them, wind it into a ball to be knitted into one of the intricate jerseys she created as a by-product of what passed for her leisure time. Rarely still, there was always another chore to keep the house free of Manchester’s grime and Izzy had spent a girlhood escaping out of sight when she could, to snatch moments to read instead of cleaning a floor. Now she had chosen the quiet time to talk to them, after the six o’clock evening meal, wireless news switched off, her dad still awake after his heavy day.

‘Mum, Dad. Can I talk to you?’

She couldn’t keep the strain out of her voice. Her parents both looked up sharply, at each other first, then her, sitting there in her normal place on the small settee between them. Her dad put down his newspaper. Her mother stopped knitting and held one hand to her mouth, waiting for confirmation that the neighbours had been right all along – letting a girl stay on at school after sixteen, and go off to college till she was a grown woman and without a proper job – it was a waste of good money.

‘Well, what is it, lass?’ her father asked.

‘I’ve applied to do international voluntary service and I’ve been accepted – to teach at a school in Africa. I’m going to teach geography in Botswana.’ All her carefully prepared sentences abandoned as the central information came out in a rush.

‘Where did you say?’

Her mother leaned forward, knitting fallen to the floor unnoticed. Izzy knew her first thoughts would be relief, that the neighbours were not to be proved right; she wasn’t telling them she was pregnant.

‘Botswana, mum. It used to be the Bechuanaland Protectorate.’

Her parents looked at each other again, and then back at her, as if she’d changed into an alien, talking about life on the other side of the moon. Her father rallied first. ‘Bechuanaland? Isn’t that the place where a chief married a white girl here and couldn’t go back? Ruth…something or other. It was in all the papers, wasn’t it? Is that the place you mean?

‘Yes dad, that’s Seretse Khama. He’s the President now, and Ruth Williams is his wife.’

‘That’s it! Ruth Williams – a blonde.’ He sat back, happy to be correct in his memory. ‘You remember, love. It was on the wireless all the time. The government wouldn’t let them go back to his country. I remember the pictures in the papers – a nice looking young fella.’ Her mother, still not resuming her knitting, nodded.

‘But how long for Isobel? How long are you going to this place for?’ Already there was no question she wouldn’t go.

‘Well, it’s a long way away, mum, you can’t just go for a couple of months. It’s got to be worth it to send you.’

‘How long?’

‘The placement is for two years.’

‘Two years!’

‘It’s not long really, mum. It’ll soon pass. It’s going to be excellent for my career you know. I’ll be fixed up with accommodation on the school grounds. And there’s an allowance to live on, and there’s other volunteers already working at the same school.’ She’d run out of advantages, and hadn’t mentioned how annoyed her Headmaster had been and how he’d tried to talk her out of making such a mistake, at the start of her promising career.

Her dad had got out the old atlas and they’d found The Bechuanaland Protectorate, coloured pink, all those thousands of miles away on the other side of the world. But they’d all got used to it – fortnightly letters on thin, blue airmail paper, and some, albeit bewildered, kudos having a daughter in Africa.

Another uncomfortable night in the tiny tent passed and she was glad when birds and sun and sounds of the hotel morning allowed her to struggle out, dressed already. Ken made sugary tea on an open fire in their billy can, and the lads had their morning Lucky Strike while she ate a dry Provita cracker. ‘What do you think it’s about though? Why can’t they accept Africans could have built this place?’

Ken took his cigarette out of his mouth, blew the smoke high into the sharp morning air and looked across at her, hardly interested. ‘Why the fuck are you still thinking about that?’

‘I just don’t get it. Why would they possibly drag in the Phoenicians to explain it?’

‘Look around you – mud huts and thatch. That’s what Rhodes and his buddies found. The guys round here weren’t exactly living in Coliseums were they?’

‘That’s no argument at all – the Egyptians used to build pyramids and look at them now. The Romans had central heating and we don’t.’ She stood up. ‘Look, do you mind if we hang on before we leave – I want to go back and have another look.’

The two looked at each other, shrugged and lit more cigarettes, so she set off out of the manicured hotel grounds, into Africa crowding up against its fences: rowdy bushes, scrambling thorn trees loaded with berries glowing in the morning sun. She was a city girl but loved where she found herself, on a limitless continent, bursting with light and life. But, as she walked on, further away from the hotel, as its elegant presence receded, the empty path, winding its way through the bush, began to seem different from yesterday when she’d been walking along it with Ken in a crowd of chattering tourists. She began to notice the trees were wrapped round with insistent creepers, shadowy ivy struggling through branches, determined to get to the light, strangling anything in its melancholy journey.

It was so quick, the change from a confident striding off into the bright morning alone and glad of it, and now feeling she wouldn’t mind some company, even Ken. Giant insects circled her head, buzzing round her face, making her hunch her shoulders as they tried to get under her hat, crawl into her hair. There seemed more of them today, especially those horrible hornet things: black bodies almost riven in the middle, impossible to see what held the two parts together, legs hanging down like landing gear, piercing sting clearly visible. She waved her arms about, increased her pace, tatty gym shoes making almost no sound on the red earth, striding onwards towards the hill, still determined to re-visit, and think about it, stand at the top and take in that view on her own this time.

Already the sun was hot enough to bring out sweat on her upper lip. She looked over her shoulder a couple of times, without really knowing why she should. The smell of cattle hung in the air, thick and ripe – she thought she heard the comforting sound of a bell on the leader’s neck, but far off so she couldn’t hear it after all when she stopped to listen properly. She moved on and left the trees behind and high golden grass on both sides of the path rippled under the breeze, putting her in mind of early morning muscles stretching themselves out after a cold, quiet night in the dark. It was so tall, so dense anything could be crouched in there, waiting for her. Why on earth was she thinking thoughts like this when it was all so lovely?

She reached the beginning of the climb through the rocky passages and set off, slipping now and then, tripping on the ancient granite steps: she really needed some new tackies – she liked that South African word for gym shoes, she also liked Mrs Balls apricot chutney, but she couldn’t think of much else she liked about South Africa. Here and there she had to squeeze herself through the narrowest parts like yesterday, stopping to catch her breath as she edged round tight passages and out into openings where the view into the distances appeared. Each time this happened, she was higher up the hillside, the sun was brighter, sharp enough to hurt her eyes and make her squint even under the brim of her hat; she should have worn her sunglasses. Only her breathing and scrabbling steps broke the quiet of the hot morning. She couldn’t even hear any birds.

The climb was steeper now, she must be nearly at the top, surely there was only the one path and she was on it, surely? She couldn’t be lost could she? But it was hard to recognise anything specific from yesterday. They’d been told stories of visitors disrespecting the spirits and never finding their way back down particular hills again. All nonsense of course. She scrambled round a couple more bends she seemed to remember from yesterday, and then there she was, climbing through that lonely doorway, stepping into the hollow beyond, stopping at its centre to catch her breath in the high morning light. She walked across the whole space, somehow feeling exposed today, overlooked, glancing up and round at the overhanging amphitheatre of granite boulders, checking she was alone. Of course she was alone. She climbed to the rim where she could sink herself into that view again, undisturbed this time: limitless plains, lying open under the sun, sweeping away from her in every direction, shifting shadows of the high clouds brushing over the morning landscape.

As her breathing eased she sank down into a squat, leaned her chin on her hands. She felt tiny, a bit dizzy. She didn’t know that she belonged here. What was it about this place? Who used to climb these paths, walk through those doorways? Was that Rhodesia spread out in front of her, or a different older land? How did land belong to anybody, really, no matter war and conquest and an egotistical naming?

Why was she even thinking about this and hurting her head with it? What was it to her? She was only passing through – it had nothing to do with her. Ian Smith faded into the morning. What could the UN and sanctions do about it anyway? Her dizziness, instead of passing off, increased, and she tipped over backwards into a sitting position against the warm rock face, looking down the precipice the Guide yesterday suggested had been used to topple human sacrifices. The peace of the hillside fell deeper around her, the sun on her face stronger, weakening her resolve to think things through. What was there to about after all? It was easy to simply be here, in the heat and quiet of a new day, the solid rock at her back and Africa stretching before her.

She jerked awake, the cry of a grey loerie sharp in the air: ‘Go Waaay…Go Waaay…’ it called from the branch of a solitary bush pushing its way through a crack in the rock face opposite. She could see its distinctive crest outlined against the sky, almost the only bird she’d learned to identify so far: the Go-Away bird. How long had she been here? She stood and stepped carefully back from the edge, climbed down into the hollow. She’d better move, the guys would be really mad with her by now, impatient to be on the Salisbury road to get there before nightfall.

Watching her step on the way down, but trying to hurry, she scudded through a bend, hemmed in on both sides by the rock faces, and in the split second of rounding the corner out of the shadows, came across an enormously long, brown snake lying fully in the sun across the track, only inches away from her toe, from her bare legs, as if it had been waiting for her.

Her body instantly reacted, heaving her backwards away from danger, her head cracking into the rock wall, dizzying her again. Oh God she mustn’t faint. Oh my God. A snake! Was it one of those spitting cobra things? She’d go blind. No, no, the guide said mambas. Oh God, a mamba, the most poisonous snake in Africa. She leaned into the solidity of the granite, head throbbing, arms outstretched at her sides, hands flat against the rock. She could feel the beat of her heart in her chest; her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She couldn’t swallow, couldn’t move. The silence thickened; could it get any quieter? Could you have a heart attack at her age? That know-it-all guide in his Rhodie shorts would find her body. She looked at the snake and it, she thought, looked at her through its slitty, malevolent eyes, unblinking behind that darting tongue. She really needed to move, backwards, slowly, away from it, move her bare legs away from it, without upsetting it, but she couldn’t, and she and the snake existed together in those hot moments. If one of them moved, so would the other. The guide had told them how fast they moved, how they lifted themselves up to attack if they felt threatened. She mustn’t threaten it.

Then, an almost imperceptible ripple skimmed across its scaly skin – she was close enough to see the creature make the decision and with no reason, it simply gathered itself, hesitated a long moment more, the head shifting from side to side, that horrible tongue still feeling the air, then slowly and deliberately it glided over the edge of the stone slab without any effort it was possible to discern, and flickered out of sight. She could move on now, but she couldn’t, not immediately, still waiting for the waves of pain at the back of her head to calm themselves, sucking in great gallons of air, exhaling with purpose, helping herself shape up to the shock, absorb the fact the snake had decided to let her pass.

They were packed up, leaning against the Land Rover. ‘You sure took your time,’ Ken growled at her, grinding his cigarette in the dirt before dragging himself into the seat beside Jon, already firing up the engine.

She climbed into her own seat behind them, took hold of the worn leather strap hanging above the window. ‘Sorry.’

‘Well – was it worth going back, Iz?’ Jon asked over his shoulder, steering through the hotel gates, sharp left onto the red, dirt road.

‘Did you work it out?’ Ken smiled now, looking back at her, ‘You got Africa sorted?’

‘I met a fucking snake.’

Ken laughed out in triumph, ‘Man, you fucking swore.’

Before anybody could respond, the vehicle hit the first of the corrugations, dancing across them, skimming the surface, loose and uncommitted. Jon held his steady grip on the steering wheel, not decelerating at all, ready to partner the road for their journey, while Izzy held on for her dear life.

WHAT GOES ROUND

They had agreed the appointment on their cell phones a few days ago, so Nat remained in the cab of his battered Land Cruiser and waited for an appearance on the dark veranda in front of him, sure they would be aware of his arrival. In the hot minutes as he waited, dressed in one of his best suits and a tie chosen by his wife that morning, he couldn’t help noting the size of the white painted house, the watered flowerbeds clustering around it like a jewelled necklace, the bright buffalo grass lawns stretching away, unblemished and beautiful, to a painted fence enclosing the whole homestead. He would remember it like this, to describe to her later, though he knew he must not sound venal in the telling.

With a slight turn of his head he could see across a field sloping down towards the dam, created in that exact spot to be enjoyed from the deep teak and leather arm chairs positioned just so, in the shade beside that front door. A man could relax there after working in the fields. Despite his intentions for this day, he could imagine himself as that man. Vast golden fields, heavy with a waiting winter wheat harvest, stretched into the distances. He sat there, absorbing it all, at the same time hearing big dogs barking somewhere, understanding they had been secured before his arrival.

The front door opened with a crash, as if being wrenched away from its hinges, and from its shadow he watched a big man step forward, looking over towards him, and behind, a woman, standing in the open doorway. The man turned and Nat watched him cup his wife’s cheek in his palm before he left her. After that one pale image he never saw Tom Bredenkamp’s wife again. He took a deep breath, opened the cab door to climb out and extended his hand to greet the white man striding towards him. ‘Good Afternoon. Mr Bredenkamp. I’m Nathaniel Mazula.’

‘Yes. Good afternoon, Mazula.’

They grasped hands and the contact was made. Tom Bredenkamp, tall as his own six feet, but bulkier, and redder in complexion, tense but looking prepared for the encounter. Apart from the similarity in size there was little else to compare, and Nat certainly knew it: Tom had been one of Zimbabwe’s winners, but a loser now, and one of those long supposed to be meek was here to inherit earth he considered his own.

‘Come, let’s go across to the office.’ Tom, in his Rhodie uniform of shorts, long socks and an open shirt, led the way on a gravel path snaking round the edge of the lawns to the business side of the house, and Nat could feel eyes on his back as he followed. He heard the front door bang shut. On this less public side of the family home were the tobacco barns and a collection of farm machinery parked tidily, some under cover being tended to by small groups of workers in blue overalls, who stopped what they were doing as the two of them marched past. Beyond the yard long strips of simple dwellings – blackened even on the outside by smoke from open fires, paraffin cooking stoves and candles: no connection to the farm electricity supply here then.

As they crowded into his untidy office, Tom’s composure seemed to slip, as if he wasn’t sure whether he should sit in his battered swivel-chair behind the desk. His intakes of choppy breath hissed in the quiet air and he rubbed at his face as he turned to face Nat.

‘Tom, why don’t you invite your manager to be here with us? We can talk together and discuss the best way of handling this thing.’

He seated himself on the visitor’s side of the desk while Tom remained in the doorway and spoke into his cell phone in fluent Shona. Nat flicked unseeing, through a dusty *Farmer* magazine, trying not to look around the office; there would be time enough for that.

Tom seemed to feel easier when his own man joined them, and the two stood together facing Nat. He was acutely aware of the dynamics between them as he stood for the introduction to Lovemore Mujure, a slighter man than either of them, in work clothes of worn trousers and a red, striped T shirt, removing his cap to shake hands, eyes shifting between his boss and Nat.

‘Masikata –Magadi?’

‘Yes, well, thank you.’

Another chair was brought in from somewhere, there was a shuffling and noisy banging about as the seating was rearranged: Tom behind his desk with Mujuru squeezed in next to him, Nat on the visitor’s side. Then the two looked to him, to begin.

He had spent time thinking about how he would handle this first meeting between himself and the man whose farm he was to take from him. The letter from the Ministry had arrived three weeks ago at his own Harare home, and the surprise on a first reading had been powerful enough to propel him outside to find his favourite chair in its place under the avocado tree at the back of the garden. He had re-read it, twice, three times, to make sure, murmuring to himself as he read, ‘It’s not possible…Can it be true?…Is it true?’ The dry wind shifted through the branches above him; he looked up at two noisy bulbuls splashing in the bird bath; next door’s gardener was mowing the lawn with their old push mower; it was a normal day in a northern suburb of the city. And then, he’d leapt up and out of the chair striding up and down the lawn, waving the letter in the air, smiling a smile – at God, at History, at Destiny! He surged back into the house through the kitchen door,

‘Ruth! Ruth! Where are you?’

‘What is it? What is wrong?’ Her hurried steps down the hall, wiping her hands on the bathroom towel, slowed as she registered his face, ‘What is it?’

‘Look. Look at this. I’ve been offered a commercial farm – a big one!’

‘What are you saying, my husband?

‘You remember that application to the Ministry – months ago? Now look, half a farm, including the house and a trout dam.’

‘I did not want you to make that application.’

‘I know…but I decided to go ahead in the end.’

‘But we agreed, Nathaniel. We agreed we did not like what was happening.’ She was not as tall in stature as he, but not a small woman; paler in complexion, her beautiful brown eyes wide, staring at him in astonishment.

‘I know that. But I thought about it again. There is a procedure and I followed it. If not me it would be another man and I wanted to try my hand. And see – it has been successful.’ He waved the letter at her again, for her to take and read.

She didn’t take it. ‘We agreed it was not a Christian thing to do, to take what belongs to another without paying for it.’

‘Ruth!’

‘We agreed.’

‘And I am telling you I thought about it again. That new Land Settlement Act makes it legal. I applied for it – a medium-sized, mixed commercial farm – it was one of the options. It was all there on the form. Look, read it, mudiwawangu.’ Using a rare endearment to bring her round.

‘I am not disputing its legality. We agreed on moral grounds did we not?’

Silence.

‘What about the other half?’

‘It’s to be divided up in 5 hectare plots for subsistence – A1 farms they’re calling them. But look, ours is massive – irrigated winter wheat, sunflowers, even tobacco!’

‘Ours?’

‘What?’

‘You said ours.’

‘Look – here is the letter. Read it.’

‘Are you sure that is what the letter really says? That a decision has been made and you are the beneficiary?’

‘Read it for yourself.’

Now she did. She stood in the cool hallway, in her apron, and read the letter line by line while he paced up and down, into and out of the dining room and lounge, stalking impatiently around her stillness. He’d bought this house a couple of years after Independence, when many whites sold up and left and his only regret was that his parents had died before they had seen their son live in a home beyond anything they had ever dreamed for any of them: a brick house, a mansion almost, in Mount Pleasant, with a swimming pool.

‘Why you? What do they want from you?’ Ruth, ever the careful one, watching out for him in days when Zimbabweans needed to watch out for themselves. But he’d not forgotten that point, even in this excited moment, he’d not forgotten to think about why him indeed. But still he blustered, not wanting to admit to feeling some discomfort at her reaction to his glee.

‘Well, do they have to want anything?’

‘There must be something. You are not one of them any longer.’

‘Perhaps what I’ve been doing out at Wedza has been noticed.’ His small farm, inherited from his father in what was called an *African Purchase Area* in Rhodesian times. ‘It must be that agricultural show and my demonstration of the piggery – the new feeding routine. And the tobacco I’ve been experimenting with. You remember those Party guys going round, looking everybody over. Everybody was interested in the tobacco. And they will know I have forex from the consultancy assignments, foreign exchange is critical these days. That must come into it.’ He came back and stood in front of her. ‘You see, there are many reasons why I meet the criteria.’

He had been one of them once – a fund raiser in the UK during the war when he was a student in Leeds, travelling between there and Glasgow, Brighton and London, to other campuses, encouraging students to support the cause and donate from their grants. He’d mingled with the UK Left, getting the donations out to Mozambique and Tanzania, to the Comrades’ training camps. He was on back-slapping terms with the people now running the Ministries, riding round town in their Benzes. The Party never forgot. These were the reasons why he, why Nathaniel Maluza should be allocated one the re-possessed white farms.

‘Tom Bredenkamp.’

‘What?’

‘The name of the farm owner – Tom Bredenkamp. You said it was ours. It belongs to Tom Bredenkamp.’

He took the letter back and this time read it more slowly. He went over the name of the white farmer written there and considered his wife’s remarks: there was the name and the address of the farm; he would likely have a family. This news would also be hitting them around now.

‘I cannot think about them, Ruth. It is time for these people to go. They say they are African yet they despise us. Being an African to them only means keeping what they stole. They had their chances to share.’

‘Still Nathaniel, the way our government is doing this thing now is leaving us all stained.’

‘Ruth, when Rhodesia was ripped away from Smith at Lancaster House, that so called Agreement was forced onto Mugabe. He had to agree to the terms, to protect the white and their stolen land. They were never fair terms for us.’

She walked back to the kitchen to heat water for tea while he followed, almost shouting after her, ‘We were promised cash by the Brits, and the Americans, to buy them out…Ruth. They went back on it. Blair’s government went back on everything we agreed with John Major’s lot. Ruth!’

‘This is not like you my husband. It is good for us that Spiwe has gone out with the children. I would not like them to hear their father raising his voice in this manner.’ She raised her hand to stop him interrupting. ‘You are a fair-minded man, Nathaniel, and your frustration and the hard times in this country are making you forget yourself. I do not agree with all this violence – mobilising veterans and so-called veterans, and nor do you. And they can take this farm from you as easily as they have given it to you. Do not forget that.’

‘There are new laws now, Ruth. It’s what they did when they came here, took the land and made laws to make it legal. They were more violent against us than our people have been against them. The world has turned, Ruth. The land is ours again.’

She would not give up. ‘But look what it is doing to us. Every night on BBC they show those ruffians hammering down the farm workers’ houses. What will happen to those people with no jobs, nowhere to go? And those white farmers – being killed. The whole world thinks we are all savages.’

He snatched at his mug of tea, took it outside, he needed to think, be calmer. Discussions with Ruth could be a chastening experience. She was a lawyer, trained to question the evidence, too calm, too fair-minded sometimes, but anyway, she had forced him to understand better now that he must consider his actions. He must feel easy in his judgement of himself as a man, as a Christian. He must consider the implications of that letter for his soul. He’d been brought up a Catholic – souls were important.

So, he had considered how he would handle this moment, here in the untidy office of a man with tears behind his blue eyes. He explained in a careful, unhurried tone, as like as lawyer as he could be, that he would not give Tom any deadline for moving; he expected him to harvest his fields and wind up his farming year in as normal a way as possible. He could take in his harvest and sell it, and when they were good and ready, then the Bredenkamps would go in their own time. They would not be run off their land like others, and in the meantime they would remain in touch by cell phone and Nat would do all he could to protect the farm from invasions. He could see Tom trying not to show surprise, or relief. Mujuru showed no emotion at all but sat throughout without question or comment.

Tom did not ask many questions, only to clarify Nat’s intention to allow him to take in and sell his harvest. Nat did not ask to be taken round, and asked nothing about the workings of the farm – that could come later. He stood, and they all stood, the three of them gruffly shaking hands in that small, hot space. Nat knew Tom had to go back and face his wife. He looked into the manager’s eyes for a moment and knew Mujuru would not think a boss of his own race would pay any more generously, or trust him any more fully or even want him to stay on. Nat would have to make that decision at some time. Despite it all, despite the pain flashing about the room, despite the tension and anger he knew was directed towards him, he could not help the soaring feelings of anticipation, of gladness about what would become his. He would have land, substantial land to tie him and his family to the future, and clear above all that he was behaving fairly and well in the reality of the new Zimbabwe.

They parted at his vehicle and as he drove slowly down the drive; in the rear view mirror he could see Tom Bredenkamp standing in front of his home preparing himself to go inside and speak to his wife. She would have to begin the packing up of their home, make arrangements to keep or sell their belongings; they would have to sit down together and make their plans for a new life, somewhere else. The Cruiser bounced across the cattle grid and he looked over the lush fields stretching on either side of him into the purple, hazy distances; low sunlight glanced silver off the long rows of irrigation pipes, and rainbows shaped themselves through the sparkling cascades soaking down into the red earth. He could even smell it – his family’s new life here.

‘How did you get on?’ Ruth was waiting for him, grave-faced. He told her, and tried to make it sound better, then became impatient at her silence.

‘Ruth – when our people were taken away from their lands there was nobody with a video camera to record the tragedy of our families – no reporters to interview grieving widows and traumatized children and pontificate about theft and injustice and government corruption. Those whites were as corrupt as any government of ours. They were clever, and printed forms and put stamps on them and called them Title Deeds and said they were legal. Who decides what is legal?’

‘Oh, Nathaniel, we have to get over the past.’

‘That is exactly what we are now doing. This is part of it. This is how we are getting over the past. We have our own forms and our own stamps. God help us all, but this is how we are getting over it.’

He kept his promises and made a number of journeys to the District police station and Party office, using up scarce diesel allocations to drive out time and again, making use of his personal contacts on Tom Bredenkamp’s behalf. He had to convince all the local officials that he wanted no occupations, no trouble for Bredenkamp, that he had given his word they could move out in their own good time after the harvest. He learned he was on his own in taking this stance, nobody understood why he was behaving like this and he knew some would think Tom must have bribed him: surely money had changed hands to make him behave so generously, so unnecessarily generously. It took a lot of pulling of old strings and faded connections to keep the Bredenkamps safe, as unrest and fear gripped the District and different kinds of farm reallocations went on all over the country.

Finally, the call from Tom, telling him a moving-out date a week ahead, but no thanks for all the efforts made on his behalf. Nat described the conversation to Ruth, and tried not to look too self-satisfied as they made their plans to move. It was a busy time in the household as they gathered furniture and packed supplies for another home. He had worked out a spread sheet to keep account of the rental income they would gain from the Mount Pleasant house; his consultancy income – one he hoped to reduce as the farm profits would replace it; the money he would need for farm inputs, labour. He would fall asleep working out pleasurable scenarios: perhaps he would be able to afford the fees for the Convent School for the girls after all; he would be able to help out his brother struggling to invest in a small taxi firm; Ruth’s mother was not well and he would assist with private clinic fees. Profits from tobacco were rocketing with Chinese buyers prowling the auction floors. He felt himself growing into the patriarch he ought to be at this stage in his life.

Moving-in day at last: supervising the packing of the Cruiser as the sun came up, the excited drive from Harare; mattresses piled high, suitcases bursting with clothes and curtains, boxes of saucepans and pots, shopping bags of supplies, cool boxes galore. Nat had described the homestead with its green garden and flowers, although he’d never been invited inside the house despite driving up that gravel road on so many occasions to coax stray gangs of troublemakers away from the security gates. He only pondered on that now when Ruth asked him about the number of bedrooms and where they would all sleep: he couldn’t tell her. In any case, the vehicle was filled with the chatter and laughter of a rare family outing together, domestic workers and the garden boy in the back making sure nothing blew away, the whole family giddy to be driving out to a new home waiting for them. Even Ruth’s worry and guilt softened by the passing months and the decency of Nat’s behaviour.

They piled out – everybody looking round the garden, peering across to the distant fields, a bit shy now, even Nat, to be faced with the moment of taking over somebody else’s home, walking up those steps to the now empty stoep – he would have to find his own teak and leather armchairs, but all in good time. There was no staff to greet them, and no workers in sight. His own people started unloading their stuff onto the drive while the family followed him. He pushed at the front door that had banged shut on him all those weeks ago; it was unlocked. In all the excitement Nat had forgotten to ask about the house keys – he’d have to give Tom a call – and they trooped in to find devastation: a gaping roof in the kitchen where the hot water boiler had been ripped away; light switches and ceiling fixtures torn out; floor tiles smashed, jagged gaps where even the teak floor boards had been ripped up, cement poured in the lavatory and the bath tub. In what had been a luscious kitchen garden at the back of the house, vegetables and fruit trees had been dragged out and left parched by their own gaping holes. That must have been done weeks ago, to make sure they died.

He walked through the wrecked rooms of the house, Ruth hushing the girls, his staff bewildered as they staggered in with the family belongings to be met by the wrecked rooms. He walked past them, back outside into the fresh air, and round the back to the barns and outbuildings, stony faced in front of the workers, watching from corners. There he found all moveable farm machinery gone, no tractors left, irrigation pipes destroyed or ripped out and gone – taps missing, joints welded together.

He forced himself to go back to the despoiled house. It was his turn now to brush away hard tears. Ruth set the quiet girls to lay out a tea tray for their father, instructed the workers to sweep out two of the bedrooms and set up the mattresses they had brought on the truck. It was she who walked through each room with pen and paper and set about making lists for replacements, other lists for repairs.

For once Nat was without words. He slumped outside on the steps, the bright sunshine over the ruined garden contrasting with the deep shadow in which he crouched, holding his head in both hands as if to keep it from cracking open. Ruth brought the tea tray, sat herself next to him.

‘It was too hard for him my husband. It was too much to expect a man to hand over his world, to keep his word on something as big as this.’ She reached for his hand, taking it in hers, pressing it, kneading it between her fingers. ‘Allowing them to remain was not the test for you. This is the test,’ she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder.

**THE SOLDIER’S WIFE**

The yoga teacher’s voice, ethereal, floating into every corner of the room, a chanting lilt encouraging her to be open, to be aware, to be conscious of all there is in her being: the past, the present, the future – to notice her thoughts, acknowledge but gently nudge them away, and simply be – in the moment.

Don’t let memories trouble you. Embrace the past.

Embrace the past! That’s it, the last straw; Ellen decides there and then she’s never coming back to a yoga class.

It’s too much, all this thinking and being aware. She hadn’t even realised these memories were so close to the surface before she had to sit here with no distractions. She’s almost overwhelmed with memories – no nudging these away. She can do without them, and sneaks a look over at Sharon, sitting straight up, cross legged, knees flat to the floor, that self-consciously relaxed smile, eyes closed, perfect make-up, too black hair tied back in what she no doubt thinks is a trendy hair band, looking ridiculous in those mauve leg-warmers.

Thirty years ago today. What a way to celebrate your wedding anniversary – what fragment of the earth’s geological formations might she have expected as a gift from Billy? A ruby by now? She has no idea, but at least he was usually around, there was normally some token or other. And most years they managed a party. A party with the usual braai in the garden, the smell of barbecued meat seeping through all the rooms of their little bungalow; their friends, and let’s face it, both of them drinking themselves silly, finding empty Castle and Lion cans strewn about the flowers beds for days afterwards. But it was usually fun in its own way, getting it ready between them, some kind of celebration of a marriage they’d had no chance of avoiding, thirty years ago today.

That day – the dress a mini and thank god for the shift style so she hardly showed. Her mom and dad with their thin smiles, and his thunder-faced parents, and Billy himself, looking like hell in his flares and a tie. Why should she be forced to remember all this? If this is what yoga is she can do without it; just seventeen, gazelle-legged in those crazy platform shoes they all wore, dress hardly covering her arse – father’s opinion. It was his opinion that’s why she was in the state she was in and why they were all there in the first place.

They’d stood at the altar in the Catholic church – they’d all had a drink already; Sharon in a dress even shorter than her own, teetering, suppressing her giggles as best she could. Great bridesmaid she’d turned out to be, flirting with Billy throughout, whole thing a big joke. Billy, white faced, hardly able to mumble his way through the vows and the priest giving them severe looks, but at least they were in church to get married.

And then to Harare Gardens for the photos, posing in the sun next to the miniature Victoria Falls the Council had erected years ago: the Horseshoes Falls, the Devil’s Cauldron, a miniature Batoka Gorge – laid out small scale for poor people like them who couldn’t afford to pop down for the honeymoon to the real thing at the other end of the country. They’ve been since of course, but she’d never enjoyed it.

She shakes herself and flexes her feet. God this is terrible – she’s not thought about that miserable wedding day for years. 1972, and within a year he’d joined up, doing his duty in the Rhodesia Light Infantry: the training, the drinking, his oppos – mates he would die for, fighting for Rhodesia out there in the bush. Coming home on leave, looking like Prince Valiant, light-stepped and jubilant down the tiny drive, expecting her and the kids, three of them finally, one after the other popping out like peas, to throw themselves at him. Well, of course it had been good each time he’d returned: not shot, not blown up, all limbs still attached. The kids grew up with their dad’s soldier language: the terrs, the gooks, the kaffirs. And now the kids are grown, all gone off to what’s called ‘greener pastures’ as soon as they were old enough, none of them able to live here after Independence – none of them willing to give it a try under a gook government.

He’d delighted in telling them about all the things that went bang: grenades, mortars, rocket launchers. He’d been an exciting kind of dad. And in bed when they laid close, holding each other, making a go of it, he’d boast about how often he was selected to be a stick commander, the lives of the men in his stick his responsibility; the close shaves with the enemy, his jumps from helicopter gunships into the bush, the excitement, the fear and thrill of close combat – dispatching terrs. Neither of them had known her gawky Billy had been born to be a soldier.

She shifts, her bottom really aching by now. When is all this meditation going to end? What is she doing, sinking into the dark, thinking these thoughts? Is this what her mind is really full of? Bad memories and regrets? No, not all regrets – they still had some good times didn’t they? Sharon was good at helping her to concentrate on the worst times though, and she seemed to be getting better at it – perhaps it hadn’t been such a good idea to spend this day with her. Why had she agreed? Thankfully instructions float over the airwaves, to take more mindful last breaths, to relax completely and let go of stress - and it’s over and they all Namaste each other with hands in the prayer position. Thank God. And here’s Sharon, positively serene.

‘Well, howz it, hun? You enjoy it? Don’t you feel a different person?’

‘Ya, it was mushi. Great.’

‘I told you you’d love it if you only gave it a try. Well, let’s get changed; then coffee first at the Golden Stairs, hey?’

She can’t very well get out of it now: Sharon’s idea to spend the day with her while Billy is out of town on their anniversary. She’s arranged a day of treats, yoga being the first, followed by a healthy fruit breakfast, then a facial at the new salon in Borrowdale, lunch and a movie at Westgate and finishing off with a dinner at the very expensive Amanzi restaurant on Enterprise Road. Sharon is great really. Why had she thought those mean things about her leg warmers earlier? She’d always been there for her, for her and Billy. That bridesmaid’s dress though – a tiny speck of fluorescent orange, ebony hair shining down her back, the eye make-up! They all used to look like pandas. They still laugh over the wedding photos. When Sharon herself got married, at twenty, not even pregnant, she’d married a guy nobody thought had a chance with her: Brian, of literally no looks, hardly took a beer, training to be a boring bookkeeper in those days and now owns one of the biggest accountancy firms in Harare. He’d survived through the thick and thin of the new Zimbabwe, thrived in fact; everybody needs accountants. Easy to see the thriving part as Sharon manoeuvres her big Merc out onto Second Street and along the Kariba Road; if only they could keep going, ride the miles in the beautiful, cool car and reach the Lake, hours away, hours from this day.

‘So you’re still up for it? Right, hun?’ Sharon taking her eyes from the potholed road, from the careless traffic thundering towards them.

Ellen will say anything at this moment to get her to concentrate on the next oncoming truck and avoid it, ‘Ya. I said so didn’t I?’ This was to be a day comprising not only treats, but one where she is supposed to decide. With Billy out of the way, not that Billy was often in the way these days, it’s a good opportunity to *think things through*. She’d booked the day off work and Sharon, obviously, didn’t need to work - could be flexible any time to suit, so the girly day out had been arranged and Sharon will help her to decide if, one, she really, really wants to ditch Billy and if so, two, how she would do it. A big agenda and Ellen feels exhausted just getting through the introductory part – the unexpected eruptions from her memory in the yoga session.

They clatter into the coffee shop, at least Sharon clatters, still wearing stilettos, but they’re both not even fifty so why shouldn’t she wear heels as high as she likes? She’s even forced Ellen into the kitten heels she’s wearing right now, forbidden her comfortable flats for this special day.

‘You are what you wear, hun,’ she’d exclaimed, not for the first time by any means, at Ellen’s initial get-up for the day. ‘Let’s make a move from the practical, and if you don’t mind me saying, almost dowdy, to something just a little more inspirational shall we?’ Why would Ellen mind when she’s completely used to it? Sharon’s turns of phrase, her bossiness, her obliviousness. She doesn’t mind anyway, not really, and she’s even read a few chapters of some of the motivational books Sharon drops off for her to read, books she can’t imagine Sharon would have time for. Ideal-Homing her fancy mansion is more her style, not intense texts around how to take control of your life. Anyway, Ellen had been inspired by a couple of the exhortations to ‘take control’ and ‘speak out’ and ‘know your own mind’. She just needs to put them into practice, though not yet feeling hit by inspiration from the kitten heels – it perhaps needs time to work its way up from floor level.

A pot of green tea and a fruit salad later, and Topic One is in full swing: does she really want to end the marriage?

‘I’m not sure, Sha. It’s such a big step.’

‘That’s what you keep saying and it’s not getting you anywhere.’

‘But I’m not sure I want to get anywhere. Anywhere else I mean.’

‘You’ve been moaning for weeks about him.’

‘I know.’ Ellen wishes Sha wasn’t quite so irritated with her. Everybody moans about their husband don’t they? Specially when they’re out of town for to so-called special occasions. ‘Anyway, if I leave him, I don’t know how to do it. What will he do?’

‘No, no, you’re jumping the gun. We’re still on IF you want to, not HOW. And it’s his problem what he’ll do.’

Ellen supposes that the irritating logical streak Sharon seems to have developed over the years comes from being married to an accountant and having no children.

‘Ya well, I just can’t decide like that. He has – issues you know.’

‘Issues! Who doesn’t have issues, girl? You’ve been talking about it for years. You’re too young to settle for less than what you want. There’s a life waiting for you out there,’ and here Sharon waves her be-ringed right hand, weighed down though it is with an array of gems of various carats bestowed on her over the years by dear Brian. The wave encompasses the whole of Harare and perhaps the entirety of Southern Africa and all the eligible men therein. ‘You said this was the last straw, the very last, that he wouldn’t be here for your anniversary.’

‘Ya, I know. But it’s not wouldn’t, it’s more couldn’t, you know. The guys out there depend on him. The families. Something can blow up any minute.’

‘Hun, there’s always going to be a reason he disappoints you. Even if it’s a good reason, he’s gonna carry on disappointing you.’

‘What about you – and Brian? How are things between the two of you? You’ve not been sounding too cool about him and you lately.’

‘Oh, don’t take any notice of me. You know it’s always the drink talking when I get started on Brian.’ And here Sharon laughs and looks for her cigarettes. ‘He’s completely boring, but he always has been. Right? And don’t change the subject: it’s you and Billy we’re here to discuss. Right?’

They look at each other over the collapsing dregs of cappuccino foam, Ellen thinking, as she usually does, that the taste of coffee, as distinct from its aroma, is one of the more predictable, small disappointments of everyday life.

Much later, after lunch and the forgettable film through which they’d both dozed, cushioned by that extra glass of Chardonnay to help the pudding go down, they are on the final lap of the day and Ellen is slightly surprised by Sharon’s response to a throwaway remarks she’s just made: – about how much fun they’d had when they were girls; would they have made the decisions they had if they’d have known what they were in for – and so on. It had sparked a slightly over the top reaction from Sharon; a solemn telling off about how Ellen needs to face up to reality and make decisions, finishing with a rare allusion to the A word.

‘At our age we’ve got to think about what’s next, right? While we’re young enough and still have options.’

Where is this coming from? Our age. There’s certainly an opening here to bring up the leg-warmers and the hair band.

‘What’s eating you, Sha? I thought you had it made. You went for the right option all those years ago didn’t you? Brian? What more options do you want?’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘From where I’m sitting I think I do – you in a mansion in Borrowdale, me in a prefab on the other side of town. You in the Merc, me in the Mazda. I need to book a day off that rotten job, you can be flexible. Hard to know what other options you are considering.’

They are in the Amanzi gardens, sipping gin and tonics under the fairy lights looping through the tree branches above, their soft glow adding to that of the candles on the white-clothed tables arranged in a carefully casual pattern over the dark lawns. They have ordered dinner from the attentive waiter, enjoying aperitifs before moving on with the issue of the long day. Really, it’s lovely to have this final, expensive treat from Sha – so generous – and Ellen takes another swallow of the icy drink, savouring its sour, lemony taste over her tongue. Perfect. She hadn’t needed to be quite so blunt with her. Sharon draws on her Madison Lite, sucking the smoke into her lungs, exhaling, almost visibly relaxing; funny, you wouldn’t expect smoking and yoga to go together.

‘I’m sorry, Ellen. Didn’t mean to jump on you. You know what I’m like with a drink in me.’

Swiftish progress had been made after all on Topic One over the facials, thanks to Sharon’s steady guidance of her distracted thought processes: yes, perhaps she might leave Billy after all.

‘He used to be fun though, you know – when he was around. The kids grew up loving him anyway.’

‘That’s another thing: the so-called kids are not any such thing – Lois is thirty next year. None of them even live in the country.’

It’s true they all moaned about how much she and Billy drank. She thought she could sort herself out if the fridge didn’t have to be stocked to bursting with beer, for him and his oppos and their ‘sessions’. And yes, her sessions she had to admit. It would be different if she had control over her own fridge; that would be a definite advantage to life without Billy.

So to Topic Two. How to do the leaving? Would she be the one to vacate the marital home, or would he? That little box in an increasingly running down suburb barely hanging onto its low density credentials. Could she force him to go? If she left where would she go? Billy’s money was more erratic than ever these days – farmers weren’t the most stable paymasters – but, when it came to it he wasn’t tight-fisted. You could never call Billy mean; what he had he shared, between her and the refrigerator. It’s not his fault he drinks so much, not really – and she has to admit, over her second gin of the evening, Tanqueray, her favourite type, that despite the discussions and her agreement during the facials earlier, her heart isn’t in leaving Billy. They’d been through a lot together – they understand each other, she even thinks he needs her. What Ellen can’t quite understand is why Sharon seems so keen on her making up her mind about it. Over the last few weeks she seems to have become keen on it. Him not being around for the wedding anniversary had incensed her. It seems.

If only he’d stayed at the Toyota garage. It was the longest time he’d stayed in a steady job anywhere since he’d left the army; three years he’d stuck it out. He’d even put up with a boss called Sixpence – Billy, working for an Af – unbelievable. It never helped telling him her boss at the estate agent is black – everybody’s boss is black these days. Except Brian. Brian didn’t have to work for them – they still worked for him. But then there had been that call one evening from Chris – somebody or other - six months ago, one of the idiots still hanging onto his farm, out Goromonzi way somewhere in the sticks. The way Billy’s eyes had gleamed; she’d not seen that lift in his step, not heard that whistle about the house for twenty years, not since his demob. He couldn’t wait to get back to being a soldier – not exactly a troopie again, but close, with a gun. Funny the lines he drew – he hadn’t minded so much being with the black soldiers – the guys – in the new integrated army they called it after Independence, but he wouldn’t serve under a gook General. So he’d left soldiering, but carried on the drinking part of it, in and out of jobs all over Harare.

This Chris had found him through a friend of a friend: the boys’ network. What did he think about getting an informal patrol together to work for a group of farmers hanging on in the District? There were three of them, three farms. It was a big area to cover. They were thinking the patrol would be armed – plenty of guns – a posse, on call to drive like hell to answer emergency shout-outs by individual farmers with war vets hammering at their security gate. The police were bloody useless. Would he be interested? He’d almost swallowed the phone. She’d watched him set down his Castle can, sit himself down at the table so he could concentrate, steady his speech, tell Chris he didn’t need time to think about it. And that had been the end of the steady job at Toyota.

The gin settles easily with the olives and sun-dried tomato nibbles, and Ellen faces up to Sharon’s intense engagement over the candle light. She’s looking spectacular: hair bobbed short, sleek and L’Oreal black as it ever had been. The tight, dark blue dress, almost a gown, but not so as you’d remark on it being overdressed even for the Amanzi; gauzy shawl thing arranged in that careless throw-round-your-shoulders-any-old-way style Sharon can be so good at, despite the yoga outfits. Even so, Ellen feels she’s not looking at all bad herself: she’d let Sharon persuade her to have the new hair cut – a shaggy, elfin style the girl had described it - who was kidding who in the elf department? Anyway, it did suit her, took years off her – agreed. And the dress she’d found at the back of the wardrobe, still fitting after all these years. She’d bought it on one of their few trips down south, that weekend in ‘81 when they’d gone to Jo’burg to celebrate Billy coming out of the army, alive, in one single, un-fragmented piece when so many had not, assuring her he’d soon find a job in civvy street. It’s forest green, heavy silk with sleeves and tight waist holding in a wide, flaring skirt; old fashioned even then really, but they’d been to see a re-run of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and she felt like Audrey Hepburn in it.

Sharon is nothing if not persistent: beautiful and persistent. ‘He’s not exactly good for you is he? Running around still playing at soldiers.’

‘No, he’s not. But it’s who he is you know? Being a soldier. He’s not good at anything else.’

‘Ya. Don’t you worry about him charging about the country at the drop of a hat for those farmers? Those guys are crazy if they think they can stay out there forever.’

‘I know, I know.’ They are on their first bottle of red by now, a very mellow South African Pinotage, Sharon’s choice – she’d been to the vineyard with Brian on one of their down south trips, and Ellen savours its tannin taste round her tongue as Sharon continues voicing her worries for Billy.

‘And they’re gonna to get Billy killed. One day Billy-O’s luck will run out.’

‘Ya, that’s what I dread, after he got through the war in one piece.’ Ellen sits back in the comfortable dining chair and considers Sharon over her wine glass. Billy-O.

‘The big deal is he can speak to the war vets in their own language – I don’t mean in Shona, but that too – I mean they understand each other. He was telling me last time he was home, it sounds mad you know: he gets the call – farmer panicking, big group at the gate – drums, stamping, war songs, pangas – the lot you know. They rock up – just him and his oppo Tony in the big Ford, first on the scene. You can imagine it, hey, pretty scary?

Sharon nods.

‘Well they all turn to see who’s come and Billy gets out and walks up unarmed, a normal walking up to them, greeting them. That’s his strategy, to go in normal at first.’

‘Well that’s just crazy.’

‘He stands in front of them, leaves Tony with the guns in the truck, watching you know. And he always has smokes, beers in the vehicle, offers them round and makes some sort of soldiers’ jokes or some remark and they find out they were in the same battle, shooting at each other in Mozambique in the bush, God knows where on the border, twenty odd years ago. Trying to kill each other. Men: they’re mad, bloody mad. They sit about then, have a smoke together, go into an indaba session talking about what it was like that day, this day - crawling about, killing each other.’

Sharon lights another Madison; they both take another mouthful of their wine.

‘Then he tries to talk to them, reason with them, sort something out between them and the farmer. They’re not usually armed, well – they have those pangas, and axes but not guns normally. He told me something once you know, Sha, years ago, in one of our rows. I really went for him when he walked out of that construction job up at Westgate. He’d been promised site manager. He could have made something of that, but no, another chance down the drainpipe. Wasn’t that another job your Brian found for him?’

Sharon nods. ‘What was it he told you?’

‘Man, I was shouting at him, you know, asking him what was it he was looking for? What sort of a job? What did he like doing? What the hell did he want to do? Do you know what he said?’

Sharon shakes her head and drags on her smoke. Another one.

‘He said what he liked was killing people; sneaking through the bush, using his training, finding them by surprise. He liked slitting throats, or garrotting or stabbing. Anything quiet for preference. As a last resort he’d open up with his machine gun, or his rifle. Obviously you get more down with a machine gun, but then they know where you are.’ She pauses. ‘It’s not like that now – he can’t kill people now, but he says it makes him feel sort of the same, facing them down, having the guns at hand. It’s like being a soldier again he says. If he absolutely had to, he could. He likes the feeling that they could go for him as well. He likes being on the edge. Of his life.’

Ellen refills her glass just as the waiter pitches up at the table to do it for the ladies, and carries on. She’s in her stride now, staring right into Sharon’s eyes over the table. ‘You know there are thousands of them out there feeling the same don’t you? It’s not just my Billy: All the drinking, the not sleeping well, the nightmares. It’s the blacks as well as whites – they all have that post-traumatic stress thing – and they’re our gardeners and car mechanics, and politicians – and I’ve got one for a husband.’

‘You’re exaggerating, Ellen. What’s got into you?’ More wine. Another bottle.

‘They went into that war as kids – all those men – they learned killing and they came out and came home and that’s what they know and nothing’s ever been done about it. They’re running the country – they’re the men running the whole fucking show.’

‘Well, what do you think can be done about it? It’s history – they just have to get on with it.’

‘Even the South Africans tried that reconciliation thing, Sha. Nothing’s been done for them here.’

It’s too heavy. The day was never supposed to go like this. She’s never talked about this part of being Billy’s wife before. ‘He’s never violent at home though. It’s just the drinking, and he can’t help that. He can be…sort of tender, for Billy, you know.’

Sharon nods, her eyes glittering in the candle light. ‘Yes,’ she whispers.

‘Did you know Billy is like this, Sha? Did you know how much he liked killing people in the war and that he misses it?’ It’s easier than she expected, knowing her mind and speaking out in her own voice, like Sharon’s How-To books tell you. Once you get started and it’s important to you, it’s easier than she’d thought possible.

‘No. No I didn’t know that about him.’

‘You have to spend a lot of time with a guy to know things like that about him, don’t you think? To really know him.’

‘Ya, I suppose so.’

‘The friend of a friend was your Brian you know. He’s the one put that Chris in touch with Billy. Brian’s his accountant. So it’s Brian got him this job.’

‘Brian!’

‘He’s always looked out for Billy hasn’t he?’

‘Let me get my head round this, babe. Brian got him this job?’

‘He surely did. That’s never come up with Billy, when you see each other?’

‘See each other? What do you mean?’ Surprised – embarrassed?

‘I just mean,’ and Ellen pauses only, but deliberately, for a couple of seconds, ‘when you run into each other – you know. Maybe you’ve been running into each other lately?’

She leans in towards her friend, over the lustrous table, forcing her to clink a gentle toast over the candles. ‘To the future, Sha.’

SHADES OF DEFICIT

‘Isobel?’

God, that voice. Only he ever used her full name. Her stomach contracted, forcefully, instantly unbalancing her. She lifted her head and turned as he repeated her name, and there he was, standing behind her seat in the crowded airport bus; clean-shaven now, slightly heavier, the same dark intense face. The eyes.

‘Nat!’

‘It is you, Isobel. How are you?’

‘Good. Fine. How are you?’

The banalities of greetings and where-are-you-going and where-have-you-come-from exchanges followed, as the bus wound its way from the plane’s parking spot to Johannesburg’s Oliver Tambo International terminal on a cold, winter morning, high veld air thin and sharp in her throat after the stuffiness of the cabin. Was it this that made it an effort to speak in a normal voice to him? She was glad anyway the packed bus meant she could take breaks in their conversation, look away as the bus swayed its way to the terminal and he had to balance and hold tight to the ceiling strap, giving her moments to close her eyes and take deliberate breaths. She answered his question about her reason for being in Jo’burg.

‘I’ll be in transit to Durban. I’m going to see an old friend who’s not well, then to Botswana. You?’

‘I’m on my way back to Harare so I’m also in transit. I’ve been at meetings in New York.’

‘New York?’

‘U.N. .’

‘Ah. You’re part of the international mafia now?’ She couldn’t help the edge in her voice, which he ignored, and the catching up went on.

‘And your work in Botswana?’

‘Ministry of Agriculture modernisation – strategy, rationalisation of departments – the usual thing.’ They worked out they would have an hour or so to wait for their different connections.

Izzy could feel his body behind her as they eased forward in the momentary crowding before the bus door sighed open and the passengers surged forward to gain a moment’s advantage in the scramble for the Immigration queue. She was glad to feel the chill of the morning breeze on her face as she stepped down and walked more slowly up the ramp, into the bleakness of the concrete Arrivals building; Nat at her side, matching her steps, offering to help her with her carry-on.

How she had loved him once, completely, across dimensions of her being she hadn’t known existed. He had filled spaces in her heart, excited her mind – and, as he made clear, worshipped her body, and she admitted, that was part of his attraction for her. It had been a new feeling for her, to be wanted so badly. They had met in Harare as colleagues and then, during the affair, had been together in the capitals of Africa, making tight time for each other in lives patterned with assignments and missions and meetings - and his family. She was clever and thoughtful and good with words; he was cleverer and wielded words to make his mark against the world. He could argue even her to a full stop, and in the next paragraph have her in bed. They’d lived this life for months, with growing ease and increasing happiness. At first she’d gone forward warily, tip-toeing from the light-heartedness of another fling, towards an affair of her heart that had stretched it, enticed it to experience a happiness that changed her - my god – she’d even quoted Neruda’s poetry at him. She’d experienced, for the first time, the high peaks and the endless risks of loving: of loving him.

‘I recognised the feet first,’ he said as they stood side by side in the queue in the crowded Immigration hall. She looked down, at bare feet in uncharacteristically comfortable sandals, wishing now she’d painted her toe nails before travelling. She looked back up into his eyes, waiting for her. ‘They were always your elegant extremity.’

They’d met in the eighties, in the heady days of Zimbabwe’s new deal, when everything was positive and expanding and anything was possible: new schools, clinics, roads, relationships. After Smith and Rhodesia - democracy and development surging across the Provinces and villages up and down the country, and they had worked together on this, and believed in the same things. He one of the rising cadre of African civil servants, able to move on and up as whites moved out, she a consultant Brit assigned to his Ministry to advise on new programmes of community development. She learned from him later that he’d been as suspicious of her as he was of any of the international aid posse, paying their first world mortgages on the backs of Africa’s poor; but he’d teased her later, how could he resist her irresistible white body?

The country was known, from the start, for being ‘difficult’. She learned that difficult meant the government and its officers had their own strong opinions, which meant her colleagues would complain about his methods and his arrogance behind his back, and fawn to his face. He’d become infamous for sending one of her Swedish team mates back home for refusing to comply with the conservative dress code of the Zimbabwe civil service – he never wore a tie and jacket back home so why should he here in a country that needed his expertise? Nat hadn’t argued but sent for the team leader and required and requested this person to be returned to Sweden. The team learned not to upset him.

Izzy not only disagreed with him to his face, but pestered him to change his mind about the Ministry’s approaches to rural development. So it had been a rare experience for any of them in those first jumpy years of Independence, to suggest policies that were not the same as those proposed from on high. There was no doubt though, it helped to be a woman in these circumstances, and even now she smiled to herself, remembering how passionate she was in those days, to have her ideas listened to, and if flirting with the boss helped…

The queue moved forward towards passport control as the memories of their past hovered across the trivialities of their conversation: after weeks of working together, he’d walked her back to her room through the shadowy gardens of a remote motel after one of their evening get-togethers with rural leaders, and instead of their usual cheek to cheek moment, kissed her directly on the lips as she turned to say goodnight. And that had been the start of it.

As they grew closer, he’d told her how he’d enjoyed sitting next to her at interminable meetings in hot community halls, where she had a habit of slipping off one high heeled shoe under the table and swinging it on her toe, bare legs crossed, so that her foot was extended, the small bones showing through the pale skin. She was at ease inside that skin, as he was in his, and they had been good together, and looked good, woven through each other on hotel beds in air-conditioned rooms - dark and light in a marbled lacing of limbs. He would tell her how much he enjoyed the aesthetic of that, taking each foot in turn as she lay back, a sparkling pre-coital gin by the bed, his deliberate fingers kneading each toe, caressing her with an intensity only he had ever shown her.

They had exchanged stories of their childhoods: his in an African village, she in the back streets of decaying industrial Britain. She had loved hearing about his mother, who excused her sullen middle son, hating farming, with his hang-dog walk to the fields, telling neighbours in their village his head hung down because his brain was too heavy to carry upright. He’d hated most things about being a rural African boy he’d told her, except catching and roasting wild birds with his friends. She’d tried to interest him in bird watching one weekend at a game park outside Nairobi – binoculars and the Roberts Bird Book at hand - and couldn’t help laughing when he told her he’d eaten half the birds illustrated, and shushed him so the earnest safari going British birders wouldn’t hear. In any case his mother had been right about his heavy head full of brains and he’d passed all the exams they could afford to let him take.

‘What did you do then, after your Matric – passing all those exams so cleverly?’

‘I got a job as a lab assistant at the boys’ high school in Salisbury.’

‘For whites?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then what?’

‘I got the sack after two terms.’

‘Why? What did you do?’

‘I didn’t get on too badly with the boys – I wasn’t much older than the sixth formers and sometimes I helped them after classes. There was a particularly dense chemistry master and I’d go over his lessons with them.’

‘And?’

‘He came in one afternoon during prep time and found me at the front of the class – *his* class, standing on *his* platform, using *his* chalk, helping *his* students.’

‘And?’

‘I was taken in front of the Head, as if I was a criminal and told to apologise and swear I would not interfere in the boys’ education ever again.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I refused of course. They could keep their job and their precious sanctity. Blacks could wash out test tubes made dirty by whites, but not teach them – anything.’ It was another conversation that ended in the passion of each other’s bodies.

They grew ever closer, and she thought at last, she had found *the one* and sank into the happiness of it and forgot to be wary. She would mix him his favourite malt whisky, not too much ice, in the heavy crystal glass he particularly liked to encircle in his hand. She would watch that way he had of holding his mouth against the side of it, slowly pulling up the underside of his lower lip to the topmost edge, thickly and softly, not letting any drop slide down the outside. There would be a momentary slight pursing of both lips together, full and dark, as the glass rim lost contact with flesh; it was an unconscious mannerism and she never mentioned it to him, so as not to lose the slight lasciviousness of it for herself.

He sent her flowers to surprise her in the hotel rooms she lived in so much of her life, and called just to hear her voice. She would read through and criticize his papers for him, and have late dinners so as not to miss his calls to the room. He made her understand an African view of the West and she started to understand how little about Africa she had understood before. She felt she had an inside track somehow, on Africa. At a conference in Uppsala, walking the snowy streets, bundled up in unaccustomed scarves and gloves, she’d noted the acknowledgements between Nat and any other black person they passed: a meeting of eyes above the scarves, a nod. Did all black people have some sort of brotherhood she asked, sarcastically? Yes, he’d replied; you wouldn’t understand.

As the months unfolded so did he, more than little stories about a childhood and big ideas about Africa and its future, but about his wife: his barren wife. He would not do the clichéd African male thing and divorce her for this; instead he had done the African family thing and opened his home to the children of his late brother, and had sought out the child of a youthful mistake so that children who called him, Father, surrounded him.

‘Can you understand, Isobel?’

‘I’m trying. I know it’s a big deal for a woman not to have children, more so in Africa than in Europe. But when I think about it, I suppose women who can’t have children do go to great lengths, women in Europe and America I mean…IVF and hormone treatment and stuff. I’ve never really thought about what men might feel.’

‘It is not possible to fully be a man without having sired children. It is expected.’ In any case, whatever she could or could not understand, he would not abandon his family or his wife for her. She had to understand that.

There was another thread to this story, and they spoke about it only once: family was political as well as personal, part of his definition of himself as an African in the larger universe of colonialism, and there was no space in this for a white woman to replace a black, childless wife. They both knew mixed successful couples – they were fashionable now on the international circuit, but not for Nat – he would never be able to rationalise his walking around Harare with a new white wife on his arm.

And then his wife had found out about them. The chips fell down, and neither of them would pick them up and shape them into a different pattern. Nat held on to his family and repaired his relationship. And she would not beg; if he would not suggest that now was the time, then neither would she.

He called her less, and when they did speak it seemed they could not explain to each other how they felt, these two with their belief in the power of words to formulate the world. It had been a love with no foundation but the love of the other, she knew that now – no family, no shared mortgage, no history as a couple at life’s rituals – just stolen times and personal ceremonies in anonymous hotel bedrooms, and it didn’t add up to enough. She hadn’t realised it didn’t add up to enough. Finally there were no more phone calls, and she had never found anybody quite like him again.

And now, as they moved into the departure lounge, she gathered herself to ask him what exactly he was doing these days and he told her he was head of an international agency in Harare. She understood this meant he was paid in foreign currency and so he was far removed from Zimbabwe’s new realities of the failing Zim dollar.

‘I also have a farm.’

‘A farm! But you hate farming. How?’

He smiled his old smile, ‘How? I applied for one of the re-possessed commercial farms.’

‘How does that feel?’

‘How does it feel? I do not quite understand the question.’

‘To be part of all this this chaos.’

‘I followed the procedure; I was not one of the baying mob, Isobel. The settler government had procedures to take the land from us and dish it out, and we now have new procedures to re-dish it.’

‘From *us*? Who is this *us* and *we,* Nat?’

‘I know you are being deliberately provocative, dear Isobel. I have missed such times with you.’

‘Well, I don’t suppose we have enough time right now to delve into those arguments do we? But you’re all right then?’

They looked at each other, meeting each other’s eyes, almost in the same way they had used to during similar arguments, before resolving all differences with their bodies. She couldn’t stand the memory and looked away, scanning the lounge for a couple of seats together.

‘I am fairly all right,’ he answered, moving a mobile phone into an outside pocket of his leather briefcase. ‘There’s too much deficit in being all right.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ and her exasperation with his sophistry flashed back again. Had it always been like this?

‘There are shades of deficit in being all right. Compared with other Africans, yes, I am all right.’

‘No Nat, compared with the world you’re all right, more than all right, with your business class boarding card in your top pocket there! People like us who bump into each other at international airports are very all right. How can you possibly bring being an African into this?’ She sprang into familiar attack, arm gesture embracing the whole lounge and beyond as she challenged him. After a small moment, they both smiled.

He didn’t answer the question, but said instead, ‘I have two daughters now,’ staring at her with his dark eyes, close to her on the hard airport seat, distorted loudspeaker announcements in the background, the stressed movements of other passengers hazy around the edges of their space. She managed to smile back at him.

‘That’s lovely – how old are they?’

‘Four years and a two year old.’

She continued to hold her smile, but she faltered, just slightly, and he saw it.

‘I divorced my wife and re-married, five years ago.’ His eyes still on hers were steady, and ready.

‘That’s really great, Nat, lovely. I’m happy for you. It’s what you always wanted.’

His mobile phone rang its siren sound, and she could tell instantly it was his wife, his fecund second wife. He turned his tailored back slightly away from her and Izzy heard her flight announced. She listened to his change of tone as he started to talk to his daughters, telling them how soon he would be home and with them all. She took a deliberate breath and forced herself to deal with the moment, tapped him on the shoulder as she stood, and mouthed her goodbye, and he stood with her, phone still to his ear, and silently passed her a card and mouthed that she should send an email, to keep in touch. She nodded and smiled back, and did not give him a card in exchange. She felt him standing there watching her as she walked away from him on her elegant feet.

THE HERD

It was time for Rose to call her mother again. They took it in turns, the three of them, so each daughter only had to call every third day: it was expensive – Jackie in Botswana, Tess in South Africa and she - Rose - here in Zim. She was strong though, her mother, and they’d probably be able to scale it down as time went on, rely on WhatsApp and Facebook. Her mother was good with the sort of tech that held them together over thousands of miles.

She leaned over her dad’s desk to pick up the receiver, disturbing the film of grainy dust that lay always across its battered surface. One of the girls would bustle in every now and then, flick a duster and send it flying and curling up into the sunlit room, only for it to float down as the day moved on, re-arranged. She replaced the telephone for a moment, to gather her thoughts, and gazed round the office. Would she ever feel it was hers? The two ancient tables at right angles to each other, this one where he had looked out over the neglected garden through the burglar bars, where he would sit day after desperate day, carrying out his war-plan to keep the farm: writing letters to Ministry departments, MPs, Governors; making insistent calls to all of them, his lawyer, the Commercial Farmers’ Union. The other was a collecting space for invoices, receipts and his files; he had kept every piece of paper he’d ever touched it seemed. It was a mess she had no time to tidy up. Even the walls were his - covered with old Farmers’ Weekly calendars; Certificates of Merit from long ago agricultural shows; the curling photos showing faded images of winning bulls and others tacked up any old way - photos of her mom, her and her sisters - little girls in fading shorts and tops, barefoot. His life. A fan shuffled the hot air, shifting the piles of loose papers held down with chunks of granite picked up long ago from different parts of the farm. When a shape or colouration had caught his fancy, he brought home chunks of it, his land, weighing down a shirt pocket, staining it red for the girls to pound out with green soap. It was hard to be here when he was not.

She leaned forward again to pick up the phone, more determined this time to call her mother, really speak to her. Have the conversation. The last time she’d spoken to him had been down these wires, she crying about something - ashamed now it had been such a small thing - only a Party official requesting a donation for the First Lady’s charity, a beast or money would do. She’d been at her wit’s end though, the farm too broke for yet more goodwill donations .But you didn’t refuse a goodwill donation to the First Lady.

She was the only one of the three of them interested in the animals. Right from the start, in her nappy she would toddle after him every morning, podgy bare feet in the gritty earth, swung up and out of harm’s way by a worker, away from the tread of the golden cattle, watching, perched on a bony shoulder as they passed. She grew up with them, marching slowly out to the paddocks each day, breathing the thick animal smell of them. Clouds of the red dust that they kicked up stained her baby clothes, their night-time bellows her lullabies. Her mother had tried, but couldn’t keep her away from them. Her dad taught her everything: feeding, dipping, vaccines; how to identify each individual animal from the mass of prints they left in the sandy ground. Her mother and sisters would see nothing but a mass of churned up hoof-prints, but a cattle farmer - a cattle farmer would know which individual beasts had trodden there, could recognise evidence of his own herd from those that would be from a neighbour’s, or a stranger’s herd. Rose learned all this from him, and had grown to know the personalities and moods of particular animals. She could feel the health of a beast as she drew her hand over its warm back, just as he did. She’d insisted on going to Agriculture College for her Diploma, while the other two went off to do commercial studies like normal girls. Well, it had worked out in the end: here she was, still on the farm, even after the invasions started she’d stayed at first, and here she was - still here, nine years later.

Not that she’d planned to be. She finally got pregnant with baby Petey after seven years of trying, little Joe growing up an only child almost. Kev was clear after Petey arrived: they had to move out, give up on Zim, find a new life somewhere else. And they had, they’d been in Zambia, Kev managing a building site in Lusaka and she hadn’t minded too much, better for the kids to be out of the chaos. Who knew what would happen next? She’d worried of course, her dad battling to keep the farm, mom stoical as hell next to him. After the first trouble though, after Stevens was taken off his farm and shot dead up near Harare, her father had re-built the house back into the fortress it had been in the war years. He took on each ragged group that turned up at the farm gates with their scrawny cattle, settling down there with their cooking pots, as defiant as him, determined as him. Still, he’d agreed that she and Kev should get the hell out – take care of the boys – start a new life – so they had. Her parents had managed, at first. They’d been lucky, really. Ma Groebler and her son, on the next farm, shot through the window as they sat by the fire one night, dogs poisoned, him dozing and too slow to pick up his gun. It could have been her dad and mom. But no, not really, not luck - her dad was a different sort of guy to the Groeblers, tough but not vicious, and the Afs knew it. They’d never been set on killing him, just getting rid of him.

He’d grown up tough: his own father died when he was only thirteen, mother an alcoholic, running the herd down from three thousand to three hundred before he took a stand, at sixteen mind, telling her to hand it all to him or he’d leave home. So, she had and he’d made a go of it.

He’d done his bit for Rhodesia as well, when he had to, fought in the war but then took Mugabe at his word and stayed on after Independence. Funny as it turned out those had been some of their best years – he’d bought up a couple more farms from neighbours who couldn’t take a black government after all those promises of victory from Smith, those who took the gap and moved down south, selling up cheap to go. She couldn’t imagine her dad taking any gap, running away. What would he have done in any case?

They had twenty years of a good life after Independence, and then it all blew up with the war vets. Too good to last. He did what he could and fought for every inch. Even so he was forced to give up acre after acre until the farm was a remnant of its original size. But he managed to protect his pedigree herd and kept it as separate from the invaders and their mongrel cattle. They coped with the theft of fencing and poles and the terrible hamstringing. Hamstringing - they hadn’t needed to take out their grievances on the cattle. As the months went on she and her mom spoke quietly on the phone when he was out of hearing, thinking up ways to persuade him to give up, neither prepared to start the conversation. Her dad had not lived through the war years for nothing. She remembered how he would drive away on call-up to fight the bastards in the bush, all those times he hugged her mom and his little girls, and the crying, and the standing there in his dust, watching him hurtle the pick-up down the drive, and each time, one of those who came back unharmed. He’d not been through all that to give up to rabbles of unwashed peasants at his gate, no matter what.

Her mom had tried, eventually, just the once. ‘Can’t we sell up and go overseas?’

‘Sell up!’

‘You’re not too old. You could do something else. We could run a pub in Scotland. Some of your dad’s people are still there.’

‘What are you talking about? I don’t want to run a pub, woman. In Scotland or blerrie Timbuktu. I’m a farmer. I’m staying put. Here. On my land.’

Of course, she and Kev had had to come back. The labourers left, terrorised off the farm, so her dad and mom were left coping mostly on their own. It was all too much. It started to show in him.

She stood up, she’d go and have a fag first, take a walk out to her dad’s tree, and then she’d make the call. It was the place where she’d find him, when he wanted a moment on his own, off down the track to the dip, where he used to watch the herd, gently bumping up against each other. She would stand with him under the single gum tree that stood sentinel over the road to the homestead. That tree, with its top branches floating against the high flawless sky, was his favourite place to light a Kingsmill and look over the daily routine, to sniff at the breeze and inhale his cattle. The memories of him were as aching here as in the office. They should have noticed earlier how much he’d been weakening, but every day had been a drama. They’d got used to all the upheavals as if they were part of everyday life.

Then, there was that morning the letter had been delivered. After that he’d gone downhill so fast. She’d never forget it, that letter, that morning. He’d stormed into the kitchen followed by his foreman, Tinashe, interrupted the lunch preparations, where she and her mom were having a coffee together. He’d thrown down a scrappy piece of paper onto the kitchen table between them: lined, torn out of a cheap, school exercise book.

Her mom had picked it up. ‘What’s this?’

‘Read it. Read the blerrie thing.’ It was written in ball pen, and she read it out loud, her two kitchen girls, Rose and Tinashe listening.

*Dear Mr Mutrie*

*If you recall very well that in Feb 2000 I took occupation of Bonnington Farm with more than 200 villagers and war vets. I spoke to you on two occasions and I deployed my people to Bonnington farm which you claim to be yours.*

*Just to remind you Sir reports that I received clearly indicates that your cattle are better off than my people. Please don’t trouble my people leave them to do their farming activities where I left them.*

*To be short if you were a wise man, there is noway you can remain on Bonnington farm. Black natives of this country the ones I left on the farm now want their Birthright. Remove your stock and leave the farm to its rightful owners who are the landless Black Zimbabweans. Please. Please cooperate.*

*Captain Francis Zimuto. Black Jesus*

‘Oh Joe, what does this mean now?’

‘It means fucking nothing. More rubbish. Ignore it. Burn the fucking thing.’ The dogs were going mad, the sound of bare feet stamping the earth, pangas scraping against the security fence, war songs thudding through the air. It hadn’t been like this for a while.

‘Tinashe let the dogs out. I’ve had enough,’ he shouted. He thundered out of the kitchen, like his old self, down the corridor to their bedroom, fumbling among the keys at his waist for the one to the gun cupboard.

‘Tinashe, wait! Don’t let them out. Just stay here. Wait there mom,’ and Rose had run off after her dad.

‘Dad stop. You can’t go out there with a gun. It’ll mean the

end.’

‘It is the end. I’ve had it. I’ll kill the fucking bastard. Black fucking Jesus. Who the hell is that?’

‘Dad, no. Calm down man. Wait. It’s what he wants, can’t you see that? After all these years they want you to crack.’ She’d put her hand on his arm, gently pushing him away from the racks of pistols and rifles hanging in neat rows in what ought to have been a wardrobe. ‘Dad it’s only a note. It doesn’t change anything.’

‘You’re dam right. You think I’m going to let a fucking note from an illiterate kaffir change anything?’ He was spitting, panting, his face blistering with rage.

‘No dad man. That’s not what I’m saying. You’ve had letters galore from God knows who telling you to give up the farm and they haven’t changed anything all these years. Don’t crack on this one. Come on, dad. We’ll ignore it like the others.’

Back in the kitchen the girls had the kettle on, hot rooibos tea for everyone, laced with condensed milk. It wasn’t like him - this explosion. He usually managed to keep his cool. Had he lost more weight even then? Should she have noticed? They didn’t have much time to notice each other in those days.

‘What do you think of this, hey Tinashe? Who is he?’ His foreman hunched into his shoulders, looking at the floor, silent. ‘Well answer me!’ They’d all jumped at the fury of him.

‘He was a Captain in the war baas.’

‘That was twenty five fucking years ago! What’s this calling himself Jesus? Going around killing people and calling himself Jesus for Christ’s sake.’

Anne passed him the tea in his favourite fat mug and Rose had remembered, ‘He’s the guy who stood outside the British High Commission in Harare with a cross last year and told them to crucify him - you remember?’

‘He is saying he is liberating his people from the oppressors, like Jesus did baas.’

‘And you think you need liberating, do you? To go back to your fucking village and starve?’

‘No, baas. I am not one of his followers.’

‘Let him be dad. It’s not his fault. Go and feed the dogs, Tinashe. Calm them down. It’ll blow over.’ Rose, the pacifier, managing her father in ways he’d never needed managing in the past.

He’d got sicker – the stress, not surprising, and finally he agreed to go to Harare for a consultation and some tests. They didn’t have enough medical insurance and had to make difficult decisions about what tests to go forward with. His continued tiredness, aching muscles and loss of weight now – was it cancer? In Harare they said it wasn’t, but the tests didn’t tell them what it was.

She’d taken charge. Her mom was good at the farm but out of her depth with illness. She struggled to confront what was happening. ‘Dad, we need to get you down south to Jo’burg and get somebody else to take a look at you.’

‘I’ll be all right, my girl. Just let me rest a couple of weeks.’

‘Dad you’ve been resting and you’re not getting better.’

‘But she’s right, love,’ Anne joined in. ‘We should get you looked at down south.’

‘What about the animals - we can’t all run off and leave the farm.’

‘Tinashe will manage, dad. It won’t be for long.’

They’d all gone, not safe to leave the children on the farm with the girls these days. It wasn’t cancer, it was kidney failure and he needed urgent and regular dialysis treatments, three times a week for six weeks to start with. Even if they could afford that now, then what? After that? Would he be better? And why kidney disease? Where had that come from? None of them could understand it. He wasn’t a drinker - learned that lesson early on from his mother. They stayed in a friend’s apartment in Johannesburg and Rose took on each day as a personal battle for her father’s life, never thinking she had it in her, to approach doctors and bureaucrats and health insurance clerks and plead; they were not a pleading sort of family. She’d finally managed to get him a cheap bed at a government hospital, sharing a room with nine other wasted men, all Africans, all dying of illnesses related to AIDS. He got the dialysis but he couldn’t stand the hospital, begged to go back to the farm. The hospital was killing him. He needed the smell, the noise of the herd, the routine of the farm - they would make him feel better.

So, they’d gone home. There was no cash for any more treatment and when it seemed impossible that there was any way forward, when it seemed they would have to watch him fade and die in front of them, again it was Rose who heard the rumour through the white grapevine.

‘Mom, I’ve looked it up on the British website. It’s true and there’s a chance you and dad will qualify.’

‘I don’t know what you mean really love. They’ll pay for us to go and live in the UK?’

‘Yes, that’s it. It’s called the Zimbabwe Resettlement Programme. It’s only on for a few months though, so we’ll have to move fast. They’ll take you back to the UK and house you, and take care of dad.’

‘He’ll never go.’

‘He has to mom. He’s going to die here if we can’t get him on dialysis, and we haven’t anything left. It’s our only option. You’re going to have to persuade him. There’s no time left.’

‘How do you know they’ll take us? Why should they?’ They looked together at the High Commission website: bald instructions that could save his life. You had to be over seventy, no resources, illness could supersede the age restriction, you had to have right of abode in UK.

‘Dad’s father was Scottish, right? And you have to be broke.’

‘Well, we surely are that, love. Broke and at the end of a rope.’

He was too ill to argue against both of them, both his women setting their faces together against him. ‘But make no mistake, I’m coming back; when I’m well I’m coming back. To hell with re-settling. They can’t keep me in Pongoland when I’m well.’

So, on this condition they had driven him away one early morning, slowing down under his gum tree to wait for the last of the herd to move out to the feeding station; her mom held his hand as they listened to the breath of the wind in the high branches, the windows of the pick-up open to let in as much of the farm as was possible. Her parents never held hands. She watched him through the mirror, sucking in the dusty air, breathing in his herd, to last him while he was away, turning his face up to the sun as the truck jolted down the track to the tar road.

But he never left his animals behind, he carried them with him in doctors’ waiting rooms and NHS hospital corridors; their problems and issues around their daily routines sustained him, distancing him from the humiliations of the health service that was trying to save his life. He continued managing them, taking urgent phone calls from that hot, untidy office advice, answered all her questions, talked cattle with his daughter. The Manchester council flat belonged to a life he would never accept as his own.

She’d been there just the once, to help arrange the funeral. He’d lasted ten months in UK, having received all the treatment available. Marvellous treatment. They’d clubbed together for the fare and decided she was the one who should go to help her mother through it. She’d hated it as much as she was sure he had. The endless rain weeping down the tiny lounge window looking out over the red-brick estate, the box of a room, the donated TV set with its streams of mindless ads that drove her crazy. What must they have done to him? But her mother – she loved it! She’d dived into British life with its NHS, its unaccountable luxuries and Benefits and never looked back: Morrison’s meat counter and its special offers – she’d got oxtail for him a couple of times; The Tesco Club card vouchers; the definite fact that the electricity would be there, all the time, that the TV would not suddenly go off, or darkness descend in that implacable moment of loss. She made the neighbours talk, keeping her lights on all day and night, just because she could - all that electricity pouring in, whenever she wanted it, and cheery Radio 2 all in English. And the kitchen, the handy kitchen just big enough - no accumulated piles of unused plates, oversized casserole dishes, black cast-iron pans too heavy to lift. They’d all thought she wouldn’t cope in the UK - having to do her own cleaning and washing, and she’d never really learned how to cook - the domestics had done all that. But it hadn’t mattered at all - the wonderful ready meals, unbelievably good, delivered to the door; a washing machine, a tumble dryer. She found a Jamaican mother and daughter to come in once a week and tickle round. Everything was easy, and stress-free: long nights of peaceful sleep uninterrupted by unintelligible songs and warring feet, flickering fires beyond the fence; the only noises here were a few drunks rolling out of the local pub. It was like coming to paradise, that’s what she told Rose many times.

‘Mom?’

‘I’m here, my girl. How are you? How’s everything?’

Rose adjusted a favourite photo of her dad that she’d recovered from her bedroom. She set it here, in front of her, on his desk where he belonged. She gazed at the photo - her father walking behind his herd one late afternoon, his elongated shadow not quite catching up with the shimmering animals in front of him.

‘We’re all fine. It’s a quiet week. No catastrophes for once. Things seem to be settling down.’

‘Well that’s some good news anyway, hey?’

‘Have you changed your mind mom? About coming back home…now?’

‘No, love. I’ve told you I’m alright here. Good neighbours - that Dolly’s turned out a friend you know, she’s always popping in for a cuppa, and the warden keeps an eye on us.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. There’s plenty of Zimbos in the UK these days you know. At my age I’ve got to think about the NHS – it’s marvellous my girl. I’m on the list for my knee op. Rose ... it wasn’t their fault.’

‘I know that mom.’

‘It’s you and Kev and the boys I’m thinking about.’

‘They’re all ok, mom. Kev’s still got that building contract in Harare so he’s away a lot, but at least some cash is coming in. The boys are just ok. Growing, naughty as hell; I’ll send you the latest video of little Petey with the dogs.’

‘You mustn’t think you’ve got to keep on, you know, nobody will blame you.’

‘I promised him, mom. We’re ok. I’m going to beat the buggers.’ That was his phrase: ‘I’m going to beat the buggers’. Maybe he would have, if he hadn’t got sick. She remembered the way the specialist in South Africa had taken her aside and explained her father had contracted brucellosis. He said that cattle farmers caught it from their animals sometimes, and kidney failure was a rare complication if it wasn’t diagnosed and treated in time. Joe’s hadn’t been. She still couldn’t decide what good it would do to tell her mother the cause of his death.

*Note: The letter is a copy of an actual note received by a farmer in the Masvingo District.*

THE PIANO LESSON

They fell out of the back of the pick-up in a jolted heap of cast-off jeans and worn out trainers, clutching half bottles of cane spirit and dirty cartons of Chibuku beer, mostly empty now, filling the air with forced laughter. One of them had a tinny radio and a couple of the others moved to the insistent beat of a township jive, their thin limbs poking into the air in some sort of time to the complicated rhythms. Without looking at the little group of white people directly, and for Tonderai it was easier not to after that first glance, easier to lose himself in the small sweaty mob, none of them really listening to final instructions before the big man’s goon drove away in a spray of spitting gravel. They all paused, and he could feel their tension was a great as his; they’d never done anything like this before.

Nobody wanted to be the first: the first to open the inoffensive garden gate, secured only with an ordinary latch, no razor wire, no security fence. He certainly didn’t want to be the first to force himself to saunter down the short drive and up the three cement steps to the veranda of the neat bungalow to confront the huddle of old people waiting there, watching them. He didn’t want to be the first to push his way through the front door, deliberately light a cigarette and blow smoke into their faces, drop the hot matches onto their precious carpet, and start what they had talked about on the way from Harare in the back of the truck: how they would do it, the job they had been brought here for.

But Tonderai, the thinnest of them, the tallest, the one whose nickname on the streets was The Cricket, found himself first down the drive after all, the pack close behind, gulping down the last of the alcohol. There were two Madams and in front of them, trying to be the one to face them first, an old baas – scared to death and trying not to show it - bald head, stocky, tough looking, still some fight left him in. There were no guns.

The others were crowding round his back now - come on – just get in – what are you waiting for – ignore the old people – get past them – just get in –

He could see the women did not understand their language, but the baas did. ‘What do you want? What are you looking for? There is no land here – it’s just this garden.’

* What’s he saying? – do not listen to him – the old snake – get in there -

just get in.

They suddenly exploded behind him and all four of them burst across the narrow stoep and crashed into the cottage sitting room, jostling about among the old furniture, caught in the light of the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows. He could see the distant purple of the Nyanga mountains looking like a poster he had seen once in a travel agent window in Harare. Even in all this confusion it was too beautiful to ignore. He’d never dreamed he would one day find himself in this place, where the big people come for their holidays and yet here he was, noticing the view, feeling strange from the unaccustomed alcohol, while the others crowded about and sorted themselves out. They remembered their plans and lit their cigarettes, and dropped their matches and blew their smoke.

The white people followed them inside, the two women both held a hand up to their chests, clutching at their hearts; he had seen his mother stand like that with his grandmother at home, waiting to be told of another calamity about to fall around them, like the day the headmaster had sent home all the children whose school fees were unpaid and he was one of them. After some pushing and shoving and throwing cushions on the polished floor, the others sprawled in the armchairs, two of them spread-legged on an ancient sofa, letting ash fall, tossing their empty cartons on the floor, not quite sure what next, leaving it to him to tell them what the boss had told them to say.

‘You have to leave this place, baas.’

‘What do you mean? Who are you?’

‘We are here on the business of Comrade Mutasa. He is the one that sent us.’

‘But what do you mean? He was here last week and we heard he was to take the property at the end of the road. Nobody mentioned this one.’

Tonderai knew nothing of the ins and outs of the Comrade’s decisions, just that this property was now on his list and his boys were here to make sure the baas and his family left. They had twenty four hours to pack and leave.

It wasn’t as bad as he expected: the man turned to his women and explained in English and only one of them burst out crying. He could see they were sisters, same grey eyes and pointed noses; he’d grown up seeing women like them on the streets of Harare, stepping into the fancy shops on First Street – Barbours, Greatermans – past the security guards he’d never dare face. The one who didn’t cry, the wife, remained steady, a homely, round face like his mother in a way, her eyes gazing wide at him without a flicker, her hand still on her heart. The husband did not remain calm.

‘What the hell’s the matter with you people? Haven’t you taken enough from us already? We’ve nothing left. Where do you think we can go?’

‘Bill, that’s enough. These boys can’t do anything about it. Get the suitcases. The packing cases are out in the garage. We’ll have to call Jed to help us again.’

He had been told this couple had been chased away from their fruit farm two years ago, and were used to it, so he wasn’t surprised they would just get ready and go. The boss man had said they were old, that four of them would be enough to scare them off; there would not be any fight in them. The others shifted themselves up and out of the furniture now the talking was over and it was all settled, and set off prowling round the room, shouting at each other to look at this crazy picture of white men in red suits on horses, or that pot thing in the shape of a fat man’s face with ears for handles. The Shona rang out, clattering among the teak shelves and beloved mementos - more fragile now than they had been for years. They moved through the kitchen, banging down a pan or two as they passed, thought about smashing cups and plates from the counter top, but couldn’t bring themselves to follow through – the waste.

They marauded through to the bedroom part of the house, peering in at a small bathroom, too luxurious with its hot and cold taps and white rolls of toilet paper stacked high on a shelf . One of the boys seemed unable to help himself and strode in, turning on both taps, taking up the round pink soap that matched the towels, holding it in his palms under the hot water, feeling the silky heat of it through the suds. He turned and threw the soap into the bath where it fell with a loud skittering bang, marched out to join the others, leaving the water to pour, bountiful and wasted, into the sink. Tonderai went in after him, picked up the soaphimself, rolling it in his palms, under the flow of hot water, before placing it back and turning off the water.

They were crowding into a bedroom now, staring round at the heavy wardrobes and a double bed, neat under candlewick with a matching cushion on the pillows. A cross over the bed, crucifix paintings on more than one wall – Jesus dead in despair, he seen similar when he used to go to church with his mother - photographs in frames on bedsides. The wife turned round from her dresser, watching them jostle round her room, and said to Tonderai, ‘Please get those two suitcases from the top of that wardrobe,’ and she pointed to them behind him.

His long, skinny arms easily lifted them down, dropping them noisily at her feet as the gang exploded with whistles and taunts and repetitions – please get the suitcases – please get the suitcases – please - please – the suitcases -. Shouting the words to each other, falling about pushing each other, laughing away down the corridor, still pumped up by the alcohol.

Then they found the television and collapsed in front of a football match – Sunday afternoon, there was always a football match. The white people went about their business: books were collected from shelves; ornaments and Jesus pictures disappeared into tissue paper and boxes; curtains were unhooked as the afternoon slid away and the boys slumbered in drink.

Tonderai felt a hand on his shoulder, soft, shaking him. He snapped awake and to his feet, surprised, glaring at her. ‘Are you hungry?’ His mother’s question. ‘We’ve cooked sadza for you and your friends.’

He kicked their ankles and told them – the Madam has cooked food for us. They woke and strolled outside into the garden, pissing away the alcohol, and then remembered the bathroom and the pink soap and hot water, but she had a tin bowlful and a jug to pour over their hands, in their own way of washing before they sat at the table, the plates they had not smashed in front of them and she and her sister served the sadza and plenty of good goat stew. They were as ravenous as they always were, but ate neatly with their washed hands and didn’t speak until there was none left, and then there were big tin mugs of sweet Tanganda tea. Full, they stood and thanked her, clapping hands as they had been taught when they were children, polite now, and trying not to be ashamed.

‘Where is the baas?’ he asked.

‘He is still packing.’

The others went out into the twilight, sitting on the floor of the stoep, backs against the house wall, smoking, picking teeth, and murmuring now and then, as if they were interested, about the football scores for Dynamos this season. But mostly they were quiet. Tonderai went back into the sitting room, couldn’t sit down but moved between the pieces of furniture round the room, touching, moving his hand across dressers, chairs and sofas.

‘How will you take this furniture, Madam?

‘We have a friend with a truck. The baas called him. He will help us. He’s done it before.’ She moved round him to empty a small bookcase. ‘Why are you doing this to us?’ Standing there, holding some photographs in their frames to her chest.

‘We have nothing to do, Madam. I am in Harare doing nothing every day. There is no work for us.’

‘But why this?’

He shrugged, ‘We were at the market. Those two youngest boys – they were selling airtime, and that other tall one he is my friend Julius, him and me were making a plan to get vegetables from Mbare market and sell to the white ladies in Avondale. But our problem was we had no money.’ A pick-up had stopped and they were called over, offered beer and cane spirit and thirty dollars each, US$, given instructions by somebody it was better not to ask questions of and driven the three hours there and then, out of Harare, here to the mountains, and off-loaded at their gate. ‘I finished Form Five Madam, and still I have nothing for my mother. There are no jobs.’

‘You did your ‘O’ levels?’

‘Yes, Madam. I got my English, History and Shona and Maths.’

‘You should get a job with qualifications like that.’

‘There is no work, Madam. The factories are closing everywhere.’

His nervy wanderings took him to the piano in the corner: high polish, beloved, tuned and much used. His hands moved onto the white and black keys, the way he’d seen keyboard players do it in dancehalls, but when he did it now, jarring them down, the noise was ugly and meaningless.

‘Here, let me show you,’ and she sat down, moved her hands and something beautiful floated out into the quiet room. ‘Sit here,’ and she patted the stool and moved to make space for him at her side and he could smell the pink soap of her as he sat. She showed him how to hold his long fingered hands to crouch over the notes. She explained there were only seven notes, repeated over and over along the long length of the keys, and let him press them and hear the octaves change. She showed him how to find middle C, and called it The Cat and showed him the patterns of the black and white notes and they found all the Cats on the keyboard, always the same distance of eight notes apart. After C, next to it came note D – The Dog, with its two black notes looking like dog ears, close together, then The Elephant, E, always next to The Dog. After that The Frog and then The Giraffe, and Ant and finally The Bear. Then the animals all started again: C< D< E< F< G < A< B always in the same order, living in the notes and working with each other, not so mysterious as a piano had always seemed. He pressed the notes and repeated their names, easy to remember the animals in a line following each other.

‘What is your name?’

‘My name is Tonderai Chiyangwa, Madam.’ He wouldn’t dream of asking hers.

‘Watch carefully now, Tonderai,’ and her skilful fingers spread wide across the animals and she sang the Happy Birthday song, with his name, very quietly. ‘You try.’

He couldn’t get it at first, fingers not obeying, animals not in the right order.

‘Relax. Try again.’ And she took hold of his hands with their dirty finger nails and laid them gently where they should be to start off, finding the D and the A notes. ’Like this.’ And this time it sounded like it, the tune he heard sometimes dropping out of cafes in Harare when the waiters gathered round with a sparkler firework on a cake, singing to some happy customer surrounded by a celebrating family.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ and Tonderai jumped up as if the piano stool had suddenly caught fire, backing away from the white baas, advancing across the room. ‘What in hell’s name are you doing, Clara?’

The shouting brought everybody piling into the room, the boys crowding towards Tonderai. What now? Nobody sure what was happening.

The Madam answered, looking down at her hands, resting on the keys, ‘I was giving Tonderai a piano lesson.’ The baas snatched up a last photo, a large one in a silver frame from the top of the piano.

‘That’s Robbie’s piano! For Jesus’s sake how can you do that?’

Tonderai waited for her to speak, looked at her sitting alone in the corner of the room on the piano stool, her hands still spread over the keys, almost felt the breath leaving her body as she sighed. ‘It’s exactly for His sake. He has His reasons for everything served on us. Look at that boy - they would be the same age.’

‘What’s got into you Clara? A street boy….a….a terrorist, forcing us out of our home. How can you mention our Robbie in the same breath?’

‘Give me the photo Bill,’ swivelling round to face her husband and took it from him. ‘See,’ and she held it out to Tonderai - a photo of a tall young man, face almost hidden under a crash helmet, straggling legs astride his motor bike, careless, laughing at his mother’s anxiety before setting out to ride his bike on the country’s pot-holed roads.

That night the boys bedded down together on the rugs in the sitting room, wrapped in the family’s blankets. They heard the Madam playing hymns on the piano each time one of them rolled over; Tonderai shushing any of them who complained and they listened to the soft music, the familiar church tunes they had all grown up with, hearing her small voice singing praises to her God. The next morning she and the sister fed them soft porridge with as much sugar as each wanted and as they were getting themselves up from the table she asked them, ’Will you accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour?’ They all looked at each other without speaking and Tonderai knew what would happen. Each one of them agreed. Yes, Madam, they would. They fell to their knees on the hard stone floor and closed their eyes as she stood over them and blessed them, her silent sister by her side.

Tonderai asked her, ‘If I see you in Harare Madam, will you know me? After this?’

Then they carried out the instructions of the baas to pack the vehicles with the boxes and furniture and suitcases exactly the way he wanted. The piano was the last item to be lifted and fixed securely with ropes and cardboard. And when the family left they sat in the shade on the steps smoking the last of their cigarettes, waiting for the Comrade to come from Harare to take them back to the streets they had come from.

THE STEADY BOOKKEEPER

Philemon pedalled slowly home in the cooling evening on the heavy, black bicycle. He was making his daily return home from Harare’s wide avenues to a neat, cement block house in the township, not yet completely painted on the outside, but finished well enough inside, with its small bathroom and a flushing toilet when there was water. It was Friday and the weekend atmosphere was strong in the air as he cycled past the maize sellers with their scavenged barbecues put together from halves of oil drums and chicken wire, the cobs blackening in their leafy skins, the smoky sweet, end of day smell drifting over the road. On other weekends it had been enticing enough to stop, pass a joke with the vendor, bite into the hot juicy seeds, relax into Friday night. Not today.

Children everywhere: some of the small girls carrying babies on their backs in imitation of their mothers; others in neat school uniforms; little boys in ragged cast-offs laughing and shouting their way through football games on any patch of land, with anything that could be kicked – a tied up bundle of newspapers flashed in front of his handlebars. It was his world and a number of men, lounging tonight at roadside bars, called out casual greetings to him as he passed. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t bring himself even to wave an acknowledgement back. It wouldn’t be noticed in the general relief and relaxation of a Friday evening.

The immediate, suffocating waves of panic that had swept through his body this morning, driving him to the Gents to lean against the cubicle wall, heart racing, face burning in the air conditioning, had unravelled throughout the long day into hopelessness and an aching dread. His wife would be back by now from her job in the kitchen of a white family and would have the pot of heavy maize meal porridge simmering on the paraffin stove, maybe pumpkin leaves and peanut butter relish in the smaller pot next to it; his favourite. She was always so happy in that little square kitchen of her own, preparing his evening meal, expecting him home from work. It was only fifteen miles from the High Commission to this world of theirs in their township home, but the real distance between his experiences and the lifestyle he observed of his European colleagues was not measurable. He didn’t often think about them, but just now he couldn’t help it. They drove air-conditioned vehicles, rarely leaving the tar, and only then to follow well used dirt roads to expensive hotels by Lake Kariba, or to lodges in game parks where he and his wife would never be able to afford to sit, sipping sundowners and marvelling at the giraffes, the wildebeest, the big five of his country. His precious, imported South African bicycle, eleven years old now, was in its last resurrection: frame and spokes in deep, misshapen trouble, extras like mudguards and lights long gone. He couldn’t afford a new one: it was the unmade roads in his township that did it, the teeth-jarring corrugations and the meshwork of potholes. He was a local councillor and knew only too well the state of the township finances. Even when they had managed the budget to tar a few miles of the main road a couple of years ago, they had selected the cheapest bidder, and when last year’s heavy summer rains fell they had seen how the thin tarmac crumbled along the road edges like stale cake, while the cracks ran across the road as fast as the scrawny chickens.

He thought about some of the individuals he worked with in that air-conditioned office in the centre of Harare; not bad people, with their sharp, clever voices raised in self-conscious opinions at their endless meetings and some of them even had experience, as well as qualifications. But what was the nature of this experience? Did their experience of Kenya, of Tanzania, of all the countries of his continent, add up to very much? He had never really considered it before, but today, on his way home on that rough and familiar road, he pondered it with a quiet despair. In the office they had jobs as Advisors and Managers, their positions spelt out on their office doors. Advising on what? Managing what? His country?

How could they possibly know his country, if they had never done so much as taken a journey on a local bus? Felt, instead of the cushioning of their unblemished Range Rovers, the un-forgivingness of a long-distance bus seat, shared with two other sweating passengers, and usually more, crushed together in an uncomplaining crowd all eager and thankful to have at least squeezed themselves in and be on their way; tasted through open windows the rush and grittiness of the hot, high veldt wind instead of the controlled whisper of cooled air from carefully positioned vents; absorbed into their chests the bass notes of the sleepless bus radio, and joined in the laughter and conversation of fellow passengers about the state of the road, the driver, the government. You would smell the journey as you travelled it with them, the red earth and the wood-smoke of cooking fires in the rustle of their every movement. Would it help his colleagues to understand what they wrote their briefing papers on, held their meetings about – their newly devised Poverty Strategies and their Rural Livelihoods Initiatives – if they sat for four or five hours in the only mode of transport available to people whose life, from being born to their dying day, was a strategy to cope with poverty?

He lifted his eyes from their concentration on the road and took in the daily, dying perfection of the sinking sun. His regular, end-of-month journeys home to the village to see his mother would finish with his walk along a red dirt road, eyes screwed up against the scarlet glory of another sunset. He loved his village home: a group of three thatched round houses, and a newer, square cement block kitchen with a corrugated roof, all enclosed by a low mud wall in a spacious plot – still reigned over by his unyielding mother. She was one of those allocated a small plot from one of the divided white farms, as a war widow it was at least some legacy from a father he’s never met, killed in the liberation war and buried in the District Heroes Acre. Small though it was it was too much for her with no help from government to plough it, no seeds or fertilizer subsidies any longer. It didn’t matter; he was there for her. Of course there was no water supply to the house, but the new central standpipe in the middle of the village had ended her daily trudge to the river to carry, in a heavy zinc bucket on her carefully poised head, every drop of water the household would use. The taps in the Gents at the office were also new, and switched themselves off automatically, but not immediately, after use. He would often stand there wiping his hands on a paper towel, watching this wasted, unheeded water spiralling down the drain for long, useless seconds. After seeing his mother’s shining eyes on a visit the week-end after the German aid project had installed the standpipe, listening to her tell him of her membership on the Village Pump Maintenance Committee, whose formation was a condition of this particular European largesse, he had stopped himself telling her about the new taps in his office.

She was so very proud of him, her son, a bookkeeper, in an embassy, in town. Every single moment of the struggle to keep him in school uniform at the mission school had been worth it. Working in white peoples’ kitchens (and being careful with how much of their washing up liquid and toilet cleaner she used, and being told when she wasn’t careful enough); selling bananas and mangoes for cents from her little garden; making crocheted doilies for sale on the Saturday streets. Ah - she had worked hard. But God had then granted the fees and a uniform bursary and her part then had been very small after all. Philemon had heard his mother say these things so many times, and knew how her heart swelled when he was able to carry in to her without fail at the end of each month, before the neighbours’ eyes, the large sacks of sugar and mealie flour and packets of Tanganda tea, cooking oil – even sometimes a cotton pinafore dress from the ‘God Help Us’ mini-mart on the edge of his township.

The burden of his mother’s happiness in him had become an almost unendurable weight on his life these days. In any case he’d never told her how much he hadn’t wanted to become a bookkeeper, how he had loved reading and writing stories and making up poems when he was at school, how the Fathers had encouraged him to study literature and wanted him to carry on to do ‘A’ levels and think of a degree. He had never allowed himself even to consider these as possibilities in his life. Bookkeeping was the first step to becoming an accountant. It was a sure step to a steady job and security. – bookkeepers were always in demand and two months ago he had finished his level one accountancy course by correspondence from the University of South Africa, the gateway to advancement for so many of his school mates all in the same perilous boat of life that was Zimbabwe.

On this Friday evening, steering around the worst of the potholes and bouncing through the others, pedalling home in his shiny suit, he tried to keep his mind on thinking about what he should do, but it could not face up to the heaviness of the problem and he found his thoughts spiralling back to his colleagues. Of course they were nice and well-meaning people, mostly. They kept themselves to themselves, and others like them: having dinner at each other’s large houses, sitting round their swimming pools, drinking imported European beer and duty-free Scotch whisky. He was invited sometimes, at Christmas and staff farewells, and he and his wife in best Sunday-best would stand about, never sure what to say, but smile on the edge of animated groups of his minimum skirted, bare-backed female colleagues, men in T shirts and shorts – it being so nice to be so informal in Africa. Of course he and his wife had never returned any hospitality. How could they? There was only one lady on the staff he sometimes shared a beer with after work at the little Snackette caravan in the square outside the office, balancing on the dusty wire chairs under the shade of the syringa trees there. He almost knew it would be okay to suggest a meal at home to her. He thought she wouldn’t praise everything in that choking heartiness whites used to cloak their discomfort when they were away from the shelter of their managed African experience, wouldn’t patronise his lovely wife, wouldn’t eat only a mouthful of the unfamiliar food she had strained to prepare for them, or declare themselves to be vegetarian. He’d observed it all at the homes of the few African advisors on the staff, homes more well off than his, so – he was only almost sure, and he didn’t want to find out that he was wrong.

He heard his name shouted very loudly over the clatter and traffic.

‘Philemon! Philly! Over here brother.’

An old classmate was standing by a table at the roadside, waving at him. Philemon liked Samora, a planning officer in the Ministry of Finance, whose parents had been able to keep him at school. He’d got his economics degree and was on the up and up. They were not alike: Samora tall and thin, quick in his speech, eyes flashing with opinions that were sometimes shocking; he’d been like it all the way through school. Philly was aware of his own roundness when they stood next to each other, their school mates had always made jokes about the contrast in their styles – one like a goal post and the other the football. Maybe he could talk to him, ask his advice. He swerved the bicycle and stopped. Greetings were always boisterous with Samora, claps on the back, jokes, getting in the beer, and then he was instantly ready to recount his day.

‘We had that team of British consultants back in the Ministry today, taking up all our time,’ he complained immediately.

‘You mean that team working on the budget process? They were in the High Commission yesterday.’

‘Yes – your lot are paying for them aren’t they? Waste of money and our time, and we have to use the Ministry’s drivers to carry them from the hotel and back and then deal with their overtime requests. They don’t have a clue these whites – the trouble they cause, helping us.’ And Philemon tried to join in Samora’s boisterous laughter at his own joke.

He’d seen the team in the office being briefed by the Advisors, and also knew how government officers resented the time they had to spend with foreign consultants when they and their laptops descended on their offices. It wasn’t only the questions they asked and the time they took, it was the money they earned.

‘They must have some useful ideas,’ he ventured, the beer after all curdling in his stomach after one sip.

‘Of course they do! They tell us how to save money: cut-back the staff; reduce the pension burden on government; get rid of the maize subsidy; de-regulate the mini-buses. They agree with the World Bank and the IMF that we have to have cost recovery in the education and health sectors. You know yourself what that does to our people. And how many of us are on the streets now with all these dismissals. Saving money! What is it costing us in misery? And they’ll be hundreds more of us on the streets without work – more problems for us to deal with. Look at the farms issue – they wouldn’t be all this chaos if people were in work.’

Philemon knew all this very well and the conversation was not helping him to forget his problem. It had taken him four years, paying for his brother’s children’s school fees, to build up a debt of one thousand, two hundred and seventy eight pounds sterling: an amount that could be paid off by the fees to a single foreign consultant for two or three days work. His brother could not afford the school fees: his job was to be in charge of the Minister’s lift in the Ministry of Finance, to press the buttons to take the Minister and his *Very Important Visitors* up and down the dilapidated five-storey building and push open the gates at each floor. It wasn’t much of a job but he considered himself lucky still to have one. The IMF was forcing government to dismiss two thousand security guards to reduce the number of Permanent and Pensionable staff on the government payroll and these P & Pee’s were all men like his brother, with families to keep, rents to pay, children to support. Nobody knew what they would do without work.

Two or three years ago his brother had heard this same team continuing a low toned conversation with the Minister about this thing called cost-recovery and he’d told Philemon and the rest at local bar where they’d mulled it over, making a single warm Chibuku beer last all evening. They hadn’t known then what it would mean, how devastating it would turn out for everybody. Nobody knew what was worse, all the increases in fees for everything or the rising costs of bus fares and maize-meal when government had been forced to lift price controls and let the so-called free market impoverish them even further. Nobody knew what was free about this market. The IMF called their advice a ‘Structural Adjustment Programme’ and they learned that SAP’s were everywhere in Africa. On the streets it was jeeringly, and helplessly, known as the Stomach Adjustment Programme.

‘Hey brother – stay with me,’ Samora joked, breaking into his thoughts. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, yes. No problem. I was just thinking of my brother’s boys both getting malaria last rainy season and how much it cost to pay the clinic fees and for the medicine. It didn’t used to be like that.’ The thought of that extra cost he’d had to find, the worry of it all; his stomach clenched again.

‘That’s what I mean my friend. My folks don’t go to the clinic anymore. When they start with the shivers they get Fansidar over the counter and hope for the best.’

‘Yes – well, we didn’t want to risk the boys.’

‘Well,’ and Samora raised his plastic cup, ‘you don’t have to worry about clinic fees in that fancy job of yours with the British. And your mother is on a resettled plot. Hey man, you have it made boy!’ And he laughed and punched Philemon on the shoulder. That decided him; he couldn’t share anything with Samora after all, and refusing another drink he dragged his bicycle back to the road, saying goodbye, and yes, yes, agreeing to look out for each other same time, same place next week.

He set off again, feeling worse. He’d never been the radical Samora was, who’d caused a scandal at high school, ditching his given name and adopting that of the revolutionary first president of Mozambique after chasing away the whites. Away with missionary names! It had been his campaign for a while and now Philemon crossed over Samora Machel Avenue every day on his bike to work. He’d always felt lucky in his mother, his bursary and his mission education. It had never been heavy in his mind, the contrast between his life and the life of his colleagues at the office: it was simply this way with whites in Africa. They knew how to take care of themselves and they needed money and plenty of material things in order to be comfortable. On his side, his nephews had to have an education. He and his wife had never been blessed, and they didn’t know why, so to educate his brother’s sons was expected and they were good boys and much loved by his wife. It wasn’t something he resented but it was something he could no longer afford, also supporting his mother of course, and her older sister, his senior aunt. It was an impossible burden, but they looked to him and there was no question of saying no.

And so he had borrowed small sums from the office for school fees, textbooks, uniforms, bus fares – the latest clinic fees, and now the auditors from London were here and he had seen this morning that they had found him out. He couldn’t keep the bike straight, almost fell off it, let it drop and just made it behind a straggling bush to vomit out the beer and let what he had to face rise up through his throat, sour and inevitable.

His thoughts finally focused back on this one appalling fact. On Monday he would be called into the Chief Accountant’s office and would avoid looking at that row of emotionless faces. He was well liked, although they knew nothing of him, and they would be sorry, but there would be no alternative. At the very best he would be dismissed, and shamed; at worst he would be prosecuted. Best or worst, his days as a bookkeeper were finished. The news of the good mission boy’s fall would rocket around the township ‘rumour-radio’, fed by an efficient network of street gossip, and it would finally reach his mother in the village. He knew that of everything else, he could not face his mother with his shame. He knew also that he was not corrupt, not in the way Africa and Africans were held to be. He had read of the dizzying corruption of the Abachas and Mobutos, but also of corruption in London and Washington. In America, men capable of the most audacious corruption were bringing huge companies to their knees, losing the savings of thousands of people, even auditors themselves had been involved! There were newspaper pictures of them in court in their suits, looking grim, but smart and well fed and staring at the cameras. Philemon only knew that he was not like that, not able to face down the fact of his theft and the betrayal of the trust of his employer. He didn’t allow his mind even to approach the Council Chamber, his regular presence there a public affirmation of his standing in the community, his wisdom and probity.

He got back on his bike, pressing the pedals, facing the wrong he had done. He had thought he would pay it back once his promotion had come through: all those hours spent studying at night for his accountancy examination, using up his wife’s store of candles, screwing up his eyes for the figures. He was admired for his studies. Could he begin to explain to anybody and face the look in their eyes? His wife? His brother? The boys who looked up to him, their senior uncle? Could he explain his fallibility?

Well – he had seen the boys through to A level exams, and nobody could take that away from them, and the house was in his wife’s name, and nobody could take that small place away from her either. His mother had the farm in her own name. As these thoughts took shape in his mind he realised he had reached a decision on that miserable bicycle ride home to his wife, good Catholic upbringing notwithstanding. Though not the end of the month he would spend the weekend in the village, with his mother.

The news came to the office on Tuesday morning, brought by two policemen in a battered Land Rover, a UK donation from a previous cycle of aid. Philemon Phiri’s body had been found hanging from the old mango tree in the small woodland not far from his rural home early on Monday morning. He had used his high quality, High Commission tie. The funeral was held at the village on the Wednesday, and just one white person went from his place of work. By then everybody knew why he had killed himself, and Izzy stood in the sun at the back of the large, sad crowd gathered round the grave. It was freshly dug and the red African earth was heaped around it while family and friends manhandled the cheap coffin on its ropes down into its resting place and the black clad priest raised his hand over it in the finality of blessing. Flies and dust and heat hung over them all. As she listened to the familiar, slow swell of ‘Abide With Me’ rise up from the mourners, unaccompanied and miserably beautiful, she remembered the times she had shared beers with Philemon after work sometimes, and how they had seemed to get on together, though she’d no idea of his personal circumstances: the quiet man, ever-smiling over his calculator, who kept their books so well. He was always well informed about African politics, probably the biggest reader of the office newspapers, always worth talking to. She also recalled a snatch of conversation in the office some time back in praise of him.

‘A really nice, steady sort of chap,’ one of them had said.

‘Yes,’ another had agreed, ‘and not one of those always pleading for a loan before the end of the month.’

DEAR MOTHER

Dear Mother

Pastor Wilkes said it will be good for me to write to you. I talk about you all the time you see, and I think it’s getting on his nerves. He says it doesn’t matter if you never see it, it’s the writing of it that will be good for me. I know you will immediately ask – good for you how, Clara? I know you’ve never liked Pastor Wilkes so his advice will mean nothing to you. namby pamby you describe him. I don’t think either of us knows what that means do we, Mother? Where does it come from? It would be funny – if it wasn’t another way for you to disapprove of my choices. Anyway - my not sleeping disturbs Bill, and he needs his sleep. It’s not good for him, my spinning about every night, as if I was already in my own grave. So Pastor thinks that if I open up to you, instead of festering from the inside, I might feel better, and be able to sleep at nights.

You remember all that time ago when Busi didn’t iron my knickers on a hot enough setting and the putzi fly egg burrowed its way into my thigh from a seam? I thought it was just a bad mozzi bite, then Miss Anderson saw me changing at school and called you, I was only about nine, wasn’t I? There’s no way of getting them out before their time – we had to watch the redness and the lump grow into that boil, and the itch drove me mad – then when it had grown big enough and you thought you could see a black wriggle, you pressed it out like squeezing a thorn, and that disgusting caterpillar oozed out of my side. And you slapped me because I cried at the horribleness of it. I was a namby pamby then, wasn’t I?

Funny isn’t it? The idea that I talk about you to somebody else when you and I never really talked at all. Do I mean funny? No… I think the word is tragic.

But now I’ve started I think I’ll get the hang of this. I’d never use a word like ‘tragic’ to your face would I? What words would I use? What words do I remember you using?

* I’m perfectly all right thank you.
* Mind your own business.
* Just get on with it.
* Life wasn’t meant to be easy.
* Don’t make such a fuss.

That’s important isn’t it? Not making a fuss. You were always better than me though, at not making a fuss, tougher than me, tougher than all of us. All we went through – all we suffered you just carried on, and that’s how I think of you, carrying on, no matter what. No suffering was allowed to break us was it? But that’s another word we weren’t allowed to use. We didn’t suffer in our family, did we Mother? But I’m telling you now that I watched you suffering, though I would never dare say it to your face. All those years when I was a little girl and we lived in all that fear on the farm with the war on. But suffering and moaning about it, getting the hell out of it, that was for weaker folk. Us – we endured didn’t we? And here I am still – enduring, mother. So that’s a real lesson I learned from you. I should be grateful for that I suppose.

Pastor Wilkes says it will help me to write down thoughts and events that come into my mind, those that come time and again, so here’s another funny thing – I’m writing this from the bungalow we got for you, the one we never had the nerve to move you to, and after all we’ve ended up here instead. They had to change the age rule to let us in: we’re the youngest inhabitants of the Mutare City Bougainvillea Old Age Home. I think about this a lot, where Bill and I have ended up and I wonder if that makes you smile.

It’s quiet enough, lovely gardens, full of bougainvillea of course, scrambling all over the place. Bill calls it the Pink Palace. They can’t afford more than one gardener, and with the best will, it’s too much for the poor old chap; the flower beds are too big for him and you know how banana trees need cutting down all the time. There are plenty of old avocados – they put the benches in their shade. It’s all very thoughtful.

The piano helps of course, but only in some ways. Pastor Wilkes says I have to remember that God does not send anything that will not make me a better person, but I’d rather be a bad person – and still have Robbie. It’s not easy to understand how losing him will make me a better person but the Pastor says I know God’s time for him had ended. His life was fulfilled in God’s purpose. I don’t know how God came to make this decision. It’s hard to think you could fulfil a life’s purpose in only twenty six years, but Pastor Wilkes says God knows best and my only job is to learn to accept. I’m still trying to do that.

I can see your face as I write that last sentence. You never accepted anything, did you Mother? Every new disaster was a challenge, a battle to be entered into and fought, with all your might and never a thought of giving in...even you had to give in about Robbie though didn’t you? Even you never had it worse than that.

It was always hard to keep up with you in the heartbreak stakes. There was always something from your yesterday that had been worse than our today wasn’t there? My memory feels flimsy, soft round the edges compared to yours – yours would spear out, unleashed in a breath, flying the banners of the past, of your worst times, when you hadn’t panicked, when you’d held it together and you’d pulled us through and we can do the same now.

It was thinking of you, and what you wouldn’t give up, that made me insist we brought the piano from the cottage down here, and I’m glad of it, glad I still have that of Robbie’s. I remember you buying it for him – his seventeenth birthday present – you arranged for it to come all that way from Harare. Remember the fuss you made to find a company to meet your approval –to keep it safe. What boy wants a piano for his seventeenth? Our special boy hey Mother? That was a good job done, getting him that piano. That was something we agreed on, maybe like other mothers and daughters agree on things. And he loved it. Funny mixture of a boy – his motor-bike and his piano.

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Had to stop for a couple of days. It doesn’t matter what the Pastor say, writing about Robbie doesn’t seem to help me to accept. Not any part of it. The piano is him though, I feel him with me when I sit at it, even now. I told you about that day, a night and a day really, when those boys were brought from town to evict us from that little place we found after we were thrown off the farm. On Churchill Road in the back of beyond and we’d thought nobody would notice us there, but one of the bigwigs did, and that skinny lad, a township boy but for some reason he put me in mind of Robbie, he was taken by the piano. Bill was upset I showed him a few notes. I don’t know what got into me either. I suppose you would have shot him if you could.

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It’s another day. I can’t say writing to you has helped much so far. It keeps taking me back to Robbie when I meant to focus on you. There’s not a lot I can think of that we ever agreed on apart from the piano. You wouldn’t forgive me for being on Bill’s side about wanting to move you from your cottage on the farm would you? I know you loved living in the middle of the orchards, even after we had to put up the security fence and the generators to keep it going. You said they ruined the night – that they would wake the dead – and you hated the dogs we got for you. But in any case, none of that really changed it for you did it? You said you still smelled the life of the valley; you inhaled the suck of the fruit swelling you said. The fence didn’t stop the bulbuls chattering and fighting for the bird bath, the flycatchers dancing across the air – you said you’d miss the flycatchers, but we have them here you know, in this garden, swooping down from the banana trees. They look just the same as those in your garden.

It was my fault, making a fuss about you there on your own, but I couldn’t stand it, during the night, thinking of you in that place with only Forbearance for company – even older than you Mother – and those squatters surrounding you with their stamping and war songs and drums all night, the dogs going mad. You with that rifle you said you’d use if you had to. We could hear it from our place up the hill, thinking of the worse happening to you down there in the dark. You told us how you could bear it – in that way you have – that you’d been through worse in the war, with daddy away on call-up and you on guard watching over Connie and me every night; the farm road mined and the boys warning you next morning before you took us to school. You told us again and again how you came through those years. Those were your times, and I have to know our times now can never frighten you. And I suppose that means they shouldn’t frighten me.

That reminds me, do you remember Joseph? Your Joseph. He’s such an old madala now. Turned up here last week selling bananas of all things, as if we haven’t enough, from a battered handcart that looked as if it came up with the Pioneer Column! Honestly, you wonder how these people keep things going. We all recognised each other right away and him and Bill sat out there on the stoep reminiscing about you and dad and our old farm, when Connie and me were kids. He must be seventy five now, if he’s a day, and looks about a hundred, but he remembers working for the old baas in the back days. He was born on that farm of dad’s, he says. I know but he has to tell it, the way they do. I made rooibos tea for them. He asked for condensed milk; some things don’t change do they – sweet, sweet tea. He sat on the step while they talked. I think Bill was glad to see him.

He talked about Simon, that garden boy of ours they shot. I remember playing with him. He must have been only a kid himself hey? Joseph talked about him, about what a good boy he was and how angry the terrs were when they turned up to kill dad that weekend and they thought Simon had warned him so they shot him instead. It brought it all back, seeing him sitting there in his ragged trousers and an old Liverpool football top of all things! I found some cast offs of Bill’s for him, those cords you never liked. Forty years ago since that lad was shot and Joseph talked about it as if it was last week. Your times hey?

He still has grandchildren to put through school. That son of his died of AIDS some time back. He said he was a good boy, and the wife also died. We bought bananas from him. Seventy odd and still selling bananas on the street.

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And here again another day, and yes, I do think I slept better the last couple of nights. Bill thinks so. We talked about you and dad, after Joseph left, about the old days, how you had to be so strong, for dad’s sake, for our sake as kids; you had no choices. We went back into all that to help us understand why you wouldn’t give up and move in with us or down into town, into this bungalow. In hindsight it’s obvious that a few war vets singing and stamping all night couldn’t compare with what you’d been through with dad in the seventies. But you’re my mother. I wish you’d thought even for a moment, what it felt like for me, standing there listening in the dark, hearing them surrounding you, not knowing what would happen to you every single night, there on your own. Can’t you see why we wanted you in a safer place, with us in the house? But you wouldn’t entertain moving in with us would you? And do you know how hard that was to explain to people? That you lived on your own on a different part of the farm, coping with the invasions, you and Forbearance – two old ladies? You must see in your heart of hearts, we were only thinking of you. And after all, this place isn’t so bad you know. No it’s not a farm but you can be on your own if you want to. There are trees. You don’t have to mix. We manage.

I can’t remember you ever thinking I was good enough for you. I don’t know what I did wrong. I wasn’t a boy. Was that it? You already had Connie and you wanted a boy for dad for the farm, and she turned out so clever, off and away doing Maths and overseas to uni. And then you thought Bill and me were too young to get married, I could do better. What’s too young, Mother? What’s better? The only too young I have in my life is Robbie’s going. You blame me for that don’t you? I know you do. He shouldn’t have been allowed to have that bike you said, again and again. I tried – but how do you stop a twenty six year old from doing what he wants? You can’t. It’s that simple. You can’t. I couldn’t. You said I was his Mother and it was my duty, to keep him safe. I should have insisted he didn’t get a motor bike.

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I couldn’t write anymore yesterday, but here I am trying to think of something that was your fault, and I know this is not what my Pastor means about writing to you to feel better. But here it is. Something that was your fault. It was you encouraged Bill to stay on at Orchard Farm when the invasions kicked off. He’d thought about getting out right away, cutting our losses, but you, making him feel less than a man when you went on about how you and dad had stuck it out thirty years ago during the war, and that swayed him so we had to hang in. Well, you certainly stiffened his spine. He says it wasn’t your fault we stayed, he says he thought it through and thought it would blow over, that our farm wouldn’t be affected. He still insists it wasn’t your fault we stayed put till it was too late. Funny how it’s turned out that he’s sticking up for you.

He thought that all the ‘good things’ he’d done on the farm would make a difference. He’d been the first in the whole Province to hire a female farm manager and then took in all those students on attachment from the Agric College – the training of them, and the feeding. And you know who took it in the end? That Councillor, that so-called friend of his with the ridiculous name, Solicitor. I’ll never forget it, Solicitor Mahachi, Chairman of the local Council. Bill had actually taken him round to show him how it would be better for everybody if we were allowed to stay, all the improvements, the staff quarters, the wages being earned – all good for the District. He even showed him the books. Mr Councillor Solicitor decided it was too good an opportunity to miss, and so here we are now, in your Old Age bungalow instead of you.

He’s a good man though, Bill. You say soft. You remember how he’d give them all time off to go for that Peer to Peer AIDS counselling and I’d have to scour round the chemists in Mutare to find wholesale boxes of condoms every time I went into town? That used to make us laugh Mother, didn’t it? We did laugh about that. You said the chemists would think I was running a rural brothel.

Bill has rows of files you know, all his records, ready for the day he can go to Court and make a claim. He even looks on that Google Earth and tries to count his trees – he estimates there are 30,000: apples, apricots, plums, nectarines, lemons, pears. I don’t know how he works that out but you remember all the work, all the years, expanding the orchards? Building all those miles of trellising, putting money into pruning towers, training and packing and transport. There were 300 trees when we bought the place in ’82. All the profits – everything, ploughed back. He really believed in the new Zimbabwe in those days.

For what? That’s what he asks almost on a daily basis. For what? I don’t think he’ll ever get over it, sitting here day after day, counting trees on his laptop, sorting out those files again and again, repeating that here we are, in our fifties, finished.

And that’s where we’ll be in the wrong again won’t we, Mother? You never allowed anything to finish you did you? If I asked you for advice what would you tell us to do? Don’t tell us to farm again, there’s no chance of that for any of us anymore. I give piano lessons, and believe it or not Bill is sometimes asked advice on fruit farming from the blacks, and gets a few dollars from that. We should do more shouldn’t we? Show the buggers. That’s what you always did, showed the buggers. I’m going to finish now for today. I need to ask you a question but I need to feel fresh to do it.

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And now, well you showed us didn’t you? Those appointments at the doctor – old lady check-ups you called them. Nothing to concern anybody, off to see Connie for a holiday till things calmed down on the farm. And all the time you knew you would die while you were away. Your doctor has told us since – an advanced cancer that even your body stood no chance against. She assumed you told us. You upped sticks and went to the UK to die and I’m left wondering what I did to deserve you doing that to me.

Connie said you didn’t tell them either. You just got sick so suddenly and you died in an NHS hospital. Connie says it was your choice and I’m not to blame myself. But it’s not possible not to feel responsible. You hated overseas. You hated the Brits for selling us out to Mugabe all those years ago. Why would you go there to die? Why would you?

That’s how I’m ending this letter to you, Mother, with that question. Pastor Wilkes says the answer will come, that God moves in mysterious ways. But it’s not God’s mysteries I’m concerned with just now, only yours, Mother.

THE SUNSET CRUISE

She hadn’t wanted to come back to Victoria Falls: it’s hot - too hot, impossible to go out in the sun. How did she ever manage it as a kid, out in the bush all day without a thought? In any case she can’t take a step outside the gates without being hassled by ever more insistent street vendors – all the time; as if she’s interested in their crude wood carvings; as if she can be taken in by their lies that the wood is teak. It’s no use telling them she’s not a tourist; if she’s not a tourist why is she staying in one of the biggest hotels in the place? Who’s she trying to kid? And staying inside is also hateful: it’s too big, ostentatiously grand with its soaring columns and distant ceilings supposedly emulating a palace in some mystical, far off kingdom. In the rooms the air-conditioning is cruel and impossible to regulate and you can’t open a window for fear the wretched monkeys will come loping in, spoiling and stealing. The staff is uninterested – underpaid and over acquainted with tourists. The insistence of the Falls itself drives her mad, like tinnitus, a never-ending roar floating round inside her head, the end of the world continually approaching. So she’s stuck in the hotel with him and he’s getting worse the older he gets. It isn’t possible that anything about him will improve and she dreads he’s going to live forever, perfectly fit at seventy-five, apart from the leg; he’s well enough to last as long as the ninety-three year old President himself! Zimbabwe seems to breed long lived men, the wrong kind of long-lived men.

‘Laura! Laura, where are you?’

‘I’m right here, father. Right next to you.’ She puts down her book to attend to him.

‘Tea. Surely it’s tea time. Call them to bring tea. Rooibos this time. And sandwiches. That gammon ham they have. Can’t you see it’s tea time?’

‘Yes, father, I’ll go and find somebody.’

‘Find somebody! You’ll do no such thing, my girl. Call them. Call one of the useless buggers over. Find somebody? What are you talking about? Raise your arm like a normal person.’

His voice is not discreet and Sean Lovemore, smiling behind his name badge and uniform appears from nowhere in his well-worn white plimsolls to take the old baas’ order for his afternoon tea. His smiles do not direct themselves towards Laura’s face and she knew she was flushing. There’s no trace of complicit sympathy for her embarrassment: old people, old fathers especially, are to be deferred to and taken care of; after all, they will soon be among the ancestors.

Father and daughter had lived in South Africa for five years now, in exile. He’d hung on and on until that last night when they were thrown off the farm and they’d run from Zim almost overnight. Him torn from his beloved cattle – his wretched mombis; she terrified, the black people turning against them, their own black people she’d been brought up with on the farm, her special friend nowhere to be seen. After the way dad looked after them: how many times had she heard that over the years? Like hell he’d looked after them; not every white farmer had been attacked as he had been; they hadn’t tried to kill everyone they turfed out of the farms. Mother had never got over it – heart attack within three months of getting away on that fear-filled night. So it was just Laura and dad, who had also never got over it and she was the one who had to listen – the repeated stories of their ingratitude, his labourers and how they’d turned on him. She had to cope with his rages and festering resentment: the kaffirs would never make it, never be able to run a bloody country – ruin and destruction was all they were good for; his harking back to Zim – his ranch – his land. But he still had his money; none of the profits from the good years had ever been banked in worthless Zimbabwe dollars – all nice and safe in South Africa so he was well off, and she, twenty five years old, no education to speak of, dependent on him for every cent.

He wouldn’t make her an allowance, she had to ask him for every cent, and account for the housekeeping; it was like being trapped in a Jane Austen novel. Stuck with him, an only child with the squint they’d never bothered to get fixed, out on the farm stuck in that wilderness; who knew about ophthalmic surgeons? And who cared? Too mean. What kind of parents let a child, a girl, grow up like that?

She adjusts her dark glasses, hardly looking at the tall, lean shape of the waiter as he returns with the tea, but watching her father consume it it’s hard to understand where all that food goes to in his stringy body. She never felt like food herself, not easy to have an appetite in front of his voraciousness, though she wished she was less like him; she would like to be plumper, and softer, with rounder edges. She used to have a better appetite. She remembered the braais they had on the farm: the savoury lengths of boerwors spitting fat out onto the piled red embers, the thick steaks leaking blood into the spicy marinades her mother used to make: Mrs Balls apricot chutney mixed with vinegar and red wine and soy sauce. The steak had possibly been lumbering round the farm a week since. And the piles of salads and charred red peppers, the great saucepan full of sadza and the zinc bath full of Castle and Lion beers floating in melting ice. She’d had an appetite in those days and used to pile extra everything on her tin plate, and run round the back sheds to share it. It was hard to remember how good life had seemed.

And now he’d forced her to come back with him to home territory, after all this time, so she can drive him past his old ranch, the place his own miserable father had built within smelling distance of their other joint obsession, after the cattle – the Zambezi River. It had always been there, gliding through their lives, wide as a lake, grey, glittering and eternal, heaving with hippos and crocodiles seemingly ignorant of the crashing oblivion downstream where it hurled itself over the edge of the Victoria Falls to plummet down between the vertical walls of the Batoka Gorge. He needed to see it again, listen to it, inhale the smell of his land and the cattle that still lived on it, he said; feel the scrape of the red dust thrown up from his old roads on his scrawny arms – one last time before he died. But she knows, now he has the feel of the place again, now there are flights directly to the new local airport from Joburg, he’d be back. Being here has given him a new lease of life. Just what she needs.

‘What time is it now, my girl? Shouldn’t they be here by now? No sense of time, that’s their trouble. Nothing ever runs on time these days. Where are they?’

‘Father, it’s still another ten minutes before the coach is due. They’ll be on time. Shearwater is the best company in the place – it’s been here since the eighties, remember?’

‘That’s before it was run by these buggers. It won’t be the same.’

‘It’s you who wanted to come back.’

‘Never mind all that. Come on. Chop chop. I’m going to the bathroom while the lazy sods turn up.’

She watches him make his slow way across the lobby, the limp more obvious every year, but hardly terminal. That last night at the farm – the gunfire – his wounds – the blood - noise and yammering yells and her mother screaming and screaming; the memory of the fear she’d felt deep in her guts even now if she lets it. She hurries off to go to her room and change into trousers and long socks against the mosquitoes on the river.

The puny jetty pokes out into the Zambezi river, past the sign advising caution against the crocodiles and the small cruise boat rocks at its moorings, smaller than expected, and not far enough away from that thundering roar of the Falls, the mist and tumbling clouds of spray visible from here. She feels sick, but this is might be a once off opportunity and she has to go through with it.

It hadn’t been a Shearwater bus after all, but a small combi with no markings, her father observing how right he was, my girl, about the deterioration of everything in this bloody country. The driver helps them both along the jetty and into the boat and the care of Justice. ‘Good evening Baas, Madam. Welcome. I am your captain for this Sunset Cruise on the mighty Zambezi River, the fourth largest river in Africa.’

‘Ja, get on with it man. We know all this. We’re not bloody tourists. You were late coming for us. There will be no sun left to set at this rate.’

The driver has followed them onto the boat and is busy releasing the mooring; he is obviously coming with them and will be the other half of the crew. There are no other passengers and Laura and her father are made comfortable seated on a bench at the back of the boat under a small awning for shade: that makes two crew and two passengers. He is now busy with glasses, opening packets of crisps, tipping them into bowls, sorting out bags of peanuts at the refreshment table, laid out behind the captain’s small cabin as the diesel engine powers the craft out into the current.

‘Don’t I know you, chappy?’ But the driver only smiles and does not look up.

‘I do not think you know me, my baas.’

Cool boxes are opened and beer, soft drinks are offered. Laura really wants something stronger, a brandy, and the driver finds a miniature for her. Her father refuses a Zambezi beer and demands the Lion brand he always drank in his old days. The boat noses out further into the current whipping past them towards the Falls. There are grunting hippos and water birds and a couple of fish eagles soaring over them, offering their melancholy cries to the Sunset Cruise experience, lamenting the state of the world. She had grown up wondering why they had to sound so very sad up there, free and wandering the skies with perfect eyesight, able to spot hapless fish no matter how dark and fast the river current. Half an hour later Justice lets the boat idle close to one of the islands while they watch the dark shapes of elephants moving like shadows through the vegetation, close enough to hear them ripping down branches, the rumblings of their stomachs floating out over the water.

The boat is even further downstream now and the river is running faster, too fast for Laura. No other boats have moved down so far towards the edge; they are quite alone here in this section of the river as the water surges onwards. The sun, blood red, low and hot presses down on the water sending crimson fingers crawling along the ripples towards them. It’s searingly beautiful, this sunset, this evening.

‘Boy, what are you playing at?’ He calls out now to the captain, who is still not turning the boat round to face upriver, away from the increasing crescendo of noise and spray, away from the water’s growing turbulence and speed. ‘You stupid bugger, turn the blasted boat round. We’re getting too close. Can’t you see for fuck’s sake?’

Laura can hardly breathe, the effect of the cheap brandy now dissipated by fear. He tries to get up but his bad leg, the rocking boat. He slips back onto the bench. He’s no longer looking for hippos or elephants or any of Africa’s Big Five and has stopped complaining. Now he’s just shouting and cursing at them now - to turn the boat upriver. He’s using those foul, familiar words from the past to curse them. The driver helps her to stand, swaying, holding onto the shaky handrail to move forward to where Justice hands over the control of the wheel to her, engine on full throttle, showing her how to gently steer towards the safety of the bank, still far away across the heaving water. She doesn’t look round as he and Sean Lovemore move to where her father is still swearing and shouting and she doesn’t watch as they tip him, neatly and in one movement, into the flow of the water, to be swept out of her life by the river he loved. Five hundred US dollars for Justice seems a small price; and maybe now she and Sean can become the special couple they had planned to be in those forbidden and secret years long ago on her father’s farm.

THE FRIENDS

It had taken him three and a half hours to get to Gweru, a longer journey than normal. Driving south from Harare through the hot Saturday morning he’d not hurried, reluctant to arrive, crawling behind the South Africa bound lorries and the over-burdened buses rather than dodging round them, taking chances on the narrow road. He’d let others do that, steaming past him whenever there was a clear strip ahead, and tried to concentrate instead on how much he loved driving through any part of Africa – golden, glimmering, endless. Today, however, he couldn’t enjoy it, couldn’t stop his heart beating faster than normal, a dryness in his mouth that wasn’t thirst. He’d left Sibyl after breakfast, red eyed, frail, telling him to *do be careful dear*. He had her little list in the pocket of his shorts; it was bloody pathetic: some frocks, photographs, a brown, leatherette manicure case - a gift from her brother in 1959. He didn’t even know what leatherette was for Christ’s sake.

In Gweru at last, he thought about having a beer first at the Midlands Hotel but couldn’t face the drabness of the gloomy, ill-lit bar at this time of day and drove directly through the avenues to the weary apartment block, an old Rhodesia Railways complex, now Zimbabwe Railways of course. It did have a rather nice location though, set on a small kopje of acacia trees overlooking the edge of town, in yellow flower at this time of year, the smell of them heavy in his nostrils as he heaved himself out onto the bare earth car park. He looked round at the view, the bush meeting the edge of town, and the Bulawayo road disappearing into the hazy distance. You’d think the Romans had been here – it was so straight and irrevocable, like a knife cut into the earth’s surface. He wished he was on it, driving into that distance. Bloody hell, he had to stop dawdling. He had to get this over with. He closed the car door more firmly than was necessary, and took some time to fiddle with the key; deep breaths. His sandals scuffed through the fallen blossoms and he bent down to knock away the flimsy flower heads sticking to his bare toes before knocking at the door. He still didn’t know what he would say to Giorgio. It was bloody impossible.

Less than twelve hours ago life had been just fine. He’d finished his first report, called Laura, had a few words with the kids – all well at home, and he’d be back in less than a fortnight. She was so good at managing everything without him. He knew he was lucky. He’d been thinking about dinner at that new Chinese – Harare always had new restaurants to try out, and then that dratted phone call, just as he pulled the ring on his first Zambezi beer of the evening.

‘Izzy? Hi! That’s a surprise. Is everything okay?’ He’d called her in London only a couple of days ago to compare some figures with her. She was his closest friend, and had been ever since they’d been young volunteers teaching together years ago in Botswana.

‘Yes, everything’s fine thanks. A quick call Max. It’s about Sybil.’ Izzy went straight to the point.

Sybil, he sighed. Izzy’s friend. Another Botswana connection and a very weird, connection in Max’s view, married to Giorgio Viani, the Rhodesia Railways mechanic. A really odd pair, older than Izzy and Max’s group, much older; they didn’t fit in at all but somehow Izzy had enclosed Sybil in her wide, eclectic circle. They had lived in a prefab up by the railway station in Gaborone, the asbestos bungalow, and the down-market Italian husband never matched Sybil’s studied refinement. Max had to give it to her though – translating French poetry, a pretty intimidating vocabulary, quotations from books he’d never read. She’d been a PA to the linguistics professor at the university, and it hadn’t been possible not to be informed of that status. She held the occasional Sunday afternoon tea party Max might be dragged along to, and if Giorgio was there, and he usually wasn’t, he would shrug his shoulders, shake hands with great enthusiasm before disappearing. Max would smile to himself at the ice-cream English, such a contrast to Sybil’s studied diction. She was short and plump and over-powdered; he slight and dark, with a scrappy moustache, and moved like an agitated blackbird. Sybil and Giorgio – they never seemed quite right together to Max, but who was he to care? He’d never have thought about them again after leaving Botswana, if it wasn’t for Iz.

Giorgio had been transferred from Gaborone by the new Zimbabwe Railways and re-located to Gweru, which meant Sybil had been stranded there in the dreary midlands town, a very far cry from the interesting times and people they’d all shared in the Botswana days. Funny coincidence that his latest assignment meant Max drove through on his way to Bulawayo two or three times a year and he’d ended up becoming the go-between for Izzy. Sybil no longer had a job; she had no people she could talk to, other than the left-over Rhodesians in the railway apartment block and he didn’t suppose there were many allusions to French poetry in translation there.

‘What about her? She seemed happy enough with that note of yours I dropped off last week.’ For Izzy’s sake he took her letters and small gifts from UK – a silk scarf, a lipstick – not seeing the point of lipstick for an old lady himself – she must be what? Seventy – at least. He now had to put up with her little teas on his own. Sometimes even a beer with old Giorgio. In fact it was young Giorgio; Sybil was, astonishingly, nineteen years older than him – a fact that hadn’t mattered all those years ago when they met in Zambia and he was mad for her, Italian, and mad for her as Iz described the relationship to him. But they never had children and as the years passed he drank more, went hunting with his mates on bush weekends, never learned to speak English properly. Italians expected children. He had a family back in Milan, waiting, in the early days. Max had picked up more unwanted fragments of their life over those dreaded tea times. Or worse, almost, had jokey conversations with Giorgio himself, about Italian football or cars, while Sibyl fussed over the tea things chatting and asking him questions. ‘What are you reading now dear?’

Max didn’t suppose Giorgio had ever read a book in his life, but anyway he had some sympathy for him. How could he put up with her day in and day out? She never stopped talking. No wonder he went hunting. Max couldn’t understand Izzy’s patience. If she’d got married she might have more sense, she’d have other things to think about. Of course he’d had to accept, quite some time ago, that Izzy wasn’t going to be normal and marry him. but anyway, they remained friends – she’d come to his wedding – he’d go to hers’ if ever that happy day came; but it was a special friendship they’d forged in those years together when they were young and idealistic and far from home. They knew each could depend on the other.

‘She’s really unhappy you know.’

‘Yes, I know she’s unhappy. So what?’

‘Well, she’s left him. At last. In fact she left him today and she’ll be arriving at your place in about an hour, in a taxi.’

‘What! What do you mean, she’s coming here? What do you mean?’

Izzy explained she’d suggested to Sibyl, in that last letter Max had dropped off, that if she really did want to leave Giorgio at last, and make a go of it in the UK, she should get herself to Harare on the National Motorways bus and stay with Max; there was plenty of space in his guesthouse. He’d buy her a ticket to London. It had come to a crisis point because she was frightened about the farm invasions.

‘That’s just ridiculous. None of that is affecting the towns. She doesn’t even have land, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Max.’

‘I’m just saying. It’s ridiculous.’

‘She’s alone, and she’s old and she’s doing a really scary thing. She’s no money and she’s coming back after forty odd years in Africa. Come on, Max.’

‘Why? Why do you have to be so involved and go to all this trouble?’

‘There’s no why, Max. She’s my friend. If I was still there I’d manage it myself, but I’m not and you are.’

So, he’d agreed to put her up for the weekend and get her a plane ticket. He could be rid of her by Monday night – and then she’d be on her way for Izzy to deal with her.

But then, Izzy had gone on.

‘Max, that’s not all. I’m sorry, but it’s not all there is to ask you.’

‘What? What else?’

‘Please stay calm. She hasn’t told Giorgio she’s left him. She’s scared to do that.’

‘Just a minute, how do you know all this?’

‘She called me from the hotel phone at the half-way stop in KweKwe two hours ago. I’ve been waiting to make sure you’re having your sun-downer before calling.’

‘Well? So?’

‘She’s had to leave without any of her things. She told Giorgio I was in Harare and had invited her up so she only has a small weekend bag.’

‘So? … So?’ Why did he repeat himself when he was agitated?

‘There’s certain things she can’t bear to leave behind. She was crying there on the phone. I told her you would drive down and…’ even Izzy had paused here ‘…and tell Giorgio and collect her few bits.’

He hadn’t been able to speak. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. There was a long silence between them.

‘Don’t ask me to do this. I can’t. I’ve no idea what to say. Fuck, Iz – he’s an Italian!’

‘Max…’

‘No. I mean it. No! I won’t do it.’

But here he was, standing at the front door of Giorgio’s flat. He took a last breath, knocked, went in past Giorgio standing there unshaven in his vest and pants.

‘Ah, Max, but Sybil is not ‘ere today.’

‘No…no, I know. She’s in Harare, at my place… She says she isn’t coming back.’ He stumbled over the telling, not finding the right words, making it worse, not understanding what he was saying really. Was he really telling this guy his wife had left him, his marriage was over?

And then the explosion, and he was really afraid as the older man started striding up and down that box of a sitting room, shouting for his shotgun, scrabbling through the sideboard drawers for his hunting knife, blaming Is-o-bel, blaming him. He knew it was Is-o-bel behind all this. Filling Sybil with ideas all these years. All those letters. Max stayed quiet, heart pounding. As the storm quietened both of them stood stiff at opposite sides of the room, looking across at each other in a helpless silence. What could he say next? He suggested a drink and Giorgio crashed about in the kitchen and came back with two icy cans of Lion beer, then slumped on the settee facing the tiny balcony. Max couldn’t think of anything else to say, remained standing. Lion was his least favourite brand. Glancing round – Sybil might have been happier if she’d at least tried to make more of a home out of this place over the years, opened some of the cardboard boxes stacked down the side of the room, half hidden by old table-clothes, put up a picture, just tried a bit for God’s sake.

‘What did she say?’

‘Well. She didn’t say much really, you know.’

‘Ow’s she going to manage? Where’s she going to live?’

‘I don’t know really, Giorgio. She just mentioned going back to the UK…you know.’ What could he tell the man? He wouldn’t mention Iz if he could help it, but he agreed – it was her fault – Sybil would never have the nerve if she didn’t have Izzy there, encouraging her.

‘She’s not lived there since she was a girl. There’s nothing there for ‘er.’

The next worst part was asking if he could collect the things on Sibyl’s list. Of course he hadn’t thought to bring anything to put them in. Giorgio pushed some black dustbin bags at him, and then he had to force himself to go into the bleakness of the bedroom, its two neat beds lying side by side separated by a small table. There was no window. He could hardly see what he was doing and too stressed to look for a light switch. Giorgio started pacing again in the sitting room, cursing and blaming as he banged about. Part of Max’s mind worried that Giorgio might rush in and knife him as he went through Sibyl’s bedroom cupboard. How would that be explained to Laura? How would Izzy explain that to her?

Oh God, why was he here? This was the worst thing he’d ever done in his life. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be, a stranger pulling together shreds from a marriage, stuffing them into a bin bag, marking them off that wretched list.

* A yellow bloody cardigan.
* Three day dresses (What’s a day dress for Christ’s sake anyway?) and four skirts, a particular pleated one in fawn (fawn – he thought that was a baby animal not a colour).
* That fucking leatherette manicure wallet.
* A faded photograph of a beautiful woman in a high necked Edwardian blouse, Sibyl’s mother. He’d never thought somebody as old as Sibyl even having a mother.

Giorgio was standing with his back to the room, looking out over the balcony. He didn’t look round as Max stood there rustling the bag, junk stuffed in any old way, not folded, looking like something ready to take to a charity shop.

‘It was the abortion – it’s always been the problem.’

Max swallowed. Oh God. He couldn’t speak – again.

‘These days nobody cares if you’re married or not. She couldn’t get ‘er divorce through. We didn’t know what to do.’

Max fiddled carefully with the plastic bag, bending over it to fold over the top, as if it was important, the way he twisted it and the exact type of knot he slowly wound, re-wound, and tightened.

Giorgio stared at him now, forcing him to listen, forcing him to know more. ‘You don’t know what it was like. I was Catholic. I had to give that up – after. She had to go on the train on her own, to South Africa. We couldn’t find anywhere in Lusaka. I couldn’t go with her. Do you know how long that journey was in those days, from Zambia to South Africa? On her own. To ‘ave that thing done to her body.’

Still Max couldn’t find a word to say, but he stood and Giorgio’s story soaked through the air and into his understanding. He didn’t want to understand, it had nothing to do with him; they were not his friends. It should be Izzy standing here listening to this, not him.

It was over. He was driving back to Harare with the hot afternoon sun streaming through the passenger window. He’d been less than an hour in Giorgio’s place, but it felt as if time had stretched so he’d lived more of his life there in that room than was possible. His stomach was cramped still, hurting him, and his shoulders felt clamped together, no matter how he tried to ease them against the driving seat. All parts of his body were seized up with tension. He now understood what the phrase heart-sore meant. As he drove he thought: about the man behind him, the woman in front of him; she’d had another husband sometime, somewhere, and there was a child she’d never had. Did Izzy even know this about Sybil? He thought about the life he’d collected in the bag on the back seat, and how little there was of it. He thought of his own mum and dad, always together, always one. He thought of himself and Laura, of his marriage, and where he might be when he was old and who would care about him. He couldn’t believe he was crying, but he bloody was.

THE GANG LEADER

There’s a woman at the head of them: five men, and Good God they’re all hefting AK’s, laughing, shouting, heading up to the house, a dark tinted BMW parked in the yard behind them. He rushes to the kitchen, ‘Eleanor – get to the bedroom – right now,’ pulling the Uzi from his back pocket and thrusting it at her. ‘Take it! Take it! Lock the bedroom door. We’ve got visitors.’ He hustles her and Takesure out of the kitchen, pushing them towards the bedroom wing on his way back to the front, flinging open the screen to stride out onto the stoep, intending to block their further progress.

But he can’t help moving back a pace as they advance up the steps and crowd in front of him, the woman tall, very slim, hair in those tight plaits close to her head, a business suit, high heels, and eyes that glitter at him, like a snake before it strikes. He’s seen that look before, but always back there, on the other side of the security fence, never this close, at the front door. Shit! He’d thought those days were over.

‘Mr Martin Pistorius,’ she drawls out his name. The men shifting their weapons, one even whirling his round his thick head, drunk, hyper; all of them scanning his home, their bloodshot eyes shifting over the old armchairs and bar table that clutters up the space out here, space Eleanor fills with friends for their Sunday braais.

‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’

‘Who am I? I am the owner of this farm, Mr Pistorius,’ sneering his name, breathless almost, as if she can hardly bear to speak to him.

‘What are you talking about? I have an offer letter.’

‘And so do I.’

These people, even now, still at. Thieving bastards. ‘Wait there. I’ll get it.’

He pulls open the screen door and they crowd in after him, laughing at his repeated instructions to wait outside, hulking shapes filling the sitting room, kicking at the furniture, boots kicking up Eleanor’s rugs, using the rifle barrels to flick at cushions, knock newspapers and her magazines off the coffee table.

‘Wait! Wait I said,’ scrabbling in his desk drawer among the folders, not seeing what he wants, glancing over his shoulder, trying to watch what they’re doing. ‘Don’t you touch anything. Tell your men here. You’ve no right.’

She doesn’t speak, but the ugliest of them, the smallest and loudest, the one that laughs the most and keeps closest to her, jeering, ‘Mr Pistorius, you are sweating man.’

She takes the outstretched document from him while the men joke even louder and a ceiling lampshade cracks from a careless gun barrel, sways madly overhead. She opens out his precious letter with her two hands, hands that shook, and Martin can’t help going and standing next to her, pointing out the details: headed paper from the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, Government of Zimbabwe, offering Mr Martin Pistorius the right to stay on Highfield Farm for a period of two years during which time it must be demonstrated that the farm is a working, productive entity and after this period he may be offered a ninety nine (99) year lease. It is very clearly addressed to him, dated only a few months ago, the best he could hope for, all agricultural land now nationalised, his former Title Deeds useless.

She smiles, a small tight smile, hardly there, and tosses the paper onto the sofa, the only item of new furniture in the place, something he’d been persuaded to splash out on to celebrate that very letter.

‘My name is Chipo Mnangagwa and I also have a letter for this farm,’ and she opens her fancy shoulder bag and extracts a document, holds it out to him, still trembling with the excitement of it all. He can’t help snatching at it. The beer fumes from the thugs are filling the air, sickening him; the noise of them all prowling and banging about, Eleanor must be terrified back there. In all the years of dealing with these groups they’d always stayed at the gate, the other side of the security fence, never been into the yard even, and now – here inside the bloody house itself. He’d been lax, leaving the gates open, thinking they were now ok these days.

The same headed paper, the same farm; her name. He throws it down, next to his own letter on the new sofa. ‘There’s been a mistake. Mine is dated before yours.’

‘Dates do not matter. You know that. You know my name hey? I am the Vice President’s daughter. You know you are finished Mr Pistorius, so you had better pack up and leave.’ She’s breathless after this speech, gulping in air.

‘You can’t do this.’

‘What do you think, Zimuto?’ she whispers to the ugly guy, and he growls something in Shona to the rest and they start to trample round the room, ornaments smashing from shelves – one goes off to the kitchen, another trying the door to the bedroom wing.

‘Wait! Please. I need time. Please, Miss Mnangagwa, I need time.’

‘What are you needing time for?’ Zimuto struts forward.

‘It’s harvest. Let me get the tobacco in, and cured.’

Zimuto calls the men back and they crowd round in a restless circle; all the rifles point at him now and he’s the hub in the centre of some nightmarish circus. They’re not so drunk they can’t pull a trigger. ‘What I am thinking is – we need some money from this white bastard. Big money – so he can keep your farm, Madam.’

So. So it’s a set up. He wipes his face. God what he’d like to do to this lot. He’s never been less sorry for what he’d done in the war. They’d deserved it. Look at what the country has come to.

The negotiations start: they want US$1 million. Obviously he doesn’t have that kind of money, even after selling the tobacco he won’t have that kind of money. Who has money like that? The amount is reduced to $500,000.

‘Look man,’ and he’s dealing directly with Zimuto now while she lolls about in his wife’s armchair. ‘I can get you $15,000. That’s all I’ve got.’

Zimuto doesn’t say a word but raises the gun barrel against Martin’s head and it’s all he can do to stay upright; he thinks his heart will beat right out of his chest. ‘Do not joke with us, man. We are not here to joke.’ His pock-marked face, greasy, held so close Martin smells the township on him and he jerks his head back, away from the brutal jabbing of the metal against his temple.

The woman stands up and pushes the gun down, away from his head, to point at the floor boards. She’s speaking in a whisper. ‘I think our discussions are over for this day. We will give you time to get our $500,000 which will allow you to remain here on my land.’

‘And then you can jubilate, Pistorius, man. The farm can be yours.’ And Zimuto gives him a last jab in his chest.

The other goons smash round the room a last time, pushing chairs over, knocking things off the dresser with the guns. Eleanor’s one precious piece of Lladro, the Shepherdess, a souvenir from a long ago overseas holiday, sent flying. Barrels flicking along the shelves like Takesure’s feather duster. And then they’re gone.

He collapses, still breathing in the fug of them, the stale beer cloud shifting round the room still, mixing with the smell of his own fear. Silence. Just his hammering heart. His panting breath. He hears the bedroom door open, whispering in the corridor and before Takesure’s scared face peeps in he’s up and at the door on his way out – the women mustn’t see him like this. ‘They’ve gone. I’m going to the police. I’ll be back.’ And he’s out and on his way to the Goromonzi police station.

Where they are not interested: the VP’s daughter, a farm issue – too sensitive for them to get involved with. They do perk up at the mention of Zimuto and his gang, they know Obert Zimuto of old, but if the VP’s daughter has taken up with him, well… In any event they don’t even take notes and certainly don’t open a docket so there’s no case, and on to Harare, to his lawyer. He needs to calm down. He hasn’t taken his BP pills this morning, but he wants to kill them, all of them, especially that woman, sprawling there in Eleanor’s armchair as if she owned the place already. Those sly cheekbones, those thin, sneering lips, her high heels stabbing into his teak floor.

Larry Wiseman’s office is in an old bungalow in Avondale, outside the city centre, and Martin is glad he doesn’t have to negotiate the decay of Harare’s central business district where Larry’s old place used to be. Even in the stress of the moment he glances at the huge jacarandas shading the entire house, the familiar purple haze of falling blossoms, somehow a small comfort as he rushes through into the Receptionist’s room, no appointment. And Larry at the door of his office, stooped, grey, chain smoking, a veteran of commercial farmers’ problems, always an open door to him. He’ll know what to do.

‘You want to fight it, I suppose.’

‘Of course I bloody want to fight it, man. It’s a mistake. Have I got a case?’

A tortuous discussion. Lawyers. What do they get paid for? The questions: what grounds does he have? Whose letter is valid? The VP’s daughter – it’s very, very tricky. Might be impossible. Is he up for another long haul? Can he afford it?

‘Can’t we apply to the Ministry to sort it out? It’s their mess.’

‘You know what it’s like, Martin. If it’s the VP’s daughter those guys have no choice.’

And he drops his head in his hands, feeling his lifeblood pumping through his temples. That offer letter had changed their lives: all the stress of the last eight years, gone. The police had come and chased away the squatters and they slept through the nights for the first time in the new century. The tobacco harvest was coming in – no problem; there were thousands of dollars already hanging in the barns, enough to pay debts, not least to Larry, invest in next year. His phone vibrates in his pocket and he answers it almost before the first tone sounds.

‘Stay inside. Don’t go anywhere near them. I’m in town at Larry’s office. Yes I’ll be there in less than an hour.’ He’s on his feet heading for the door, ‘They’ve come back and they’re sealing the doors of the barns. Have to go.’

What will he have to face now? Racing along Samora Machel Avenue out of Harare, driving like one of the maniac kombi drivers he normally curses for their wild driving, a law to themselves, ignorant madmen. He swings round vehicles too decrepit to be on the road, hooting and flashing his lights at idiots driving too slowly in the overtaking lane. Forgetting to breathe. He needs to breathe.

But they’re gone by the time he arrives and his workers have crept back and taken down the amateurish blocks hammered across a couple of the barn doors. He sits opposite Eleanor, holding her hand across the kitchen table, Takesure bringing tea for them, steady as ever, part of the furniture, kneeling to serve him. He’s surprised his wife is not as shaky as he’d expected.

‘What did Larry say?’

‘He’s not sure the best thing to do. He’s thinking about it.’ He doesn’t want to tell her Larry thought there was zero chance of winning through this time.

‘Takesure’s got an idea.’

‘Takesure?’

‘Tell the baas what you told me.’

He stares at his old domestic worker: obedient, trusted, quiet as an armchair, with no more ideas than the kitchen clock.

‘Baas, that woman, she is not the daughter of Vice President Mnangagwa.’

It turns out that Takesure had been peeping through the bedroom curtains as the gang left and she recognised the woman at least; they are from the same place, were at Primary school together in Zvishavane in the Midlands. They are home girls and Takesure knows for certain she has nothing to do with the VP. Her parents are late and she was the only child for those parents.

‘So who is she?’

‘She is nobody, baas. She married and has only one child.’

‘So what is she doing with that gang?’

‘I do not know that answer, baas. I have not heard of her for many years. My idea is they cannot know the Vice President.’

Well, well. No political connection after all. This makes all the difference. A scam. On the phone to Larry, who is now full of his own ideas: impersonation; extortion; unlicensed firearms – probably; blackmail even. He could easily open a case. Martin will come back into town and file an affidavit. They will go to Court and hammer the bitch for every cent she owns; they’ll destroy her.

But it turns out not to be so easy; for all Larry’s connections on the streets and in the Party’s various factions, she’s not known. She can’t be found. It’s as if she rose up from the earth that terrible day and has now sunk back into it for all the trace of her they can find. It’s as if she doesn’t exist. But by God, Martin knows she exists; he can still see her tight, mean face when he looks across at Eleanor relaxing in her chair in the evenings, sipping her after diner coffee. The day that woman sprawled there in front of him, the guns at his chest, he’ll never forget it. What if they’d got through to the bedroom, got hold of her? He wakes up next to her, night after night in a sweat. His wife, unable to protect her.

Yes, the police track down Zimuto and arrest him for something else; they’re not interested in Martin’s case: nobody was killed or robbed as far as they’re concerned, but somebody has to pay for that day, and it’s going to be that woman.

Three weeks into the search and Martin is getting to the end of his tether, sick of being calmed down by Eleanor, sick of being asked if he can’t let it go, now they know the truth, now they know it was a scam. But why should he? Why should he forget that day, helpless and scared to death in his own house, sick with worry about his wife hiding away in that back bedroom? By God, if anything had happened to her while he was there and unable to stop it. That woman, lolling about, giving her orders, crossing her legs in Eleanor’s chair. Somebody has to be punished for making him feel like that.

And then, one afternoon, tramping into the kitchen for a quick coffee break away from the smoke of the barns, his wife surprises him again. ‘Martin, Takesure found that woman for you.’

He’s speechless, Eleanor’s hand on his arm, leading him to sit down at the kitchen table, where Takesure is laying out the cloth. He looks at them both, fussing with the coffee things, the pot, the milk jug and the cups and saucers. There are even scones. One of them has baked scones, waited for him to come in before sitting him down to tell him this news.

‘Tell the baas what you found out.’ Takesure kneels beside him, wiping her hands on her apron, not looking up at him. ‘Madam asked me to help you look for this woman. She told me it was too hard and there was no success for you.’

‘Yes, yes. Get on with it.’ He can’t cope with the slowness of the telling. How has she found her? How could she do it when he and Larry couldn’t? Where is she by God?

‘Martin, it is a long and sad story and if you shout at Takesure she will only get more nervous and won’t be able to tell you. Just be patient and listen.’

And so the story is told. Madame gave her ten dollars airtime and she made some calls to friends, and then to friends of those friends, and after this she was given a day off and bus fare, and she found her way into Epworth township, the very worst and poorest part of that bad place, and knocked on the door of one dirty shack and found the woman who was not the Vice President’s daughter. She is alone and has no one anymore. Her husband and son are both late. She seems to be very sick. She was forced by that gang of tsotsis because she has no one she can turn to, no man to stand by her.

And he can’t believe it and asks question after question and Takesure answers in the same steady way, that the woman has no family and lives in poverty. ‘There is not even a bed in that place, baas. She is sleeping on a mat on the floor. I can see only one pot for her cooking. She has even one single blanket for her.’

He drags his stare from the top of Takesure’s head and meets Eleanor’s eyes. He drops his head into his hands: he knows where she is, could arrange to have her strangled in the night, or stabbed. He could do it himself. They did worse in the war. Life is cheap in the townships. Nobody will miss her by what Takesure says. How can she have nobody? There’s always family for these people.

The poor cow. She has nobody. Forced by those fucking goons. What did they do to her? No wonder she was fucking whispering and trembling that day.

Eleanor’s eyes on him, Takesure focussing only on the floor, hands still screwing up that blasted apron of hers, both waiting for him to respond. He jumps up and out of his chair, strides to the door, smashes his fist into it, turns back to stand in front of them. The two women, both looking up at him now. They know how much he’s wanted this. He stands there, hands grasping at his temples. ‘Christ it’s not fair!

THE GOOD ZIMBABWEAN FARMER

They’d been living in Cape Town for five years now and he hated it, always hankering after his farm back in Zim, keeping in touch, hearing about deals being made between the new black land owners and farmers like himself, so he’d persuaded Steph to come back with him, just for a visit for a couple of weeks, to see the lie of the land, to go and look-see their old farm. She hadn’t wanted to and they’d had a hell of a row and she’d accused him of loving the farm more than her and the grand-kids and other such rubbish, but she’d come in the end.

And now here they were back at the airport in the queue for the flight back out of Harare, only four days later, and she wouldn’t look at him.

In the end she hadn’t gone out to the farm with him. They were staying at the Meikles Hotel in the city centre and on the second day she’d tripped crossing Nelson Mandela Avenue, falling over in one of the many new pot-holes left to spread across the city roads. People had helped her up, all black people in the city centre these days she told him afterwards, and they steered her to the kerbside, waiting until she was steady on a limping leg. So she remained behind in bandages as Chris made his arrangements, hired a vehicle and set out early on their third day to drive out to his lost farm.

As he drove south, first on the tarmac and then on the dirt roads he had missed so much, he thought about those times back in 2000 when the worst of the problems started. He’d been sure he could manage his invasion: he’d come to an understanding with the leader of the group and who knows how long that could have lasted, maybe all this time it might have lasted. If it hadn’t been for Steph.

His wife. He sighed as the wind hit his face, his arm resting on the open window, hands firm and confident on the steering wheel of the Toyota. They’d had an up and down marriage anyway, especially after Independence when Rhodesia disappeared. He’d had to cope with her longing to leave, trying to persuade him to take the gap and move down south. Her constant nagging to go south. He’d put up with her calling the new puppy *Mugabe* – she’d insisted many of their neighbours had done the same and it was true this was a good wheeze at the country club, where calling a dog *Mugabe* was the mildest of jokes against the new government. He didn’t hold with it himself, the sneering and antagonism; as long as he could be out there on his land, to hell with governments. Smith had caused hell, taking them into that crazy war – a time of his life he wanted to forget. After all the fear of reprisals, after all that happened in the war, to everybody’s surprise Mugabe seemed to want them to stay and they were left to get on with their farming. It had suited him just fine.

But they should have known it couldn’t last, though it had for nearly twenty years, twenty years of carrying on the good life. Like all them, he’d shrugged aside all the warning signs: the deteriorating streets of Harare, of Bulawayo – all the towns, filling with pavement vendors, beggars at every intersection, jobless people wondering why they’d fought for their land and still had nothing. The papers were full of it. Then the trouble had really blown up.

‘Chris, come quick. Look! My God, look at this.’

He’d been relaxing on the stoep with a brandy and water, watching the sunset, all bruised orange and purples glowing deep over his western fields – man this country could make any schmuk a poet – and had gone inside to watch the end of the BBC footage showing some farm workers’ quarters being smashed in by a gang, the excited commentary describing wide scale attacks on white farmers. Sure there’d been some isolated incidents, but not like this, and on the BBC. Right away he was on the farm radio conferring with neighbours.

‘Steph,’ he put his arm round her shoulders. ‘I’m sure we’re going to be ok. There’s no sign of trouble round here. I’ll go into town anyway and see if I can get a word with the Governor tomorrow. He’s a sensible guy. He knows how productive we are. He won’t want us to go under.’

‘He’s not sensible at all, you fool,’ she twisted herself roughly away from him. ‘People are being murdered. Let’s go. Let’s go while we still can.’ Fear made her eyes wider and bluer than he had seen them in years and, for a moment, he remembered that young girl he’d fallen for, when life was predictable and blue eyes and long legs were what had mattered most. He’d already admitted to himself, after years of a making-do sort of marriage, it was his own fault; he should never have persuaded a city girl to marry him, to live on a farm away from the clubs and pubs, the bio-scope evenings where she’d love to meet up with everybody: beers and burgers on the back of a pick-up and never mind what the movie was. She’d hated farm life, hated the isolation, miles on dust roads to do any shopping, sending the boys away to school. And the staff – always changing the houseboys and washing girls for some reason or other; always up to him to translate because she wouldn’t stoop to learn the kaffir language. It had been a disaster of a marriage really: only their two boys had kept them together, and his thousands of hectares.

Anyway, when it all blew up, he’d insisted. ‘We’re not going anywhere, Steph. I’ll work it out. My guys won’t let me down.’

And they’d hung on for two years. Friends and neighbours either sold out or were run out, some guys were murdered, some beaten so badly they never recovered, homes burned down; but his was one of those that rode through it all, no mobs at the gate and Ashton Farm didn’t appear in any of the gazetted lists he searched every time *The Herald* published a new one. Of course he wondered why, but he didn’t have other farms, he was known for being a relatively decent boss. He was left alone as others fell into disaster.

Then one morning it happened: his foreman ran through the tobacco field towards him, sweating face, terrified, calling in Shona, ‘Baaas, baass! Uyai! Come quick. They are here. They are at the farm gate.’

‘I’m going down there. Check on the Madam and make sure she stays inside.’

The untidy group of war veterans had already moved through the gate and was advancing up the farm road towards the house, about twenty five of them, ragged and mostly barefoot, some carrying staves, others pangas, following a tall man, dressed only slightly better than those behind him. Chris met them on the red dirt road and faced him, a man as tall as himself, eye to eye.

‘Good morning, Mr Brock. My name is Shadreck Marisa. These are my men. We have come to reclaim our land.’

Chris greeted him in Shona. ‘Mangwanani, Mr Marisa. I think I’ve been expecting you.’ More greetings, a handshake. ‘Will you come over to the office and we can sit out of the sun?’

They walked across the yard and round the back of the house to Chris’s cluttered farm office. He called out for rations for Shadreck’s men and observed his own workers gathered in fearful groups at a distant corner of the tobacco barns. They settled themselves facing each other across his untidy desk, cold Castle beers from the fridge in the corner staked out in front of each of them, dripping condensation, Chris dived into the confrontation, too stressed to wait for Shadreck to begin.

‘Look man, Shadreck, this is my land. It was my father’s land. I have title deeds. We can’t live in a country where these things don’t count.’

‘Mr Brock…’

‘Please – it’s Chris.’

Shadreck nodded, ‘Mr Brock, do you not understand, even yet, that your people took this land forcefully from my people?’

‘But it’s we who worked it. We made it productive. There were just a few meilies and scrawny cattle here then.’

‘Mr Brock, that is not the point. This land is our land. It is where our forefathers and foremothers were born, and where we should have been born. You and your people do not know what we would have done with it if you had not come here from Europe with your guns.’

He had to control himself not to show surprise at the steady logic of Shadreck’s argument, delivered in the deep tones of his deliberate English. This was not the war veteran he had expected to deal with.

‘Listen man, we can’t turn back the clock. This land has been in my family for two generations.’

‘And it was in mine for countless generations before yours. Your people took it with guns. Your white surveyor from England made drawings on a piece of paper which made it legal in your culture, to steal my people’s land from them.’

He sat back now and emptied the can and Chris did the same, parched. He got up and replaced both empties. ‘That was a long time ago man. We have to deal with the situation as it is now, and as it is now I own this land.’

‘Mr Brock, I am trying to make you understand. If you do not understand we will not solve this thing without bloodshed. Our people have nothing and they are very determined. You have seen what has happened in those other places.’

‘So you think you can make things better by murdering people, invading their farms and beating them up? What way is that to go about things?’

‘We are not here to murder. Violence would have happened by now if that was our intention. Let me try once more, Mr Brock, to make you understand. If the Nazis had won your war in those times, and English cities and farms now belonged to German people and your English compatriots were servants and lived in compounds and townships, paid in rations and unable to afford to send their children to school, would you still say this was a long time ago and those Germans should be left in peace to enjoy your beautiful England?

Chris didn’t reply. He didn’t know how to answer, these were not discussions they had at the Club.

‘Did not the Irish people fight you for centuries to get back their own land? We are talking about only one hundred years since your people came to this place. It was never your land. And now it is time.’

The air seemed to stretch so tight and thin between them that sounds from outside caught the airwaves, sliding along them, entering into the hot office so Chris could plainly hear the two resident laughing doves murmuring affectionately to each other on the roof above; some farm children kicking around a football shouting in the distance; one of his tractors on a far field – the comforting chug of it woven into the fabric of his life.

‘Shadreck, I don’t know how to answer you.’

‘We are discussing justice here. I have heard of you. People say you are a fair man. That is why I have taken the time to speak with you, to help you to understand. Our government has not helped us. Our politicians say your government in London never paid what they promised to buy you out. We do not know about those things but our patience is finished. If your government cannot buy you out, we will send you out.’

‘Whoa there, man. My government is not the British. I’m a Zimbabwean like you.’

‘Do you still hold a British passport, Mr Brock? Did you vote for Ian Smith in those years in the eighties after our Independence?’

‘No – I didn’t vote for that crazy bastard – I didn’t vote at all.’ He avoided answering the passport question.

‘You should have voted for the Party. Too many of you voted for the past and nothing can save you people now.’

‘Listen, Shadreck, you’ve seen this place. You must know what it produces – the maize – the tobacco. You know your guys won’t be able to keep it going. They don’t have the experience, man. They don’t have the funds. Running a commercial farm isn’t like growing meilies in the communal areas. Can’t we work something out here?’

Shadreck expelled a breath and for the first time he smiled. ‘Mr Brock, our thoughts are now moving along the same tracks. I have a proposition for you.’

Back in their sitting room, with its chintz armchairs and prints of the English hunting scenes she liked, Stephanie was white-faced. ‘You agreed to give away half the farm?’ She stared at him. ‘You sat and shared beers with that…that savage and agreed to give away the farm. Have you gone mad?’

‘You’re going to have to rename the dog. Don’t go calling out that name. These people won’t stand for it. I’m going to help them divide up the other half tomorrow.’

He was drained but he had at least kept half of his land, and the house, and, in spite of himself, Shadreck’s measured delivery of a history he had never worried himself about, tugged at the edges of his certainty about the past.

The following day they’d gone to into town to see the Governor and got approval for their agreement. They’d come back and started the division. Chris couldn’t help some small admiration for the discipline of the invaders – they were divided up into teams and got on, striding out measuring, digging in the new posts, obeying gang leaders – it seemed many of them really were war vets, used to taking orders, getting on with a job. But it was not the same in other parts of the country. The government in Harare seemed to be struggling to keep up with events on the ground, at first having some invaders turfed off by the police, then turning round and passing legislation to make legal what they now called the ‘fast track land reform’. It was hard to know where they stood but on the bottom line, he was on his farm, he was farming, he walked out each day with his land under his feet. His friends urged him to leave while he still could, but he and Shadreck held together a steady peace. Months passed and neither Steph’s sulks nor his sons’ pleas from South Africa would move him: his corner of Zimbabwe was still working things out.

Until that day, in Steph’s garden.

He’d come back from the fields, to get a morning coffee, watching her through the open kitchen window, standing with her gardener among rows of onions, sugar peas, beetroots, two kinds of potatoes; a small orchard on one side, oranges glowing in the morning sunshine, hanging like the gaudy earrings the latest maid wore sometimes. He knew it was her Eden, this garden, a refuge from the take-over of the rest of her life; she disappeared into it for hours, but no matter, their meals were all the better for the time she spent in there. As he sipped the coffee he saw her stiffen suddenly and even from inside he could hear a noisy conversation, coming closer. None of the vets had been near the farmhouse before and perhaps it was a mistake as they wandered into the garden from the back, looking round, admiring the order and abundance of it. Chris watched her see four dirty, menacing black men – wanting what was hers, coming closer, laughing at her, insulting her probably – and then the frustration of the past years exploded and she screamed out at them, using words and curses that were unforgivable. Irretrievable. He didn’t even know she knew such language. She shouted out a disgust and hatred it was fearful to hear, ricocheting through the trees, the flower beds, banging up against the walls of the house. He had never heard anything like it as he rushed out, grabbed her roughly, shook her to silence, but she turned on him, beating at him, scratching at his face.

‘You! You bastard! I hate you.’ She could hardly breathe by now, forcing out the words. God, she’d have a stroke; uselessly flailing up at him, fists still clenched, ineffectual against the bulk of him. ‘Letting these kaffirs onto our farm. Here in my garden. You stupid sod. You fucking prick.’ She sagged and fell against him, tears now, wetting his shirt, sobbing as he held her up and off the ground against his body, while he watched the men’s faces as they turned to leave, and knew he had lost his farm.

Shadreck had been implacable. ‘You have to leave, Mr Brock. We have tried to make this thing work but the words your wife has spoken have spread out among the people. They are words that have leaked a poison that can only kill what we tried to grow here. The people are building up anger. The words have spread to town, to the Party office. The young men will come here and burn down this place if you stay. You need to go while you still can.’

He had not allowed her to destroy any part of the house; leaving his father’s armchair in front of the stone fireplace, his desk and bookcases intact, taking only clothes, photographs and papers, and among those his title deeds.

They had packed what they could into their vehicles: he drove the Toyota pick-up and Steph the old black Mercedes, leaving in the middle of that night, the high stars lighting up his fields in soft, silver waves as he breathed goodbye to his farm, watching the lights of the Merc in his mirror to be sure she was safely following him down the long, dark road.

And that had been it. They stayed with friends in Harare for a few days, made phone calls to their sons in Cape Town, who were not surprised, and relieved that dad had finally seen sense. She went out with their friend’s wife and bought extra suitcases in Greatermans on Second Street; they’d made a day of it – lunch at Barbour’s, a manicure. It was an easy flight to Jo’burg and a connection down to Cape Town where they were met, and welcomed; the family together again at last. They made a new home in the cottage of their son’s enormous garden and she loved it – being with her sons and grandchildren she had blossomed, while he had shrivelled and thought about his farm.

And right now he didn’t feel shrivelled at all. Here he was with the windows of the hired pick-up wide open, driving along the familiar rutted road with his land on either side of him. It had rained in the night and he inhaled the sharp, blood smell of it, the smell of his life – this waiting for the heat of October to end, for the rains to pour from the sky. He loved this time of year. He could almost hear the earth drinking each drop, readying itself to push out new growth, and he wanted his job back, to be its steward, to nurture the land and bring it to harvest. In one part of his mind he thought Steph was probably right, this was a hopeless journey, but he couldn’t help his heart lifting – back where it belonged.

She was having a late afternoon tea in the still rather gracious lobby of the hotel and looked up as he strode over, making his way between the low tea tables and comfortable arm chairs, brushing aside the alert head waiter, indicating he was joining her and didn’t need his own seating. ‘Well, I haven’t seen that smile in a long time,’ receiving his kiss with some surprise.

‘How have you been all day? How’s the leg? That spread looks all right.’

‘Yes, they managed to find Earl Grey and they scraped up a lemon. The scones are passable. Do you want one?’

‘No cream for you?’

‘How could there be when they’ve wiped out the dairy industry?’ She never missed an opportunity. ‘So – tell me the worst.’

He leaned forward in the armchair, his knees pressed against the table between them. ‘Steph, I’ve had the most amazing day. I got there, drove right up to the front door. I didn’t recognise anybody. Doesn’t look as if any of my guys are still there. It doesn’t look up to much mind, a real mess out in the yard.’

‘Well what did you expect? What did I tell you?’

‘No, listen. There’s no sign of Shadreck, but there’s an in-charge, some sort of foreman. He told me after we left the big man, the Governor was allocated my share, the other half still has the small guys on it. And they’re making a go of it, some of them – even tobacco. Anyway he let me in, inside the house.’

‘Oh God. Don’t tell me about it. Who’s living there?’

‘No one – it’s in bad shape but it won’t take long to sort out. Can you believe it, Dad’s chair and desk are still there? I found them under some rubbish in the office.’

‘What do you mean it won’t take long to sort out? I don’t understand you.’

‘Just listen. Listen. They told me the Governor rarely visits. He’s had a couple of so-called managers in but nobody’s stayed. The land has really gone downhill.’

‘But that’s what we expected. We knew they’d destroy it. They’ve destroyed everything.’

‘No, it’s not like that. The guys’ plots looked ok – in pretty good shape. They’re growing maize and…’

‘Of course they’re growing meilies, it’s all they know.’

‘They’re growing wheat, and groundnuts and sunflowers – and tobacco I’m telling you. A couple of them have started small piggeries. It’s my side that’s looking bad.’

‘What are you getting at? Why are you so excited about your farm being ruined?’

‘I went into town and saw the Governor. He was glad to see me. We had lunch together at the Midland.’

‘You ate lunch with him?’

‘I’ve come to an agreement with him.’

‘An agreement? What are you talking about?’

‘He wants me to come back and manage the place. We can live in the house again and get our side on its feet – profitable. Tobacco’s making good money these days – the Chinese can’t get enough. He’s prepared to invest.’

‘What!’

‘But listen, here’s the best part. He’ll give me back fifty hectares, to farm for myself. It’s happened in a couple of other places – there’s a few of us having the same sort of arrangement.’

‘He’s giving you back a paltry fifty hectares of your own land? And you’re happy about it?’

He stopped for breath now, full of the memory of the conversation, of the immediate plans that had sprung to mind as he drove back to Harare: he’d need to walk the fields; assess the state of the workers still there; examine the farm machinery. He’d have to decide what they were going to plant this year, how much fertilizer to order, check the irrigation infrastructure – see if any of it was still intact. There was so much to do. He’d have to be quick, the rains would start in earnest any time now.

He called over one of the waiters and ordered a beer, and was told, apologetically, that only tea, coffee, milkshakes and soft drinks could be ordered here in the tea room, but that alcoholic beverages could be bought and consumed in the Explorers’ Bar – and its location on the other side of the grand piano behind him was indicated. He hadn’t noticed till now that tea time music was still being played on it, by a young black guy in a dinner suit instead of that ancient white chap he used to greet in the old days – same awful Victor Sylvester music though.

As the waiter moved softly away, he looked over at his wife, at her eyes glittering with held back tears.

‘Steph?’

She shook her head and held up both her hands as if to fend him off. He watched the hard swallows of her throat and the rise and fall of her chest. She just needed a minute or two to get used to it, to get used to the idea of coming home, she might be glad there was going to be some sort of redemption for the bitter years since that day in the kitchen garden.

‘You’re really serious aren’t you?’ she finally whispered.

‘Of course I’m serious, Steph. I’m going back tomorrow to start the inventory. You could come if your leg’s up to it? Have a look round the house – see what you need to start getting it to rights.’

She looked down at the wreckage of her afternoon tea. ‘I’m going to our room now. I’m going to pack. I want you to change my ticket so I can go back to Cape Town tomorrow. I am never going back to that place. If that’s what you want to do, you can go alone.’

She stood, and he rose to go with her. ‘Don’t. I don’t want you near me. Leave me alone.’ She hissed the instruction at him.

‘But Steph ...’

‘Be quiet! There’s nothing left to say to me.’

He watched the way she kept her face averted from the others taking tea as she wound between the tables, ignoring solicitous waiters, making her way to the lifts in the corner of the lobby. She pressed the button, holding her smart handbag tight up to her chest, standing there in her blue Cape Town dress and matching shoes, waiting for the doors to open and take her from his sight.

And so, here they were, in the queue slowly moving forward to the check-in counter.

He would say goodbye to her and then drive out directly to his farm. He would need to find a good foreman. She would explain to their sons and to friends in Cape Town that her husband had decided to stay on in Zimbabwe, that he would be managing his farm on behalf of a ZANU-PF Provincial Governor and he was so happy to be able to do this he had abandoned his wife of thirty-seven years. Chris would never find the words to make it sound any different.

THE RESEARCHER

I always take a deep breath before taking myself up those few steps from the lobby into the bar. In the lobby you’re simply a guest and in a hotel as up-market as this one, you expect and receive every courtesy, but once over that threshold, your gender becomes the most significant aspect of your being. Why is it Zimbabwe can make you feel like a woman of loose, even zero, morals in 2016 for God’s sake, for going into a bar on your own? And if you’re lucky enough to be out with a girlfriend, you’re still alone. I wasn’t staying in my room every evening in any case, and tonight it’s Friday and a large G and T calls and is being answered. It’s worse – or is it – being white and a woman, going in there? The open and unembarrassed stares, the emanations of barely repressed hostility at invading another’s space, knowing you are an open target in this space. It’s like moving into a time warp and you’re in Britain in those old days when women were forced to know their place, as defined by any random man whose trajectory happens to brush pass your own. But no, not worse; black women in a bar, in this country, are most definitely prostitutes in the eye of every male in the place.

I settle myself on one of the too high bar stools and don’t cross my legs in their sensible Rohans, catch sight of myself in the mirror, hair on end and the colour of those pumpkins loaded onto us every time we leave the interviewees’ villages. I should have washed it. At least the barman is used to some female guests coming in here unaccompanied, greets me politely enough, takes the order without bestowing on me the benefit of ‘the look’. His uniform waistcoat is big for him and his white collar has been scrubbed too many times, fraying at the points and at the back where I can see it standing away from a neck too scrawny to fill it. The G & T is perfect anyway: the Malawi gin I always order here has a slightly sweet edge I like, and the double tot, easy on the tonic, is a good strong smack in my mouth, sharp after the warm Fantas and Cokes I’ve had to pretend to enjoy all day so as not to offend anybody. I always come down too early, to have this half hour and the first drink to myself on my own after a week in the field.

Jeez, this is a man’s bar all right, a palace to the patriarchy – the colonial patriarchy: stuffed buffalo and kudu heads, and other arbitary antelopes as casually dotting the walls as those sets of flying geese used to do at home before Ikea taught us better. In every spare space between their hapless stares are faded prints of white men with beards, accompanied by legions of bearers carrying enough stuff in fact to stock Ikea. There’s Livingstone over there discovering the Victoria Falls, taken to the very spot by guides, being told the name it had already for centuries and promptly taking it on himself to re-name it for the dear old Queen. That part of the story failed to make it to the history books. And there’s Rhodes, Cecil John himself, in his moustaches over on that wall, sitting on a pile of rocks telling the Ndebele what for. Sorting out Africa for the Empire. The room is dotted about with shiny teak tables and those loose, leathery armchairs men like to lounge in with their spread legs, and all round the sides a scalloped edging of banquette alcoves, fading away into the gloom, done up in dark red plush, like the waiters’ waistcoats. What a place, truly a blast from somebody’s past.

‘You look as if you’re enjoying that.’ Well, well. Company. I hadn’t noticed him come in, a few seats up the bar, drink in hand already. ‘Yes I am. The first of the evening is always the best don’t you think?’

‘You must be a visitor.’ He’s not bad looking: grey hair, in a good sort of way, fifties maybe, perhaps a couple of years younger than me, powerful body filling a faded safari jacket, legs that know how to wear shorts, no long socks thank god; but still, a Rhodie.

‘Yep. From UK.’

‘On holiday in our beautiful country?’

I laugh. ‘Ah, not a holiday I’m sorry to say, but your country is beautiful.’ I don’t wear a ring, those days are long over, and I see him looking at my hand as I finish my drink.

‘Would you allow me to buy you another, as a welcome to the beautiful country?’ The others will be here soon, so what the hell.

‘Thanks. I’m Izzy.’ We shake hands. He’s Chris, and he moves up the few bar stools to sit next to me. We nod an insignificant toast.

‘So if you’re not on holiday, let me guess – you’re working for one of those NGOs helping our esteemed government do what it can’t do without you?’

‘Wrong. You don’t have to guess. I’m a researcher – from the University of Southampton. We’re a team working with UZ.’

‘Right, a researcher. Last guess – more research into HIV-AIDS.’

Obviously I take note of the cynical tilt to the guessing game. ‘And wrong again. We’re researching the fast track land reform since 2000. Land tenure issues.’

I can’t help smiling at the look of surprise that spreads over his face and then, just in time, the rest of the team appear, ambling in, noisy, laughing, relaxed after the week. There’s the three of them: Amadeus Mtombodzi, our leader, short and round, his sharp mind hidden behind the face of a large child, Head of the Institute of Social Studies at the University of Zimbabwe; Jonathon Mbudzi, our stats man, tall like a ladder, thin, bespectacled face always chewing on the data; and Joice Manjoro the land tenure guy, full of enthusiasm, ready for each day with new jokes, the one who carries a half empty rucksack to stow away the gifted pumpkins. Introductions all round, and Chris is greeted warmly in that completely accepting Zimbabwean way to strangers when they’re introduced by a friend. What a surprise – he’s fluent in Shona and there is a lot of that double-hand shaking now, Magadi - ing each other and inclusive laughter that excludes me. But I’m used to that. If you don’t learn the languge you’re going to be left out here and there.

‘And what do you do, Chris?’ Amadeus asks him.

‘Me – I’m a farmer.’ He seems to anticipate the reaction this would get from us, given what I’ve just told him, looking over at me from within the explosion of pleasure that brings the team back around him, slapping him on the back, more handshakes, extending an easy physical contact.

‘You are exactly the man we would like to add to our sample,’ and Amadeus seriously looks as if he thinks this guy wouldn’t mind.

‘Well, there’s not many of us left standing hey?’

Jonathon moves into the fray, the walking encyclopaedia of our stats. ‘Our best estimate is that you are about 400 remaining, out of an original number of between six to maybe eight thousand before the land reform started.’

‘And that’s what you guys call it? Land reform? Murder, theft, violence. The land left in ruins.’

Oh no. I knew it was too good to last. Cordiality now maybe a bit less obvious as the guys start girding their rational argument loins – we’re used to this. But it’s Friday night, our relaxing time and I can see they don’t really want to gird too tightly.

‘Come, Chris, my friend,’ and Amadeus, urbane and calm, arm round Chris’s back, signals for more drinks and leads us to one of the red plush alcoves, all in one smooth operation. I slide in opposite to Chris, not wanting to sit next to him, looking as if I’ve joined him somehow, two whites pairing up. Anyway, from this side I can see his eyes: unusual, dark grey like the clouds building up for a Harare thunderstorm. He keeps glancing at me as the discussion takes hold, we hold the contact now and then for longer than is necessary.

‘Well, why did it happen like that? All that violence. Why did the government start down that track?’

Joice steps up to this one, jovial, on top of the research. ‘The government did not have a lot of say at the beginning of it, Chris. It was led by the war vets, and peasants, those with nothing. They were desperate times if you remember well. You recall that the 91/92 season was the worst El Nino of the century? Then more droughts through to ’95…’

‘And that idiotic decision to go to war in the Congo! What did that cost the country? Who benefited from that, tell me that?’ Chris interrupted Joice’s flow.

‘You are quite right, Chris, my friend, that was a devastating blow to the economy and combined with the World Bank structural adjustment programme – there was wholesale hardship all through the decade.’

‘I never understood that ESAP thing. The end of free education and health. My workers had to start paying to go to the clinic. It cost me I can tell you.’

‘It cost the poor a lot more. It was the new flavour of international aid – the neo-liberal free market model of development: the so-called Washington consensus. No more government support – just when our people needed it most. Government was in what we call, using your so expressive English language, a rock and a hard place.’ Huge delight at this joke. A lot more laughter and back slapping. ‘Back in the 80s the Bank had put pressure on government to take out massive loans and to get any more assistance in the 90s they had to accept Washington's diktats.’ Always a radical, Joice, a Marxist student in his time, telling it like it is.

‘Why!’

I knew what was coming; Amadeus had done a study of the performance management system World Bank staffers worked under: his thesis was that because they received more points the more loans they managed to persuade governments to take out, they were incentivised to put pressure on. Debts built up. More loans taken out to pay more debts. I always argued some of them must have had better developmental reasons for pushing the policies and the loans, but Amadeus wouldn’t have it, arguing that there’s a history to why Zim is in the state it’s in – not all the President’s fault. That’s his take on it. I suppose some of the Bank’s economists must have thought at the time it would work, but now we all know better.

‘The war vets association grew stronger out of all the misery, and their leaders stepped into the breach, organised the first repossessions…You remember that chap Hunzi at the time?’

Chris bristles at this and interrupts Amadeus. ‘Yes I do. Called himself Hitler if you remember that part of it. They were invasions, whatever you call them now. The country will never get over it. It’ll never produce what we did.’

More drinks appear, salty chicken-wing bar snacks in ancient saucers are spread around the table by that skeletal barman. Joice jokes that he hopes they’re road-runners with a real taste, not imports from Brazil. In any case we all dive in and get greasy chins, wiping off with the thin paper serviettes folded in neat triangles placed all round us.

No normal person really knows what’s happening in Zim agriculture after all the chaos of the early repossessions, only people like us, researching it. I hadn’t known myself before I got involved and my assumption had been that agriculture had gone to hell since the whites were thrown off. It’s not like that though. I wonder how Chris is still farming.

‘You are wrong about production levels, Chris. In the first land reform after Independence, the biggest ever attempted in Africa mind you, 75,000 families were resettled. Government did what it could, buying land from you whites who were fleeing – willing seller, Lancaster House rules.’ And there are wry smiles between us, the team, and now Jonathon explains further.

‘Whites either offered marginal land for sale, or made it so expensive it was unaffordable to government so then they got the Certificate of No Current Interest – you remember those? And then they could sell, at cheaper prices to their white brothers. So you ended up with the remaining whites, many with two or three farms, some of which lay unused.’ Chris shakes his head. It’s getting a bit much for him.

‘And to cap it all,’ Amadeus always relishes this part of the story, ‘a Labour Government was elected in UK. In 1997.’

‘What does that have to do with anything?’ Poor Chris looks really perplexed.

‘Everything, my friend, everything. And it led to the breakdown of relations between our two fine countries. You see, there had been negotiations with John Major, for the UK to finally come up with some of the promised money to buy white farmers out, but this agreement was thrown away by Tony Blair. There’s a famous letter sent by Clare Short pulling out of the earlier agreement.

‘Clare Short?’

‘She was Labour’s new head of international development. Sent it to our Ministry of Agriculture and Land, 1997. She said she was Irish and Britain had also colonised them. Laid out new terms to acquire land and said they wouldn’t pay unless the government could prove poverty was being reduced. Put backs up. It caused a fine kettle of fish here I can tell you. No bowing down to the British and no means by which our government could use taxpayers’ money to pay to whites, to pay compensation to people who had taken the land by force in the first place.’

Chris doesn’t give up though, engages with the guys, takes on board some of what they’re throwing at him, and carries on confronting other stuff. He can’t accept Zimbabwe will ever produce what it did under the whites, but then does look staggered when Jonathon tells him that white farmers always got government help and by the mid-70s the Smith government was subsidising each white farmer to the tune of $40,000 each year, and even with that only 5% of farms were very profitable, most broke even and another group were insolvent. He agrees he knew people in all categories, though he thought there were more successful farms. Cordiality seeps back as the alcohol intake increases. Joice starts to give him figures about the improvement of outputs from the small resettled farmers, even without the support the whites used to get. It’s one of the most interesting land reform programmes in the world. Every land tenure academic is interested in it. Chris didn’t know that.

Turns out he’s one of those that made ‘an arrangement’ with the ZANU-PF politician who was allocated his farm years ago when Chris had to get out: he manages it for him now and has been given back some of his own land to farm for himself. We’ve heard of these arrangements but not met one before. It gets to dinner time and I’m ravenous but obedient to the protocol and have to wait for Amadeus to round up, portentous as always, but sweet. We shake hands and say goodbye to him. We all make our way to the buffet and take huge helpings of Zimbabwean beef carved from juicy joints in front of us, sweet potato, sadza of course, greens.

And then my John arrives and greets everybody in his usual boisterous way, kisses me, makes sure he squeezes in at the table next to me, joins the team without any hesitation. He’s possessive in company but I’ve decided not to mind. He’s fun and clever, with a good body: in bed, snuggled up against his back is like being a chalk pebble at the foot of a basalt cliff.

The conversation is that half-Shona, half-English style, the guys slipping effortlessly mid-sentences between the two languages, so I can sort of follow. They tease him about his job at the tax office and he makes jokes about the uselessness of researchers and it’s all more cordial than ever.

We go to bed and not till he’s getting dressed to leave after midnight does he mention that he has a funeral to go to tomorrow: his friend’s mother’s half-sister, or some such. I’m mad as hell: we’d arranged to spend the day together, to go out to Bushman’s Rock for lunch and look at the cave paintings. I know it’s no use but I try to argue. ‘She’s not even a bloody relative.’ But it’s his best friend from uni days and really I know funerals can’t be missed, so I throw him out, spitting whispers of irritation at him along the corridor, tell him to sod off. He can’t stand public scenes, people knowing his business, so he goes without defending himself further. I’ve had to get used to these petty disappointments with him, but they still irritate the hell out of me.

‘You’re drinking alone again?’

I look up and it’s him, Chris from last night, and he joins me for a morning coffee in the lobby. I’m still fed up about that damn funeral and glad of the distraction. We start talking where we left off last night: he has questions and we chat away, about land reform like you do. I don’t bother to take offence when he asks my job and rolls his eyes when I tell him gender issues.

‘If you’re not doing anything better would you like to come out to see the farm. It’s only an hour away.’

‘Really?’

‘I could have you back before dark.’

I nip upstairs and change into the new dress I would have worn for Bushman’s. It might sound stupid, to go off with somebody you’ve only met once but you know, in Zim, you don’t worry about things like that; it’s not like meeting a stranger in a bar in UK. In any case we meet Washington, the major domo, patrolling the lobby and front doors, ready to call me a taxi, recommend some hopeless restaurant, and I tell him I’m going on an outing to the gentleman’s farm, just to make conversation as we pass. Then I stand while he and Chris exchange hearty Shona greetings as if they’d been to school together.

It’s a bit depressing really, the farm house, clean but bleak. Obvious he lives alone and it turns out his wife left him a couple of years ago; she’s in Cape Town with their sons. I don’t ask him any questions, and it’s probably one of those a long stories neither of us are interested in pursuing right now.

‘So are you making it?’ I ask him.

‘So-so. Completely different situation from years ago.’

‘You mean without all those subsidies and contracts you used to get from government?’ I push it, interested in the reaction.

‘We didn’t know the blacks didn’t get any of that help you know.’

‘You didn’t?’ I try not to sound too incredulous.

‘I promise you, man, we never really thought about it. They were all out there in their own places and we got on with our own farming.’

‘You mean out there in the Tribal Trust Lands – where they were pushed out to – the worst farming areas in Zim. Do you think about it now?’

‘I have done, over the years since. Bit of an eye opener that discussion last night you know.’

We are having tea in the kitchen, spotless, the cement floor gleaming with its Cobra glow, the lavender smell of it drifting in the air. A massive dresser takes up an entire wall, mostly empty of the crockery and knick knacks I suppose his wife would have loaded its shelves with in the old days. There’s nothing here that could have been added since the place had been built: another time warp of the fifties.

‘My dad was a war vet you know, came out in 1951 on an assisted passage when they were trying to increase the number of whites here. I hadn’t known till last night there was a special scheme – that Soldier Resettlement thing your friend Amadeus talked about. He never explained that side of it, just said he’d been given a farm – it was cleared of bush and fenced, forty hectares ploughed ready for him, they built a road to connect him to the main highway. And he even got tools, seeds and fertilizer. It was great for him. Lifted him forward.’

‘They even got two years training you know, those who had no farming experience – free accommodation and food on other farms. Did you know that’s how they were helped to start farming?’

‘Well – they worked at it. Made the country what it was. The blacks were doing nothing – a few scrawny mombies and maize. That’s a struze fact, man. He starts to sound annoyed. ‘He found it like it was – he didn’t push anybody off any land. And neither did I.’

‘Only some of those farmers made it, and we don’t know what black soldiers would have done if they hadn’t been excluded from the scheme, do we? In any case, it’s interesting that the pattern of the resettled guys now the same as it was for the whites, isn’t it? About a third are not using the land well at all, a third breaking even and a third doing very well.’

He shifts about, lifting the milk jug and moving the sugar basin around, wants to dispute what I’m pushing him on. ‘There’s a lot of us out there these days you know, counting, measuring, interviewing. The small guys are where it’s at these days. Do you know the records show that in 1975 52% of all taxable income was paid by only 271 white farms. That’s out of six thousand. It shows that not all large scale, white agriculture was the success everybody thinks it was.’ I need to stop. I hadn’t come out for a confrontation. Can’t help myself sometimes.

‘But you now, living alone, managing your old farm for somebody else? Is it

worth it to you?’

He’s pretty defensive, says we’ll go and have a look at his own fifty hectares after tea, and yes it is worth it, to be on the land and in his own home is worth it. It’s who he is. I’m warming to the guy in a way. OK – he’s a Rhodie, but he’s real, and he seems like one of the better ones. It’s not his fault he was born there. We keeping doing that eye contact thing. I’m just settling into a second cup, and maybe we’ll get round to his wife and why I never re-married, when we hear a vehicle thundering into the yard.

‘Hey, someone’s in a hurry,’ and he gets up to go through to the front to look, and pops his head back round the kitchen door. ‘Don’t know the vehicle. Excuse me.’ He goes off to welcome the somebody. It won’t be anybody I know so I don’t move. I have both hands round the dainty cup and take notice of it; it must be from his wife’s time – bone china, a pale rose design twining up the delicate handle. I can see the shadow of my hands through its fragility, and wonder how it survived the years the place was abandoned.

I hear raised voices, then very raised voices, and it sounds as if some furniture has crashed over, outside on the stoep. I stand up and walk back through the sitting room. A huge row is going on outside. My God, that can’t be John’s voice, can it? It is. He has Chris by the throat, bending him backwards over the balustrade. They’re both shouting at each other – in Shona – in English. I stumble out fast as I can. Chris is roaring, ‘Voetsak, voetsak - you shanya bastard,’ pushing at John’s hands.

‘John! What the hell are you doing?’ Seeing me enrages him even more. I can’t believe what’s happening. He pulls Chris up by his shirt front – they are both big guys, but John is younger and works out – and smashes his fist right into Chris’s face, knocking him down onto the floor.

I scream at John to stop and rush over to kneel by Chris’s bleeding head. Bad move.

‘What?’ John sounds out of his mind, his normally calm face split by snarls, ‘So it’s true. You are with this man,’ and he pounces forward to grab at Chris’s torn shirt again, to pull him up so he can hit him again. ‘I’ll kill the bastard.’ John never swears.

I try to grab at his arm, shrieking at him, ‘Stop it, stop it,’ but he smashes down at Chris again, the momentum of his arm throwing me sideways onto the floor, but at least it makes the punch miss the face this time and crash instead into the side of his head.

‘Sweetheart!’ John is horrified seeing me fall over and immediately steps over Chris’s body to lift me up.

‘Get off me. What the hell are you doing?’ I shout, shaking him away, and he moves back to tower over Chris, who’s not moving. ‘For God’s sake John, it’s just a visit. Research. Look at me. Look at me. He’s a farmer. We met him at the hotel last night.’ I babble anything that comes into my head. ‘He was with the whole team before you arrived.’

We face each other. Both gasping for breath. Chris is on the floor between us. We don’t even know if he’s breathing.

‘What are you doing here?’ I finally manage to shout at him.

‘What?’

‘Have you gone mad?’

‘You come out here.’

‘So?’

‘Behind my back!’

‘You went to that bloody funeral.’

‘I left early to come and take you out like we planned.’

‘How did I know you would do that?’

Groans interrupt this stage of the row and I drop on my knees again, to Chris’s bleeding face. I fumble about for a tissue to dab at the blood coming from his mouth. ‘If you’ve killed him you’re finished. Go and get some water and towels. Find the maid somewhere.’ I scrabble one of the cushions from an overturned armchair and put it under Chris’s head. He looks terrible: bleeding from his mouth, eyes closed, painful rasping breaths. ‘Chris, can you hear me? I’m so sorry.’

One eye opens and focuses on me, thank God. I bend down to hear him wheeze, ’Who is he?’

It’s no time to equivocate, ‘He’s my boyfriend. He got the wrong end of the stick. I’m so sorry. He’s never done anything like this.’

His lips move again, so I go in closer to hear him. He manages to expel one sentence. ‘You dirty, fucking, kaffir lover.’ I hurt my neck jerking back, as if he’s spit a gob of saliva into my mouth.

We get him inside, lying on an ancient sofa, bleeding stopped, antiseptic applied, ice pack over his ear, maid attending to him, and continue the row on the way back to Harare. But I’m disadvantaged by disgust and feel ashamed somehow. The farmer’s words crawl round my mind. I try to feel I still have a good case against John: I’m outraged, and speak like a Jane Austen character – How dare you? How could you? What were you thinking of?

He’s more outraged, and angrier. Going to the home of another man, alone, what else could that mean? Yes – Washy had told him at the hotel – the whole hotel knows I went with him - everybody knows that guy’s farm – managing it for the ZANU-PF Governor – that’s no secret. How could I think it’s ok to come out here? Alone with him.

Neither of us can breathe right; he’s still panting, knuckles standing up round the steering wheel, his shoulders hunched forward over it like a racing driver, speeding and bouncing along the dirt road. And I don’t really have the heart for a fight. My throat feels thick. I still try though – you don’t own me – I’ll go exactly where I like – who do you think you are? But it doesn’t get me anywhere. I don’t know where I want to get.

I try to take some deep yoga breaths and sit back, looking out onto the landscape where it’s melting into the darkening sky. It’s still too light to see stars, but the first trace of a new moon hangs over the eastern horizon, pale and fragile. I love the southern sky, lying on a sun chair in my garden at night watching the endlessness of the stars swoop round our tiny earth: a benefit of Harare’s lack of power and its unlighted streets is that the heavens are opened up every night, pure and eternal. You can see what the Greeks saw when they named the constellations. But now I can’t get over those slavered words. I’ll never be able to tell John what he said. I won’t be able to tell anybody what he said. I can’t admit that I’d fancied him. It serves me right – you can’t be on two sides in this country: you’re on one side or the other and the skin you’re in makes sure of that.

BOUNTIFUL’S STORY

Sharon stared at the tearful face of her domestic worker, intrigued. Honestly, these people.

‘It can’t be true can it, Bountiful? That person in the newspapers, it’s you?’ Her maid only nodded her miserable face, crouched on the floor at Sharon’s feet. She’d suddenly seemed to have some sort of breakdown, coming in to collect the breakfast napkins; Grace had been called to explain the hysterics of her fellow worker and Sharon had been told of Bountiful’s great fears.

‘Do stop crying, girl. Here, get up and sit down,’ and she and Grace hauled the woman up on her unsteady legs to the dining chair recently vacated by husband Brian. Lord, she’d only taken this girl on a couple of weeks ago to help Grace with the washing and ironing, and there was another problem, Grace, getting too old and slow to cope with everything. The hassle of training up a new girl after all the years she’d looked after them; how would she manage without Grace when the time came? And now this – really, it was too much with these domestics, there was always something up with them, and she’d gone to all that trouble of matching her up with Grace in the new navy blue uniforms she’d been to Pick N’Pay specially for: contrasting white aprons and doeks wrapped round their hair - very tasteful.

‘Wait there. I’ll have to cancel my hair appointment. Really, Bountiful, this is very inconvenient, today of all days.’

But how interesting: it had been in the paper on and off for days – the gang bursting into Martin Pistorius’ place and terrorising the guy (though why these men kept hanging onto their farms with all their problems she couldn’t understand, they should have got out years ago). She sent Grace off to deal with the breakfast dishes so she could get the story without all that talking to each other in Shona these girls did all the time. She closed the dining room door and resumed her chair opposite Bountiful, sniffing now but no longer sobbing.

‘Bountiful, look up at me. We are going to go through everything step by step so I understand. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, madam.’

‘You will need to speak up so I can hear you. Try to take some deep breaths. Stop crying now. Breathe in – and out. Again. Yes, that’s better. Now let’s start again. You are that woman they talked about in the papers – the gang leader who is the Vice President’s daughter?’

‘Yes Madam.’

‘What? You are Mr Manangagwa’s daughter?’

‘No Madam, I am not that one.’

Sharon had expected the story to be exasperating so she held herself in check and started again. ‘Bountiful.’

‘Madam, they were forcing me. There were many.’

‘Who, who was forcing you?’

But Bountiful was now weeping again, tears streaming as if without end. Sharon sighed, and went off to find a box of tissues; poor cow, she was really upset about something at any rate. She popped her head in the kitchen, ‘Grace make a pot of tea will you and bring it through. Bountiful looks as if she needs one. Where on earth did you find her? Never mind that now – just bring the tea.’

Back in the dining room she handed over a scrunched handful of tissues. ‘Here, wipe your face. It can’t be so bad.’

She could hardly hear Bountiful’s response as she scrubbed at her eyes. ‘It is, Madam.’

‘It is what?’

‘It is very bad, Madam.’

The tea came, was poured, a cup for Bountiful with five large spoons of sugar, they loved sugary tea, and she watched Grace stir it and hold Bountiful’s hand round the cup to be sure she was steady enough to hold it well.

‘We are going to start again, Bountiful. Now you feel better. Right?

‘Yes, Madam,’ looking at Sharon for the first time, sitting up straighter, obviously making an effort to calm down, thank God. She was older than Sharon had first thought but now she was looking at her properly, not as old as Grace, but not a girl – always hard to tell age with Africans. Thin as hell: Jesus, Sharon hoped she didn’t have AIDS, that would set Brian off on one of his moans about the state of the nation these days, how it was going to hell in a donkey cart – one of his favourite, boring expressions.

‘Who forced you?’

‘They were five, Madam. Five men. With the guns. They came inside my house to push and slap at me. They poked …they poked their guns at…at…my private parts.’

‘Do not start crying again, Bountiful, or I shall give up on you this minute. You understand? Now, what did they force you to do? You can tell me. Tell me!’ But Sharon had to wait while the wretched woman gathered herself again.

‘The one in charge was named Zimuto. A very ugly man. A very fierce man, Madam. He said I must be in that gang. I had to learn to say the white man’s name. They bring good clothes I must wear – and shoes.’

‘Why?’

‘So I can look a big person. I have certain things to say they make me learn. They keep coming each day to make me learn.’

What! She couldn’t be making this up. The story emerged as the morning wore on and Sharon drank in every detail, forcing Bountiful to remember, extracting what had happened, fact by fact. Finally she was satisfied. ‘Well,’ and she blew out her cheeks. ‘Listen dear, you are suffering from what is called post-traumatic shock. Try not to worry. Everybody gets it these days. But let me tell you, the police are not interested in that case any longer. Mr Pistorius reported it and didn’t pay any money. Nobody was hurt. It’s nothing. You’re not in trouble. The police are not interested in it any longer.’

She allowed Grace to come and take Bountiful to the kitchen to see if she could be persuaded to eat some sadza and leftovers – she didn’t seem to eat. Thank God it wasn’t AIDS. She lit one of her Marlboroughs and strolled over to the open window, blowing the smoke outside, considering the garden: a mass of purple bougainvillea climbed unrestrained through the old avocado tree, the red hibiscus bushes that needed thinning; the acid yellows of the canna lilies. The lawn lay perfect and cosseted. Brian had a thing about his lawn, stretched out by the mower’s perfect parallel lines to the high cement block walls surrounding the entire property, razor wire crowding over the top of it like a spikey climber. He insisted on so much security because she wouldn’t have a dog: she didn’t like dogs, or children. The details of the domestic’s account of the Zimuto gang did tie in with the reports that had been in the papers, and she played with Bountiful’s part in it, running it like a film through her imagination. What a scream. Should she tell Brian about it? He’d been so interested at the time – another example of how the country was going to the dogs – female gang leaders – impersonation – intimidation – armed assault on Martin Pistorius. They’d do anything to get at whites and the farms. He’d gone on and on about it and now - here it turned out the so-called gang leader was their washer woman, here in their own house. What a story.

In her bed later, Brian reading through a file in his, she smoked her last cigarette of the day, waiting for him to finish. ‘Have you finished? I’ve got such a story to tell you. It’s a scream.’

‘What kind of story?’

‘Listen. You haven’t seen her about I suppose, but we’ve got a new helper in to do the washing and ironing for Grace, a couple of days a week, and this morning she just collapsed, right in front of me, hysterical in the…’

‘Am I going to be interested in this story, honey?’

‘Yes, you are. It turns out she’s the woman who was supposed to be the gang leader in that Pistorius case.’

‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘I’m telling you. They forced her to join them; knocked her about a bit, threatened her and said they’d give her some of the money when he paid up. She had to learn certain lines to say, like a play, pretend she was the VP’s daughter, just like they said in the papers. But she’s not. When they dropped her off they even took the clothes off her back, and the shoes.’

‘But why?’

‘Obviously they thought he’d pay up. It was a blackmail plot. They even had a forged letter saying she’d been allocated the farm instead of him. You know - VP’s daughter – he’d have known he had no chance. So they asked him for big money and said she’d let him keep the farm when he handed it over. But he went to the police and that lawyer of his and with all the publicity the plot fell apart. And now she’s worried sick the police will come after her.’

‘Who’s worried?’

‘Bountiful! The new domestic. Brian do listen. Setting her up as a gang leader. Isn’t it a nonsense? She’s such a mouse.’

‘And did they…interfere with her?’

‘What! No. They only frightened her, slapped her around a bit.’

And now she had to watch him consider what she’d told him, piece it together in his accountant’s mind, each fact slotted into its logical position. ‘Interfere’ – it was like living with somebody from the dark ages.

‘But why her? Why this woman?’ he finally asked her.

‘Well, I don’t know.’

‘She must have known them.’

‘I asked her that. She swears she didn’t. You can tell anyway, she’s not that sort.’

‘So I repeat. Why her? Out of all the women in the township, why her? There must be a reason.’

‘God, Brian, I thought you’d be interested.’ She flounced off to clean her teeth, thrusting the brush back and forth in her mouth. He always, always spoiled her stories.

But then later, lying awake in the dark, she thought about that last question again. Why indeed Bountiful? Why had she been picked on? Where was the husband and the children in all this? The family? They always had family, in every nook and cranny.

Bountiful didn’t come in every day so Sharon had to wait. She tried asking Grace, who clearly knew everything but was being too awkward to talk to her about it, whatever it was.

‘I want both of you there in the dining room. And there’s no need to look like that, I’m not going to bite your heads off. Come on. I want to get to the bottom of this thing once and for all. Grace, you can make tea for us.’

Grace carried in the best silver plate tea tray: the sugar and milk in a matching set, and a packet of Lobels shortbread, the buttery rectangles spilling out over the plate. She arranged the grouping so the two women would sit opposite her on the other side of the dining table and she leaned forward over it, her bare, tanned arms outstretched towards them across its polished surface.

‘Now, Bountiful, I expect you are feeling better after our little talk on Monday. The police are definitely not going to be coming for you. You know that now don’t you?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘You are sure? You know that it’s all over and you are quite safe. There’s no need for all these breakdowns and tears any longer?’ Sharon waited for the girl to reaffirm her understanding that she was ok now.

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘And you feel better?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘Well good. That’s good, isn’t it. Now,’ and here she smiled at both of her domestic servants, directing encouragement towards them. She didn’t want any more hysterics – just the story. ‘I have invited Grace to be here while we go through things again. I’m not quite certain I understand absolutely everything you told me before. That’s right isn’t it, Grace? You can help her explain things in a better way.’

‘Madam, the story of Bountiful is for her to tell.’ This unexpected assertion of will from her domestic irritated Sharon only slightly: Grace could be difficult, she did have her ways and continued to use her own methods of cleaning despite any suggestions Sharon had made in the past to speed up certain functions. But they were used to each other after all these years – impossible to think of starting afresh with a new girl.

‘Well of course it’s Bountiful’s story, Grace. But she’s not so used to me as you are and you can help her out if she needs it can’t you? She’s not so good in English as you. You can translate if she needs help in describing things, can’t you?’

‘I can do that, Madam.’

‘Right. That’s all I mean,’ and Sharon now focussed her attention on Bountiful, who was sipping tea from one of her best white china tea-cups that Grace seemed to have decided was appropriate for this meeting, somewhat to Sharon’s initial surprise, and too late now to ask for the kitchen crockery.

‘Bountiful, I have been thinking about what you told me, and I have one more question so I understand everything.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘These men came with guns to your house and they beat you and threatened you, yes?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘They said you must pretend to be in the gang with them and go to frighten Mr Pistorius at his farm.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘My questions is – why did they choose you, instead of somebody else? They could have gone to any woman for that gang. Why you?’

Bountiful put down her cup and wiped her face with her hand. Sharon picked up her own tea and took deep, patient breaths; she’d cancelled yoga this morning to get to the bottom of this, but she’d have some story to tell at the tennis club lunch later. Nobody would believe it – the gang leader woman in the papers doing Sharon’s laundry!

‘Madam, I am telling you I am not one of those in that gang.’

‘I know that. I didn’t mean to say you were a full time member. I am trying to find out why they chose you, Bountiful. There are many, many women in the township. Why you? Why Bountiful?’

At this point Bountiful turned to look at Grace, who took her hand and held it. Sharon watched her squeeze it, stroke it, the work-shaped hands of the two women holding on to each other, hearing the soft whispers in Shona between them, not understanding the words but feeling somehow a catch of tenderness from Grace. It was she who looked up at her and spoke with unexpected directness, again.

‘Madam, I am telling her to tell to you her story. It is very hard for her. She is saying you cannot be interested because it is a story very far from your life.’

‘Oh. I see.’ She didn’t see at all. Why couldn’t the woman just get on with it? Grace had obviously been doing some post-traumatic counselling, in her own way.

‘But I am telling her you are a good Madam in your way. I am knowing your ways and the way you speak your words. I am telling her you will not be hard with her.’

‘Well…good.’ Sharon had not expected the session to turn into a feedback loop on her own qualities and thought she would process these revelations a bit later on in the day. ‘So, Bountiful, now will you please explain everything to me so I can understand.’

And so the story of Bountiful unfolded, with and without Grace’s occasional translations and quiet prompting, over more tea, a cancelled lunch and into the long, sunny wastelands of the Harare afternoon.

Her husband was Aloysius. A man too good with her. He was a man who never drank beer. Never. He was not a man to hit her, his wife. Never one time can he beat her. His love was to play the mbira and the sound of that small thumb piano played through all their knowing of each other. He was one they called to join others, also good with mbira.

They used to be on the farm of a white man. She was only a labourer for the tobacco fields but her husband worked with the machines – the big tractors and trucks. He was the best mechanic that white man had. The only thing not good with that life was a lack of children. The Lord did not send them children. But even so, Aloysius remained loyal with her. He did not blame her. He did not beat her. He did not take another wife. And then, the Lord heard her prayers at last and she bore a child for her husband. Not just a child, but a son. They named him Chengetai. It means to protect or take care of. They thought that was a good name because they would take care of him and then he would take care of them when he was grown into a man. She was too much happy. That child was the only one but her husband did not heed his family, always, always telling him to get a better wife.

Ah…that husband was a good husband: big, strong. How much he cared for her, telling her she was his one and only wife. The one he loved only. Her eyes came alive, talking about her husband and Sharon could almost feel a pang, of something or other; fancy, this beaten down creature able to speak of having a husband with such feeling for her.

They were chased from that farm when the war vets came. Everybody was chased but they came to town. Aloysius soon got a steady job. Everybody called him to fix their cars because he was too much good and not a man who can cheat and overcharge money for that job.

And the boy – he grew and was like his father so tall and strong and full of joy for her. He learned to be a mechanic from that father and can drive at only seventeen. They lived a good life the three together. Her parents were late and her two sisters were married in Johannesburg and she had no family close – but it did not matter. It did not matter at that time Aloysius’ family did not like her. Her husband was like Peter – her rock.

And then he died. The doctor said his heart was weak and had split open when he helped a friend to lift a heavy truck at work. He just collapsed down into the oily dirt and died that day. They came and told her and she nearly died herself. Her heart emptied of its life.

And after the funeral his brothers came with their wives and sorted through his things and took everything: his two Sunday suits and his work clothes, and even the mbira to sell for cash. They left nothing for Chengetai from his father. And the senior brother also said he and his family would now stay in the house and she would become his second wife. It was his duty to take her. But it was not something she could bear, to be a wife to this man who was nothing like her own best husband. Yes…she tried to speak but he hit across her face so she knocked against the wall. Chengetai jumped up to protect his mother but this uncle punched him hard to the ground. The family was very angry a young man tried to lift his hand to a senior uncle. It was not a thing heard of. It must be her doing to raise a son so disrespectful.

She could not go on at this point. Sharon herself needed a break. What was it called? A misery memoir or something - they talked about at her book club once. It was that Irish book Molly had suggested …*Angela’s Ashes*, that was it – a really miserable read. She hadn’t finished it.

She made the call to cancel her tennis lunch and the women went off the kitchen to make more tea and eat something. She poured herself a generous gin from the sideboard while they were gone, a splash of tonic, nibbled on a shortbread.

When they were all settled down again, Grace explained that the next part was too hard for Bountiful to continue, so she, Grace, would complete the story. Sharon had almost forgotten that she still didn’t know how Bountiful had got mixed up in Zimuto’s gang and asked for this part to be explained right away. That was the whole point of the morning after all, not all this family background stuff.

‘Madam, there is more in the story until we come to the Zimuto part. After the death of her murume there was some good news. Chengetai came home one day with great, good news for his mother. He found a job, to drive a combi on the Harare to Norton routing. It is good for him, that busy route. He can earn better money and find a new place to rent for his mother and him. His plan is to take her away from his uncle. It is no longer a place they can live. He is worrying for his mother: she has stopped to eat; she can never smile.

That day he drove home in the combi vehicle to show her, she is smiling that day. It is her first time to smile since her husband is late. Her son is young to be a driver but they know him from his father and give him a chance. She did not like the words painted on the sides of the combi – you know those young men, Madam, and how they can paint anything on their buses. For Chengetai he painted *Vengeance is Mine*. Very big letters using a purple colour and the combi is white. He is laughing at his mother that day because she does not like the slogan but she herself is happy to see him laugh again.

Madam, you are reading in the newspapers about the death of Chengetai. He was the one driving the combi hit by that bus coming from Bulawayo. The tyre for that bus exploded and Chengetai is driving too fast. He is wanting to make many trips to earn the money. They hit with a heads-on crash and that is the time the twenty eight people died that day. You remember it was all in the news and on the television set. What Bountiful can only think about is what the passenger who is saved said. She is the one sitting next to Chengetai at the front and thrown out and so God saved her. She told the newspaper reporters they watched that big bus speeding at them so fast and at the end moment Chengetai took his hands from the steering wheel and dropped down his head into those hands. And then it is all finished.

Bountiful keeps asking me if I think her son was thinking about his mother when he died that day.’

Grace finished and the room fell quiet. Sharon listened to Brian’s old clock on the sideboard, its steady beat counting out the seconds. Next door’s gardener was mowing their lawn; the resident robin sang its beautiful liquid song outside the open French window where the net curtains shifted slightly in the afternoon breeze. This room would never feel the same. ‘What happened then, Grace?’

‘Everybody blamed her for those deaths, Madam. They were cursing her in the street. The brother of her husband banished her from that home. I helped her find a shack to rent in Mbare. It is a bad, leaking place and she is sleeping only on a mat. She is a person with nobody. Those tsotsis are knowing all this. There are no men to stand for her. They make their plans and they decide to have a woman to be the Vice President’s daughter. They are stupid men and they thought it was a good plan to get free money from that white man. They do not want a woman who knows them. It is easy for them to come for her and force her.’

‘How do you know all this, Grace?’

‘I am knowing all these things because my friend, Takesure works for Baas Pistorius. She found her. We are all home girls. We are knowing her mother when she is still alive.’

‘Yes… I see. And you asked for her to help you with the washing.’

‘Yes, Madam. I am the one trying to save her. She is no longer believing that God is caring for her. Without that she cannot live.’

Sharon sat back into the dining chair, shifting her shoulders, trying to ease the tension that had accumulated there over the afternoon. She really needed a yoga session after all this, and more gin. Strangely, Bountiful was sitting straight up, looking her in the face; perhaps having the story told out loud was helping her. Well, it was supposed to, and it was a pretty horrible story, no doubt about that, and she was probably still in shock, but…still, the woman had to snap out of it sometime, and get on. Quite a lot to snap away from though.

‘What are we going to do, Grace?’

‘Madam, that is a good question you are asking.’ Grace’s steady, familiar voice answered. ‘I have made a plan for us.’

‘A plan? What sort of a plan?’ She hadn’t really expected an answer.

‘Bountiful can move from that bad place here with us. You and Master can build another small quarters for her next to mine. There is more space back there,’ and Grace indicated the general direction of the bottom of the kitchen garden where her neat room and kitchen were tucked snugly out of sight, behind the pink oleander hedge Brian had planted all those years ago. ‘I can show her everything in this house and she can learn to look after you and baas Brian like me. She can learn to be a good maid with you and I will rest from that work and be taking care of her until she is restored to the Lord.’

‘Restored to the Lord,’ repeated Sharon.

Grace looked at Bountiful, ‘Tell the Madam.’

Bountiful said simply, ‘I am ready for this job, Madam. If you allow me I will learn everything for you.’

‘I’m not sure about this Grace. It’s only days ago she was a wreck on my floor, dropping serviettes all over the place. The baas doesn’t like any upset in his routines.’

‘I will learn all your ways from Grace, Madam.’

Well, it would certainly solve the aging Grace situation…but no, the woman was an emotional wreck.

‘Do you really think she’s up to this, Grace?’

‘Yes, Madam,’ Grace was very firm, ‘You and me can bring Bountiful home and she will be made better.

STEADYFAITH’S STORY

Mangwanani, Madam! Ah, you know some Shona. Good for you. Get inside. Please come inside – you are welcome here. Yes please sit. Here at the table? There is room for your books. I will make tea for us. No, no – it is no trouble to make tea for you. I have Milo also if you like? No? Please make your space comfortable while I bring us tea then.

Ah, you find it too sweet? It is the condensed milk.

You are sitting well? There is space there for your papers isn’t it? Yes, I am made to understand you want to use your recording machine. They tell me you want to hear my story. Others have been interviewed by your people and they say you sit quiet and allow us to speak. We laugh for that. It is rare for us to find white people who remain quiet.

My name is interesting? It was the choice of my grandfather; he was a Christian man and insisted all those in his family were Christians. The name of my father himself was Godknows, also chosen by my grandfather for him. Yes, switch on your machine. I am prepared for you Madam. Those who know me have been telling me not to bite your ears too much. But first I want to tell you that no one of us people ever sees the stories we tell you. They say you turn our words into books. No, I have never seen one of those books. How can we find books out here in the rural areas? Even our grandchildren at school have no books.

Ahh, you only write the truth of what we say. I ask you if we tell the truth even when that is what we ourselves want to do. I want to remember the truth for myself, and you say you also want only that, but I am no longer sure it is possible. Yes, your face is looking confused. I mean that truth has many faces. You may see a truth different from one that another may see. I have found this out for myself. Truth is sometimes a stranger even to itself. When I am with maComrades and we stretch our minds back into the years to share our memories of those places in the bush, those battles we fought ... we sometimes cannot agree. *No! That is not how it happened* says one*. Listen here! It happened like this* says another*. So and so was with us and he fell that day. Rubbish - he was never there.* And yet we were there together isn’t it? How can it be possible we do not agree when we are all telling the truth?

Yes, we can get on. But ahh, Madam, in those days I did not think a white person would ever want to hear my story. All the fighting we did. But it is a story not so different from many others, my story. Yes I hear you. You do not need to tell me to use my own words. I have only words that are my own. You have finished your tea. Mazoe for you? But I have no ice cubes so it is warm. Have you been down the Mazoe valley where the oranges grow? Eeeeh – that place. That is a place for Zimbabwe. Yes, now I will begin my story.

I was the last born, in 1956, into a family of four elder brothers. I receive no assistance from those brothers because they are all late – two in the war and the remaining two passed on some years ago. I manage myself without help from brothers. Those boys all went to school and I did not. My father ruled that only the boys should go to school and the girl should not.

Ahh, I am laughing at your question. Why can I feel bitter about that small thing? In a life of big bitterness. But let me tell you even at that time I did not suffer from lack of schooling. We lived on a white man’s farm and that farmer was very rich. My father worked in the fields and my mother cleaned the Madam’s house. She was a great favourite of that Madam, and me the only girl in my mother’s family and not going to school. I lived a life in that white farmhouse. The Madam, she had no children. My mother and all others looked at that with pity. How can you be a woman if you have not borne children for your husband? Even white people must feel this. My mother allowed Madam to share me. I was with her every day from before I could walk.

I had lessons from her and learned to read and write and to speak English in the way you hear me now. I was quick at learning and ate good white food in the kitchen and had lessons at Madam’s desk. I read everything in that house. That was my childhood… and it was a good one, reading the books of Charles Dickens and those clever sisters – I even still remember their name of Bronte. They are sisters who had need to work for themselves while their brother was not good enough. We know about men like that in our lives here in Zimbabwe, but it was a new thing for me to learn that white men also can be useless.

The Madam bought books to teach me arithmetic and geography and history. I learned at that time how lucky we natives were that Mr Cecil John Rhodes found our country and civilized my ancestors. I was the pretty pet and she had some love for me, but I can tell you that being pretty is not helpful for a girl child. Yes, I have learned that lesson in my life and I thank God I have two sons only. I am not wishing a girl to be born into this world even now. Yes I will explain that part. You will understand as my story continues Madam. I have prepared myself to tell the story in good order for you. Ahh, yes thank you, I will try to use your name. Izzee. Oh – it is short for Isobel? There is an Isobel at my church, but no Izzee.

My father noticed that pretty face when I was about twelve years of age. My mother was too afraid of him. She tried once to shield me from him and then I had to go to the Madam and tell lies for a week until her face looked better. I bore what my father did to me. No, there was no person to tell in those days. Where would a girl in the rural areas go and who would she tell? Even now when we have a Ministry for Women and our councils have Social Welfare, do you think they have money to take care of those girls whose fathers are still misusing them? Our Government does not have money enough for that. They must take care of themselves. My luck was that I never became pregnant. God took care of me for that.

And then my two senior brothers left us. The Comrades came creeping in the night and give lessons on the Revolution and how we would have our own land when we won and took back what was ours from the whites. I hid and listened and I believed. They stayed all night in the villages those people, talking to us about our lives, about the time when we will be able to speak, when we will not have to step down into the road to let a white man pass. They told us we will fight a new Chimurenga and get back our land. Some of those who came to talk to us, they were women. From hearing them and seeing them I knew I too could go. My brothers, I long heard them whispering about the camps in Mozambique. I had seen the baas building his house into a fort. They were not afraid, those whites. They knew they would win a war against Africans but my brothers went anyway to fight them, and that made me to understand I too could leave and go to join the war. No, I could not go with them; they had no interest in taking a small girl-child.

I was nearly fifteen years when I left. Yes it was a young age. You people in the West, you talk of child soldiers. Yes some of us were young but we knew what the fighting was for. We knew. I wanted to be a Comrade. It was an easy decision to go when the thought had entered my mind. I thought the war was a good war. I still think that. I asked myself many times even when I was still young why you whites had everything. Why was my mother on her hands and knees each day in that house? Our Madam sat at her desk teaching me to read and write and she never had to wash a dish or even cook food for her husband. Our people did everything – in the fields and in that house. When I grew I understood if that Madam did not favour me, it would be me also holding that floor rag and dipping it into the bucket each day isn’t it? The Comrades told us we would fight the war to end that.

It was very far to walk to Mozambique, and I was scared many times but it was good to be away from my father. I carried that thought in my heart. It was good to be away from my father. Sometimes we found a villager who would let us remain in their hut and feed us on our way, but many times we slept under the sky in the bush with wild animals moving about and not enough food. We were four in that group and I was the youngest. Aah ... we had bad times on that walk through the bush and the forest into the mountains. We had to be careful to avoid the Rhodesian soldiers so we moved mostly at night. We heard of others who walked onto on a landmine near the border. Two of that group died and the others became discouraged and went back to their homes. The Rhodesian soldiers they mined places along the border because they knew our people were leaving to go and train and join the war. But our group made it to a camp and when we were there my greatest days started. I think that is a real truth I can offer you – the more weeks I was in those bush camps, the greater I became. I felt free, and strong. You see me smiling as I remember that young girl. They trained us and I became a soldier. We lived together, ate together. We sang our songs of the future liberation of our country. We still sing those war songs when we need courage. There was much dancing and laughter among us even though we were training hard to be in that war. It was my time. I always can look over my shoulder and see myself in those times and my heart is strong when I do that.

No you are right, it was a very hard time. Our training? We trained how to kill. That is the part that made me so strong. That is what soldiers do. I learned there are many ways to kill a man, with a gun and even without a gun, many ways to move silently through the bush and kill a man in the night. Let me make you understand. I was not thinking about learning to kill when I left my home. We went to fight for our liberation but we were too young at the start to think what that meant. Before we arrived and received our training…we were too young to think about that. I can see you still look worried at what I am telling you. But that is war. What I enjoyed was the skills and the strength I gained. I also gained great knowledge of the socialism and we met many people from other countries. I did not like the killing, but they were killing us. It is hard to explain this part to you but I can say it was worth it. And from that time no man has ever worried me.

Yes I saw many bad, bad things. They are those things I do not want to remember. Yes, it is true, the Comrades sometimes made us watch the beatings of those they accused of selling out. If they received a tip off they went to any village. They went anywhere in the night, through the bush like ghosts those men. They would find the sell-out and beat him to death in front of others. But no, I am not thinking any more of this. I am not telling you more. Aah…Izzy… my heart beats even now to think of those things I saw. Let us have more tea. Wait there. It will rest my mind to make it for us.

No, I am fine. These are hard things of which I am telling you. Yes, yes, you are right to ask that question - there was bad use of some of the girls there, and the village girls were used by the men, it is true. But that is war my dear. That is what happens to women in war - you know that from your own wars. It is not just us in Africa. But not to me, no! I had my place and my training and no man touched me. I had enough of men touching me before I went to that place. Yes, let us carry on.

There was more training than only for killing. We were made to understand the writing of Karl Marx and Lenin, and that our new socialist state would mean we would live a fair life after the whites were chased away. Now today, now we have been Zimbabwe for many years, the Comrade Ministers – all those Wabenzi in their big cars, with their many farms and businesses you see out there, they were also trained in Marxist-Leninism in those times. Do you know that?

They saw I was a Comrade with more education than others in the camp so they soon used me as a trainer. Soldiers who cannot read are not effective as those who can. And we had to read the booklets and learn the socialism from them. My own teachers were Chinese people and like many others I was sent to Tanzania and learned about Chairman Mao and their socialist revolution. We were given Chinese guns. Other Comrades even went to China and Russia for their training. You know they learned to eat snakes there? Snakes! So they can survive even in the bush with no food, only snakes and insects. That’s how those Chinese won their fighting for their own socialism. Those Chinese can eat anything as long as it means they can win. We learned many things from them. And yes you are right, now they are everywhere in our country.

Was I afraid? Madam…yes, sorry, Izzee. Are you afraid of living your life? Fear is something we lived with in our lives. Yes, I was afraid of the helicopters and the Rhodesian planes and the bombs they threw down on us. We were bombed many times. Many comrades died on the ground next to me. But not me. I was one of those looked after by God. I can remember the fear, very well. When you have lived in the bush and seen terrible things…yes, and done terrible things, fear is just another feeling in your life like being happy or sad. It is part of us as human beings and we live with it when it happens. I never feel fear now. There is nothing that can make me afraid since those days. So I am better off. I do not know if that is a good explanation for you to understand? No, I do not want to speak any more of the terrible things. It was too pitiful. I will not speak further of those war years. I learned my own people can be as cruel as you whites, isn’t it?. What did your Dickens say? It was the best of time, it was the worst of time. But now I look back over my life I see for me it was the best time I ever lived.

And these days. We will soon come to that.

When we were victorious and after Lancaster House and we came out of the bush and the Prince of England came to give us our country back and we watched our Zimbabwe flag replace the British in the stadium that night, how much we cheered. We were so happy. I cannot describe to you the fullness of everybody’s heart. Bob Marley came to sing to us. You know that? And then we waited for the socialism to come and Comrade Mugabe talked about our future and reconciliation with those whites who had not run away. We waited for our land. We had learned to eat snakes in the bush for our land. Our hands had killed for it. And we waited.

I returned to my mother where she remained working in the Madam’s house and I waited to be allocated the piece of land I had fought for. My father? My father did not make it through the war. No – he did not go to fight…the killing came to him. In those days of the war nobody had interest in the death of one farm labourer in his hut one night.

As for my land, they said it was not right for unmarried women to have their name on the paper for the land. Some women were lucky. They were the widows and could be given, but not me at that time.

And then I met my husband. I was still pretty and still young in those days. I was only twenty three, or twenty four. I bore two sons for him. He worked at the David Whitehouse textile factory in Gweru with a good job and all was well. No, I still had no land in those days but it was no longer important to me. Government stopped telling us all about it. Some were given. I did not mind because I had my husband and family and all was well, at first. But he was handsome – and I was young.

And then came the drought year of 1992. Do you know about that time? It was terrible. There was no harvest that year and the cattle died. The Government had to pay to bring in grain for us from outside and that made our Government very poor. It was from then the real bad times started for us. My husband was retrenched from his good job and we were left with nothing. Everything got worse for us. Our Government was forced to borrow money and the ESAP started and we were told we had to pay school fees and fees even to go to the clinic. No I do not remember what those letters stand for. I only know we in the townships called it The Stomach Adjustment Programme. It was in the paper every day. Yes, that’s it – you know about it - it was the economic adjustment programme to make the country better.

My husband’s factory closed. Many others also closed and people lost their jobs. No, there is no government assistance for those who lose their jobs. There is nothing, only family. His people were in Bulawayo, also suffering even more. No job means no money. No money no school fees, no clinic fees if you are sick, finally no food. And then he made things worse. He joined that opposition party – the MDC. He said ZANU-PF had done nothing for us. I told him no good can come of it. We are nothing without the Party. He was beaten, but not too bad because they knew me. They knew my background as a war vet – that saved him from worse.

Aaah – we were in trouble in those days and in my house the trouble came hard. Izzee, I will ask you a question. In your country what do men do when they are in trouble? You do not know? In this country they drink my dear. Ah, they also do that in your country? Here they go to the shebeen with any few dollars their wife might have gained from selling a pair of shoes, or even their sheets. They can sniff out such money like a dog, even when it is hidden in the sugar tin to buy mealie meal for the children. And when men drink they fight… and sometimes they can even come home and beat their wives.

Did he beat me? You do not need to look hot. He did beat me, but only one time…and then I had to move from our nice place in Gweru and seek work in Harare for myself. Many people even now are forced to go to Harare to find a way to live. I found one room for me and my sons in a place called Epworth. It is what they call a high-density suburb. Do you know what high-density means? You think you do. It means leaking shacks and mud roads and candles for light – there is no ZESA in those places. It means walking to a standpipe before the sun appears to hope for a drip of water. It means stinking smells and sewage in the streets, and hunger and dirt everywhere. My boys and me we lived in that one room and I paid the rent by making candles and selling dried fish - you know kapenta from Lake Kariba? We were living like beggars, one dollar at a time. My husband? He had passed away. I even had to borrow money from his relatives to bury him.

Yes, we were suffering, my sons and me. I cannot describe well enough to you the hunger pains we suffered. I had to watch my children crying for food. That was a time their stomachs were never full. I had neighbours who took their small ones to town to beg from motorists at the robot stops. I never did that. How did I manage? A truth about our Zimbabwe people is that we know how to endure. We are good at enduring. We have learned it. Even now.

But then God took pity and a new leader came to us war vets. You might have heard his name, Comrade Hunzvi? He called himself Hitler. He was a hard man and later they say he was a thief and stole our money, but at the start he was the only one who stood in front of our President and spoke out for us. He persuaded our Comrade President to give us all a payment and a pension. They said Government had no money but we got that money anyway and we had food at last and my boys went to school and they both had training. The first born, he became a builder. That is his job now. We are sitting even now in this house he built for me. But that was later. I am in front of my story.

Comrade Hunzvi was still working for us at that time. It was a time when the money started to become meaningless. There was plenty of it but you could buy nothing. Bread and maize flour cost hundreds of dollars more every day. The shops and kiosks were empty of food. A Comrade from the local ZANU-PF office came to that shack where I was staying. ‘Comrade Steadyfaith,’ he said to me that day, ‘We are making our plans to take back our land. You are one of those who fought and so you are one who will be high on the list. Our target farm is in Marondera. You will start the committee here. Get the people organised. We will arrange transport for the day we will move. Be ready.’

What did I think? I was excited, my dear. I was ready to do anything to help my children, growing like sticks under my eyes. We were three women who made up our Jambanja committee. I was the Chair because of my war position. It is your first time to hear that word? It is a Shona word – it means something like…taking action with anger. We would go to jambanja the white farms. Yes – I can tell you we were angry by this time. The year 2000 and still living in poverty with nothing. Yes, that was a good thing for us – we were many women involved. My friend Agnes led several invasions from that time. She is a great organiser that one, even with her only one leg. Her other one leg was blown up in the war. Yes – she is a special somebody who came back from poverty to help us to lead.

We have a proverb in Shona – *Panodya ishe veranda vanodyawo* - it means *When the Chief eats the subjects eat as well.* If that was true in those old days it is no longer what happens. Our Chiefs eat without us. In any case Comrade Hunzvi encouraged us to move without our government. It was planned carefully. They would choose the farm for repossession and then a spokesman would go to the white farmer and try to come to an understanding with him. Sometimes they worked something out between them. Sometimes it did not happen like that. Yes, you have heard of the murders and the beatings. There were those bad murders in places but we did not want anything like that on our mobilisation. Our farmer was not a bad, bad man. He had a school on his farm for the workers and their pay was not so low as others. But it was not his land. The land is ours. All of it.

The plans were made so that on Easter Friday 2000 the trucks came for us and we were carried to that white farm. I was very excited I can tell you. At that time the big chefs in Harare kept on telling us not to take the farms, to keep law and order. We did not heed. The others in our group were mostly the ones from town with no jobs and some from the rural areas with no land. All of us had nothing. Nothing to lose you see. With my military training I was the one chosen by our Commander to organise those others at the farm. ‘Comrade Steadyfaith,’ he ordered me, ‘it will be your responsibility to ensure our group stay together and follow my orders. I am relying on you to be the one to organise them.’

He wanted no violence against this white family. They had small children. Our tactic was to frustrate them so they would leave of their own accord. My job was to organise the others to peg out five hectares each and to assist them to start to build small huts. I organised them into teams and transferred orders from our Commander. It reminded me of my old days in the bush. I had my sons with me and they well remember watching their mother become the in-charge. It was all for them you see.

No, we had no guns. The white farmers all had guns. We camped there on the farm, on the other side of the security fence and made our fires and sang our songs. Sometimes we could see the white family sitting on their stoep, having their drinks watching us. They even kept their swimming pool and we used to speak about that …how murungus can have a swimming pool and our women walk through the bush to the river to carry water for our cooking and washing. They had their visitors and their children at school and we allowed them to move freely along their farm track out to the road. Our job was only to convince them to leave their farm and go. I watched that mother drive her children out to school each day and I looked at my two playing in the dust.

We kept discipline in our group. Our leader was very good and he spoke to the farmer in solid words and tried to explain why he should take his family and leave in peace. We told him the old days were over. We stood at the security gate for these discussions and I watched the face of that white farmer turn red and he held his words. I know the kind of words he wanted to speak but by those days they had stopped calling us kaffirs to our faces.

Yes it is true – some of our young men were not so easy to remain patient. They would dance and sing the old war songs in the night and get excited and then they did hard things. An example? They would try to convince the farm workers to turn against their boss. Some were so afraid of the beatings they did join us. Other refused us and so they were beaten hard. No, nobody died on our farm but many ran away. One night some of them beat the woman who was the farm shop manager. That was not approved. We continued with our tactic to harass the white farmer. We did drumming all night sometimes, singing, whistling, dancing. We would light our fires in front of the farmhouse gate. We pegged out on his fields. There was nothing they could do. The police took their orders from the Party, no one else. Those whites they ran away in the end. They could not continue. How long did it take us? If I remember well we were on that farm for about four months before they went away. You want to know where the family went to? We do not know. We know you whites always have money somewhere and you take care of each other. I am sure they are in South Africa, or Australia. Those are countries that take in whites isn’t it?

And so we are here. I have this plot and I have my own name on the paper. We are many women in this place who are the same. We are women who have fought. No they are not all widows like me. Some are farming with their husbands and some never married. But it is easier to get your own paper if you are a widow, and if you are a war vet like me. Why is that? Ah Sisi Izzee – our men. They do not want us to have our own things. In this country only men can have what they want. Is it the same in your country? Well you are lucky if you can speak out and be equal to men. That is what we want here but even me, I have to be careful.

Yes – this place. There was one white farmer before and now we are seventy four each with our own plot. We each were allocated six hectares. I am among the best of these farmers. There are two of us in this District who belong to the Women Farmers Land and Agriculture Trust. We go to meetings and work for women to get their land in their own name. It is not easy for us. The men get the land more easy. It is life. Men are the favoured ones in our culture, even today after all we have been through.

And now let us have more tea and you shall come into the kitchen while I boil the water and cut bread for you. I have been talking long. There is jam. Let me show you my house. Here we have two bedrooms, and there is the bathroom. I carry my water from the pump. It is not far to walk any longer as in the older days when we walked down to the river. There is also that lounge and my kitchen and when there is ZESA I have power for this stove. Usually there is no power, only in the night times when we are sleeping. Yes, we joke about ZESA – it is like a ghost that comes in the night, but only sometimes. In your country we have heard you have electricity each day and every day isn’t it?

I cook mostly on the fire - you see out there in the yard. Ah no - it is not a hardship. I remember my time in that room in Epworth, not even a mattress but only mats on the floor, scratching round to get enough firewood to cook sadza once a day for my children. Those were my days of hardship.

Let us walk out now where you can see my land. That wailing? Yes – over there – my neighbour. Eiee, it is a very bad thing with her son. I will also go to her when we have finished here. He has committed a suicide for some problem at his work in town. Yes, it is too sad for a mother to bear. It can finish her.

Let us look at my land here. Yes, you are right, it is a productive plot. But we had a battle to come this far, me and the others. Even when we pegged out our six hectares so nicely and the whites had gone it was not easy. At first the Government sent the police to chase us off. Some of us were even beaten by them to make us move. No – no we would not move for them and after some weeks our President agreed we must have our land.

And there you will see what I have done – they say I am one of the most successful of the A1 farmers in this District. But I have had no help from government. Nothing. I have managed. They tell us the whites always had help from their government before our Independence. So – you know that? Here are my fruit trees and vegetables. I have the two hectares over there planted with cotton. That other side - past the big gum tree on that corner - is for maize. I can live from this land. And over there is my two hectare of tobacco. For two years I am trying tobacco. That building is the one my son built for me to dry the leaves. I made the bricks myself. Aah – why should I not grow tobacco? There are many of us now benefitting. When I was young only whites grew it and they thought we never could. The new tobacco floors now admit small farmers like me for the auctions. I save money for school fees for my grandchildren from that crop. Yes I am doing well. Those women you see in the fields there, they are weeding. I pay them to do that. They are not so fortunate as me. You see what I mean when I say God has taken care of me?

You have some final questions? No – I do not know what happened to that Madam and her husband from my youth. I did go there some time back but the farm is now inhabited by one of the big Comrades from Harare. The workers are all new to me. My mother? She lived long but is now late and I buried her well.

You have remaining questions? About my father’s death? And that of my late husband? Ah – that is long past. I am wondering why you still have questions about worthless men who are lying long in their graves.’

PRISCA’S STORY

The bus lurched off the end of the tar and immediately red dust billowed through the open windows and there was the usual scrabble to close them. Prisca leaned over her neighbour, an old woman too buried in her parcels and bags to move, and heaved theirs closed. Now it was too hot and there were those with plenty to say, laughing or cursing at the choice between being too hot and suffocating that way, or dying from dust as the bus bounced across the corrugations, away from town to the rural areas.

She was so happy she didn’t care about any of the discomfort: the hard seat, the sickening swaying of the overloaded vehicle on its crooked axle, too many passengers intent on getting home for the holiday weekend; all of them squeezed in by a lean and wiry conductor, as confident in scrambling up the side of the bus to stow and secure baggage as he was in passing a few notes to the constables at the inevitable road blocks. It didn’t matter to her, no girl could be happier than her, luckier than her. The look on her parents’ faces – she could see it: the disbelief, then the pride in her – a daughter at that. All the neighbours would be there to see it with them – her mother would be so glad.

It was another two hours to her stop, where she clambered though the bus, forced her jangled body through people reluctant to move out of the way, then the fuss and palaver while the driver and conductor scrambled up on the roof to release her baggage, shouted down at her, teased her – such a small girl to have such a big cargo to carry. She didn’t care about any of that nonsense; this was Prisca going home for the first time since she’d left, six months ago, a scared young girl going to Harare for the first time in her life. Back now to see her parents, and not empty-handed but with a gift. Three boys, barefoot, happy with the tattered notes she offered them, soon found two ancient wheel-barrows: scraps of wire were found; odd lengths of string and bits of rope were found and finally everything was secured as well as possible, not very well at all in fact but she had to be satisfied. It would have to do to get them home.

They set off along the familiar track, moving in fits and starts as adjustments needed to be made to the load; the boys went ahead now and then to break off branches and shift rocks that might way-lay the procession, and returned each time to lift the barrows’ handles and force their way forward with the awkward load. She walked behind, her new rucksack heavy on her back as she kept a careful eye – nothing must fall off, be spoiled or lost – nothing must spoil the homecoming.

The months had flown by since the day her mother had rushed to take the call on the foreman’s cell phone – her sister telling her to send her niece, at last she’d found a job for Prisca. It was a safe job, at the same workplace she herself had been for years, with the Swedish. It was a good job. For Prisca it was a place she had never dreamed of – she had her own room: a bed, and sheets and blankets and nobody she had to share anything with. Her Aunt showed her everything. At first it was to do the cleaning she could no longer manage easily – her knees – and there were acres of wooden floors to keep clean and make shiny, but so easily, with enough Cobra wax and no need to spare it. The Swedish Madam did not measure anything, did not care how much was used, not of anything. Her Aunt simply made a list on a small notepad kept in the kitchen for that single thing, with a pencil attached to it with string so it would not become misplaced. The list would grow during the week: washing-up liquid, Cold Power laundry powder, tons of toilet rolls: there was never a shortage of anything, she only had to whisper to her Aunt that some item was getting low and it would be added to the list. On Saturday mornings she would listen to them chatting easily together in case there was anything else to buy, to add to the list. These chats were usually about food ingredients because her Aunt was the cook and prepared meals for Birgitta each evening and for guests when they were invited. They looked alike in some kind of way, heads together over the shopping list, both small, determined sort of women, her Aunt’s hair hidden in the smart white doek she wrapped round it every morning as part of her uniform, Birgitta’s straight, cut like a cap onto her face. There were no men in Birgitta’s household. She explained to Prisca she did not want to be called Madam, but it was too much to call a grown woman by her name so she settled for not calling her employer anything at all, not at the start.

And at the start there were two jobs she particularly liked. She enjoyed smearing the pink Windolene over the huge glass French windows in the lounge, then polishing it off them to a shine, all the time staring out over the beautiful garden with grass green enough to make your eyes ache; the blue pool glittering under the sun down a flight of shallow steps. The other was to run to help Birgitta carry the shopping from the car to the kitchen each Saturday – she had no idea there were so many things to buy in Harare, so many cans and boxes and items wrapped up in plastic, especially cheeses of many kinds. Her Aunt explained that the Swedish liked it very much and a white man had even set up a business that only sold cheese; he even called himself The Cheeseman and had become famous. Her Aunt knew everything; she’d worked for the Swedish for many years and greeted each incoming Ambassador and then said goodbye to them after their contracts expired. Her main job in the household was to cater for the big dinner parties Birgitta held and she had been sent to many cooking courses over the years of her service. Prisca learned to prepare the dining table, set out the glasses and silverware, carry in the dishes so carefully prepared. She watched the big people, black and white, seated together round the table. They were from Government Ministries and the UN and the British and Australian and other Embassies, all of them discussing Zimbabwe and its problems and the way forward. Men and women together – women speaking and laughing as loudly and as often as the men. Birgitta was always the one in charge, seated at the top of the table, pointing out with smiles where the guests should sit, even the men sat where she directed them. Prisca tried not to stare, these people looking so fine: women in their sharp earrings and high heeled shoes, knees showing from under smart dresses, lighting cigarettes, drinking wine together with men in good, dark Sunday suits and shining shoes, though it was never Sunday.

She had a contract. Birgitta had called her to sit at that gleaming dining-room table in her first week at the house and showed her the paper; they read it together – *Terms and Conditions*. Yes, it was true she had four ‘O’ levels so of course she could read and understand: English, Shona, RE and Geography. Birgitta was sorry Prisca could not find a better job than this but hoped she would be happy and hey, they would look out for something more suitable for a girl with ‘O’ levels as time went on. The contract – good wages, her own room; she had to pass a satisfactory probationary period of six months, and then three years employment, renewable if both parties agree. Paid holidays!

Prisca had completed that probation and was considered very satisfactory indeed. After sleeping in the bed in her own room the first time, she had made a plan to save every penny of those good wages and following the wheelbarrows, pushed with great heartiness by the struggling boys up the track to the compound, she hugged the pleasure of the successful completion of her plan. News of her arrival had spread and attracted scatterings of children who flitted round the bedraggled convoy like a flock of excited mouse-birds; they whistled and snapped fingers in admiration. – Eish, Prisca, what have you here? What have you brought for us from Harare?

And then her parents were at the doorway of their room and her mother rushed to greet her, to embrace her. How happy she was to be folded to her mother’s body, to smell the fire and smoke of her, the smell of home. She curtsied to her father’s grave face, and knew he also was glad to see her.

‘What is this, my daughter? What is all this commotion you have brought us?’

Everybody was by now circling the wheelbarrows, clapping, ululating, calling out to the panting boys with their victorious faces. The gift had to be announced, obvious though it was.

‘I have brought you a bed my father.’

Her mother watched her father, as he remained still, taking in the activities of the porters, each instructing the other in the best way to deal with this final stage of the perilous journey from the bus stop. Finally the mattress in its fluttering plastic covering, the base and legs and boards were all untied, unloaded, carefully placed against the wall while general observations were made, reactions considered.

‘Have I done well father? Is it good?’

She and her mother followed him inside the dim room to discuss in private, her father on the single chair while she and her mother sat straight-backed, legs out in front of them, on a mat on the floor. Questions were asked and pride was expressed that Prisca had a contract and had saved well to please her parents with this surprise. The tea and cooking oil, sugar and maize meal were all unpacked from the rucksack, greeted with clapping, but she knew there was a problem.

‘It is the baas, my daughter. He does not like us to have our possessions.’

‘I know it has always been like this father, but things are changing in this world. Even me, young though I am, I now sleep in my own bed and ...’

But her mother interrupted, ‘You cannot think the ways of Harare can be here, Prisca. You are a good girl to think of us but it is not a thing known here on this farm. You have not been gone so long from us you have forgotten what baas van Heerden is like. You know his rules for us.’

‘Father, have you heard what is happening on some farms? They are taking them from the whites.’

‘Eish, my girl, we will be finished if that happens here. You know they say we do not belong here. Our people are Mozambique. My own parents came here so long ago. I was born here. Where else can I go?’

‘But mother, your people are from this place. This is your own born country.’

‘It is true Prisca, but it is your father on who we depend. I am only the woman.’

‘Father, everybody is talking about the changes. Our country is changing. You can take this bed and no longer sleep on your mat. Please, father.’

‘It is enough. You are thinking a bed can make our lives better? It can be worse for us. Let us eat now and you will return with it when you leave.’

She went for a walk, tired though she was, while her mother prepared sadza, a walk that took her to the big house, the back door. Cook wasn’t pleased, and wasn’t sure, but he went and fetched Baas van Heerden. She tried not to, but almost of its own accord her knee bent into the expected curtsey. She explained who she was. Yes, he knew whose daughter she was, the one who went for work in the city and back with her tail between her legs hey? There was no job in the house for her but he’d find her something sorting the tobacco leaves if she wasn’t too high and mighty for that now. Then he let her speak and she told him about her good job and she told him about the bed for her parents and watched his big, white eyebrows jump up at the cheek of her.

‘Mr van Heerden,’ she wasn’t going to call him baas no matter those eyebrows, ‘my parents are poor people and I am the one looking after them. I am asking you to allow them to keep that bed I brought for them today.’

‘Not too poor to send you to school, my girl, thanks to me hey?’

She had to run to keep up with him, as he strode out along the track to the compound in the evening light: small fires lit, smells of cooking seeping into the air – even meat in some pots to celebrate the holiday – conversations softened and ended as they watched the baas approach, to stop at the Nyusi’s room, the bed parts leaned up against its wall, stared him in the face. Her father appeared in the doorway as if he had smelled the boss’s presence, took off his cap and stepped outside. Waited.

‘So this is the bed.’

‘Yes sir.’ Her mother appeared, and remained in the shadow of the doorway so Prisca could not see her expression.

‘Your daughter’s doing well for herself, hey?’

No answer.

‘She says she’s working for one of those Embassy people. More money than sense. No wonder the country’s going down the Swanee.’

No answer.

Prisca watched her father twist his cap. ‘I bought the bed with my own wages Mr van Heerden,’ she insisted. The collective expulsion of breath from the listeners in the twilight behind her moved the air, using his name, speaking before she was spoken to.

‘Well what do you think about it, man? You want the bloody bed or what?’

At last her father spoke, calmly. ‘She is working with the sister of my wife baas, and she is earning money on her own. She has spent this wages on her parents. Yes sir, we are wanting to keep the bed.’

The whole compound waited for the answer. Nobody had a bed in that place; there was only this one, in pieces, propped before them all.

‘Ya, well okay.’ He turned to Prisca, ‘but no tee-vee or radios hear? I don’t want this place turning into a Friday night shebeen. No music hey – you all hear that?’

The next thing she got them was a cell phone, and through this she heard they’d managed to get away safely when the war vets went smashing into the van Heerdens farm. She got money to them via Ecocash and they managed to hire a donkey and scotch cart and pile it with what they had. The bed. But they made it to her mother’s relatives in the communal areas fifty miles away. Others were scattered and nobody knew where they went at first. She carried on in her job, still listening to the discussions round Birgitta’s table – the government should stop it – the government was behind it - the police should act – they can’t if they’re told not to – it can’t be reversed – the war vets have a point – plots are being pegged out – new legislation – offer letters – A2 farms – A1 farms. Prisca learned about all these things; she didn’t have four ‘O’ levels for nothing.

Birgitta was helpful, told her about various self-help groups, about women’s rights and the women’s groups, gave her time off and extra cash for bus fares to move round town to go and talk to people. And then the day came when she took her on at the Swedish Embassy in a small job as a messenger at first, taking documents between desks, delivering notes to other offices in town. Another six months and she was having computer lessons: WORD, EXCEL, POWERPOINT; she had an email address and an android phone and Google. The whites in the office liked to talk to her, asked her opinions; her parents were a case study of exiled farm labour – chucked out of their home– homeless, jobless: the forgotten. They wanted her views on the farm situation – she’d grown up in a compound, she was authentic. She went out for meetings and lunches at Harare’s fashionable coffee shops, became better friends with one or two of them. She went out to dinner and films with a particular advisor. They got on well together.

Birgitta took her to the Women’s Resource Centre on the corner of 7th and Herbert Chitepo. Prisca had not known such women had been born – loud, opinionated; women who read and consulted files and books, always having urgent phone conversations, sorting things out, giving advice; huddled in meetings – not only Zimbabwean sisters but from Uganda and Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania. Nigerian women even. Women for women. Some were married, many were not, some had boyfriends and others did not. Others, one or two, had girlfriends. She was introduced to the Zimbabwe Constitution and its sections about women; she read the UN equality protocols; she learned what women’s equality was and what it was supposed to be in Zimbabwe. She joined the new Women’s Land Lobby Group, followed its Facebook Page, joined its WhatsApp group. She was constantly excited, making notes, hailing taxis, going to meetings. At the Embassy her opinions gained more authority and her authenticity gave her a courage she never thought she had.

She persuaded her parents to come back, to apply for a plot of land on the van Heerden farm when it was being split up and allocated into A1 plots. Who knew better than her father how to work the soil in this place? This man and this woman, they know this land. Eeee – the debate went this way, and then that way: this man is not one of us, he is a Mozambique. But no, the wife is from this land, as is her family. Prisca was not allowed to speak but pressed her mother to speak out, to use her voice, to point to her birth certificate – to show that the daughter here was a citizen of Zimbabwe also. And there was the Party card – both parents had their Party card. (How could they not?). They were only labourers but they were loyal.

Her parents became tired and knew they could not win and wanted to give up, go back to the communal lands and continue to have nothing.

‘You have rights, father. Mother, you have rights.’

‘It is no use, Prisca,’ her father was weary, not used to arguing. ‘We did not fight. We are not war-vets.’

They had never seen her fierce before; daughters were not usually fierce. ‘Many who now have land were not war-vets father, many. We are not giving up.’

And they did not give up. Prisca had decided to be the hard wind behind them, determined to drive them forward. All around her a new future was being shaped and she understood now that this future was in the hands of those who took action, who made it their business to know things. She was only their child but it was a new time, her time, to stake a claim in a different Zimbabwe.

And finally a three hectare piece of the van Heerden land was pegged out and allocated to Prisca’s parents – no contract, no offer letter, but the pegs were hammered in with the Party watching, together with officers from the District Administration and Department of Lands. They were not the only family and a few others from the compound also got small allocations next to the bigger plots of resettled people. It was done; and after some time a small, neat breeze block house was built, plastered, finished with a red tin roof. The bed was brought back from dusty exile. At first it was her wages which paid for fertilizer and seeds, and she persuaded her father to plant tobacco. ‘I’ve read about it, father. It’s possible to get four tonnes from a single hectare with the new seed varieties. The Tobacco Research Board is developing new strains. Agritex will help us to do the right things. You can get training. ’ She helped him to register as a grower and paid the fee. In the first year he got six bales. There was the day he came home from the tobacco auction floors with more cash in his hand than he had ever handled in his life to that moment. He paid for more inputs to their land, and then a wardrobe to stand next to the bed, and next a large radio whose news and music carried round their homestead and beyond whenever they wanted to hear it. Relatives from the communal areas came to help to weed and to harvest and built their own huts next to her parents’ place.

‘You see my father – you paid for your girl child to be educated and look where we are now.’

And Prisca’s story could have ended here, but the relatives pressed and first her mother submitted, and then her father, and her mother’s calls became more insistent: it was time to arrange a marriage. A decent young man and his family was put forward. They had known each other from Standard 7 and he’d had to drop out before ‘O’ levels. There was nothing much wrong with him that she could argue against – he was farming well on his own plot – he would do well. The two of them talked about family pressure as they strolled around the homestead, how hard it was to disappoint your parents. She understood he liked farming and his independence, he didn’t want to work in town for wages. She told him about her life in the city. There was neither a great attraction or dis-attraction and Prisca thought she probably owed it to her parents; there was the issue of grandchildren to consider. So there were extended family discussions and despite herself, one weekend Prisca found herself with all the other women, preparing the food, sweating over the fire, carrying it to the men to serve it for them, curtseying to them as she handed it, with her two hands, to each male relative and potential relative. The match was discussed seriously now. Lobola was discussed – yes she had a good job in town, but she had only four ‘O’ levels, and she would, in any case, have to give it up; it was not like she had a degree, or even a Diploma of some kind, so the lobola her father could expect would not be too much: even two hundred dollars would be generous.

Though she loved her parents like nothing and nobody else in her life, enough became enough. She finally told her best friend at the Embassy, who was astonished that Prisca could even consider it. Really astonished.

‘It is our tradition,’ she explained miserably.

‘But you are not a traditional girl, Prisca, are you?’ Gently. ‘I had thought we would become better friends than we are now.’

‘Better?’

‘Closer.’

And so Prisca and Ulrika became very close indeed and Prisca never again curtsied to any man, other than to her somewhat bewildered father each month on dutiful, cheerful visits to the prosperous A1 farm where, with growing families of cousins and second cousins and their children instead of their daughter’s, her aged parents learned to live happily ever after.

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

A CRITICAL COMMENTARY:

VOICES FROM THE ZIMBABWE FAST-TRACK LAND REFORM

Introduction

‘For a colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land.’(Fanon 1963, p.44)

My short story collection, *Zimbabwe Ruins*, comprises sixteen stories inspired by the experiences of ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary period: the forcible repossession of white commercial farms in Zimbabwe at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The stories grew out of this turbulent historical landscape as Zimbabwe continues its journey to statehood and the erasure of colonialist institutions. In this Commentary I explore the reasons why I wrote the collection and the creative choices I have made in developing a range of voices to tell stories from a chaotic and sometimes violent series of confrontations between black and white citizens of the country, with black Zimbabweans demanding the land they considered they had fought a war of liberation to gain. Before 2000 there were about six thousand white farmers (Ian Scoones, 2010, p.2); there are no contemporary official figures but perhaps two to three hundred remain. The government designed the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme to respond to the farm seizures, through which hundreds of large commercial farms were then repossessed by government and allocated to others. In blunt terms, white farmers were dispossessed of land the white settlers had initially appropriated from the indigenous inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century and black farmers were settled on it. It remains a complex, divisive and evolving situation. To assist readers who may not be familiar with the country, I have included a Background as Appendix 1, in which I briefly summarise key issues in Zimbabwe’s post-colonial history to provide the context for the events of the land reform and for my story collection.

Why I have written this collection

I decided to write a collection of stories about a wide range of people: stories of the people who replaced the whites on the farms; stories of accidental involvement and tangential relationships with the land reform; and stories of the ways in which ordinary people were caught up in the nation-changing events that drew the attention of the world. The collection has been informed by my life and working experiences in Zimbabwe, which began with my first assignment there in 1985, working for the Public Service Commission, and by reading the work of a contemporary, vigorous, black Zimbabwean writing community, including authors such as Yvonne Vera, Tsisti Dangarembga, Shimmer Chinodya, Chenjerai Hove and others. In my reading, I found that black writers write mainly about black experiences, whilst the white literature on land reform issues gives solely a white perspective. It is my intention that my collection should give the same narrative weight across a range of individuals, male and female, black and white, poor and rich, each of whom experience the reality of the land reform differently and uniquely. Boehmer (2005a, p.36) refers to the ‘multivocality’ of the works of Bessie Head, the late, exiled, mixed-race South African writer whose novels focussed on life in a Botswana village. Head’s work, Boehmer argues, ‘consistently avoids the single perspective, the conventional “national” line’. My intention in embarking on the collection was to similarly avoid any national line on the complex, life-changing events which continue to make up the land-reform process in a deeply troubled country.

I intended to illustrate a plurality of perceptions, not constrained by an authorial voice, but instead presenting voices speaking for themselves in a ‘polyphony’. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) repurposed this musical term to describe the complex achievement of great writers, specifically Fyodor Dostoevsky. He describes Dostoevsky’s genius:

In the first place in his characters’ language there is a profound and unresolved conflict with another’s word on the level of lived experience ... on the level of ethical life ... and finally on the level of ideology (the world views of characters ...). (Bakhtin, 1981, p.349)

Zimbabwe seethes with unresolved conflicts embracing language, ethics and ideologies; I sought to exemplify some of these in my collections.

Above all, I wanted my stories to counterpoint the ‘one’ story of white loss versus black avarice which had become normalised during the farm repossessions. Nadine Gordimer (2002, n.p.) gives us the term ‘witness literature’ to speak of her own writing of apartheid South Africa and those writers who experienced ‘[t]he duality of inwardness and the outside world: that is the essential existential condition of the writer as witness.’ I wanted to add my own stories to this genre of ‘witness literature’, to bear witness to the multiple personal stories of the land-reform years.

I feel I ‘grew up’ professionally and personally in southern Africa, working in Botswana as a young teacher, later in Zimbabwe working for the Ministry of Public Service and other Ministries, travelling in the region, reading Doris Lessing and Gordimer, Bessie Head, Andre Brink and Alan Paton. These authors wrote their own witness literature about what they saw, and about what they and others experienced. Gordimer’s work (1958, 1971) taught me about the tensions and heartbreaks of black and white people negotiating their way through the nightmares of the South African apartheid state, and I experienced it for myself working as a volunteer in Botswana in the 1970s. I cried reading Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country* (1989) and *Too Late the Phalarope* (1971): powerful stories of love and loss and black experience in South Africa. I read Nelson Mandela’s original *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (1965) living just over the border of the country where he was imprisoned. These writers gave voice to a multitude of characters who otherwise the world would not have heard. It was my loss that I did not know of the work of the exiled, black Rhodesian authors at the time. I do now and reference them in this Commentary and envisage my own collection entering into the polyvalent dialogue which now pervades the literary landscape of Zimbabwe.

Overview of the Commentary

In chapter one I describe the collection and argue that the short story is a malleable vehicle that allows for the polyphonic range necessary to unfold the complexities and differing perspectives that generated the upheavals of the time. I locate my work within the broader context of contemporary Zimbabwean literature and reflect on some of the associated problems I encountered as a writer deliberately responding to a socio-political environment. In this chapter I draw out a number of themes that emerge across the collection, a significant one being that of ambivalence. My characters are not faced with simple decisions, but instead are confronted with moral choices generated by contentious situations and in the chapter I dissect some of their multiple ambiguities.

In chapter two I reflect on challenge of finding the voices of my characters. I felt that my responsibility as a writer demanded I attempt to create a wider range of voices from the land-reform process than are currently available in the canon of Zimbabwe’s literature. I refer to the Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay (1994) ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in relation to the female characters in my stories. Although not exploring subaltern studies to reflect on my own stories, this metaphor is nevertheless a powerful means with which to analyse the circumstances of some of my female characters. In the chapter I expand on Spivak’s views on how the gendered subaltern is represented and argue that I am attempting to join a vital and diverse group of female writers. Zimbabwean literature is expanding with the voices of women and Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, and Valerie Tagwira among others, have explicitly taken on the challenge to represent ‘subaltern’ women as a normative group in Zimbabwe.

At an early stage of the project, I had thought I would write only female characters, and in chapter two I reflect on why this changed and on the voices I chose to tell the stories. I use the Bakhtinian concept of ‘heteroglossia’ to analyse the language choices I give my characters. In ‘Discourse in the Novel’, Bakhtin (1981, pp.262-63) describes the concept as:

A diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices… The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviours, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour.

This is a piercingly apt description of the multi-voicedness of modern Zimbabwe. With its sixteen official languages it is common to hear versions of these in single sentences as people easily code-switch, depending on who is engaged in the discourse at any one moment in time and I discuss this further in the chapter. I end with some reflections on ethical considerations involved in creating some of my characters and acknowledge the challenges involved in creating realistic voices. I conclude with some reference and reflections on examples on so-called African ‘poverty-porn.’

In chapter three I examine female voice within the specific context of contemporary Zimbabwe and focus on a consideration of what has been labelled a ‘communal voice’ by the feminist, narrative theorist Susan S. Lanser (1992). I explore some literal means of rendering a sense of collectivity in literature generally, and in the work of some Zimbabwean women authors. I look at the pervasive issue of gender-based violence, which I suggest is the empirical reality from which a communal voice of Zimbabwean women has emerged. I end the chapter with a close reading of passages of Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue* (2002), a novel centred on women’s experience of violence. I use Vera’s text as a means to further elaborate on this chapter’s primary assertion: that there is a communal voice of women emerging from the country’s literature.

In my final chapter, I examine my process of revision. In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1958, Ernest Hemingway was faced with a question about why he had rewritten the ending to *Farewell to Arms* (1929) thirty-nine times. The interviewer pressed Hemingway on what was the technical problem, what had stumped him? The terse answer describes what I tried to do in my revising: ‘Getting the words right’ (Paris Review, 1958 n.p.).

I conclude by considering how the four years of writing and academic study have affected my creative life.

Chapter One - Writing the Stories

‘Knowing a story is one thing, writing it quite another.’(Vera 2003, p.489)

In this chapter, I describe the social and literary context in which my collection has been generated. I explain why I decided to write the collection and why the short story is my chosen form. I comment on some problems generated by my initial motivation, and finally draw out the most significant themes that have emerged across the collection.

The social context

At the end of the 1990s, liberation war veterans and various groupings of landless people began to force white farmers from their land, sometimes with great violence, sometimes though harassment. Many of these dispossessed and embattled white farmers wrote about their experiences, generating a new genre of white literature and thereby establishing what Rory Pilossof (2012, pp.149-78) terms a ‘consolidation of voice’ to describe their experiences. Through these memoirs and non-fiction accounts of their struggles, white farmers documented their loss. As I read these accounts and observed the international news media reports of the tragedies of the farmers’ dispossession, I was struck by the contrast between the tone of these accounts and the earlier triumphalism of the pioneer literature, a literature of possession and conquest over the indigenous inhabitants of what became Southern Rhodesia. (See Background, Appendix 1 for titles). Now, less than one hundred years later, the whites were writing stories of their own loss and deprivation. There is no comparable black voice either describing a history of loss or in the contemporary literature of farm repossessions.

I was also surprised by the production and circulation of a persistent image that appeared in social media, cable television and newspapers: hard-working, decent white men (usually), the central support of Zimbabwe’s economy, evicted from their heritage. The message attached to this archetype anticipated, implicitly or explicitly, the destruction of Zimbabwe’s economy by this expulsion. The general effectiveness of white farmers is an inaccurate depiction, though it remains widely believed. Research into the state of agriculture before and after Independence demonstrates that many white farms were inefficient (Joseph Hanlon, Jeanette Manjengwa and Teresa Smart, 2013). Indeed, such enterprises were ‘only able to survive’ thanks to ‘a wide range of assistance given, both directly and indirectly, to European agriculture in the form of loans, price support, capital grants, the low wage structure and artificial land prices’ (Riddell 1976, cited in Hanlon, 2013, p.40).

It was also a picture that ignored sometimes racist employers, paying less than subsistence wages to black labourers almost totally dependent on them for housing, education, food and general well-being; a system in which many white farmers operated as near feudal barons with almost total control over the lives of their workers. Ian Scoones (2018) interviewed former farm labourers to get a picture of the reality of their lives in the compounds of white commercial farms. One former labourer testified:

The white farm owner here was harsh. If you bought a bicycle or TV he wanted to know where it came from… Even if we had extra money we would not buy things as the farmer would be suspicious. (p.101)

The farmers and the self-serving system they controlled, even after an Independence hard-won in 1980, were transformed by the media and their own literature, into objects of international sympathy.

There is no doubt that the turmoil introduced into the socio-political framework of Zimbabwean life by the land reform events of the late 1990s onwards severely destabilised not only the country’s farming community, but more fundamentally, the nation’s sense of itself. The pillar institutions of the state, such as the police service and the courts, were captured to serve the will of the ruling political party, and laws were hastily enacted to support a chaotic intervention in the social fabric of the nation. In response, societal moorings seemed to come adrift as people behaved in unexpected ways. The inaccurate and reductive stories flashed about and re-circulated by the international media took centre stage alongside a resurgence of white-authored memoirs. In his study of ‘White Narratives’ of the post-2000 Land Invasions, Irikidzayi Manase (2016) concentrates on six of these memoirs, the titles alerting the reader to their content and tone. Consider, for example: Catherine Buckle’s (2000) *African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions*; Christina Lamb’s (2007) *House of Stone: The True Story of a Family Divided in War-Torn Zimbabwe*; and Douglas Rogers’s (2009) *The Last Resort: A Memoir of Zimbabwe*. Lamb’s book portrays the shock felt by one of these white farmers when confronted by some of his own workers in the gang at his gate. Recognising his employees, he asks: ‘“Wonedzi, how could you do this after all we have done for you?’ …and “Norman, I got you that job, how could you do this?”’ (Lamb, p.250) Without doubt some of these farmers were genuinely astonished that their labourers could want more than they were given. What is crucial to appreciate is that few of the negative aspects of the power relations between blacks and whites were analysed by the media. Instead, the story of the well-intentioned white farming community became a monolithic, internationally circulated image: after providing much needed employment opportunities, supporting the nation’s food supply and economy, they had then been violently forced from their farms by senseless black looters. A single story of farm seizures was told. Scoones, et al. (2010, p.7) called the above a: ‘simple storyline’ he goes on to suggest that: ‘Such narratives and the myths they perpetuate, do not of course come from nowhere: they are constructed by particular people, and are always positioned in a wider political arena.’ My stories intend to illustrate this wider arena.

It is not only in the news that single stories emerge; the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009, n.p.) describes the same issue in her TED talk, ‘Danger of a single story’. She emphasises the fact that human beings are vulnerable when presented with the seductive force of a story. As a Nigerian, Adichie describes her own earliest writing, full of snow and ginger beer, based on her experience of Enid Blyton stories. In Nigeria they had neither, but her notion of what was a book was based on the single story of plucky white children having adventures, described through the only fiction she had been exposed to, that of the colonial power. She describes how it took her some years to understand she could write stories about Nigeria and Nigerians.

In his coruscating satirical essay for *Granta*, the Kenyan author, Binyavanga Wainaina (2006, n.p.) satirises the telling of a single story about Africa in fiction:

In your text treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. … Make sure you show Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls and eat things no other human eat… Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), reference to African writers or intellectuals.

Single stories are easy to tell, and they seem to proliferate in an age of instant communication. Perhaps Zimbabwe is a singular crucible for these; a single story of a caring white patriarchy which carved a civilization from empty bush country lives in the same world as another story of black indolence and incompetence, dependent on white patronage. And now, through the white-authored memoirs noted above, this story of successful colonial munificence has been replaced by one of white trauma and ungrateful betrayal. On the other hand, a new story of black nationalist courage and persistence is being created post-Independence. An extreme instance of this so-called ‘patriotic history’ is described by Terence Ranger (2004) as being launched by the ZANU-PF government in the early 2000s, at the time of the farm repossessions. This is a new ‘single story’: a version of Zimbabwe’s history in which only the agency of the ruling party is emphasised; a partisan view of history at the expense of all-encompassing analysis. Ranger considers the emergence of this particular single story at the time:

Over the past two or three years there has emerged in Zimbabwe a sustained attempt by the Mugabe regime to propagate what is called ‘patriotic history’… on television and in the state-controlled press; in youth militia camps; in new school history courses and textbooks; in books written by cabinet ministers; … It is a coherent but complex doctrine. (p.215)

It is a doctrine which obliterates all versions of history other than that designed by the country’s ZANU PF government. Single stories about Zimbabwe have split along racial and political lines, further dividing a deeply fractured society. As ever, who tells the story is critical, as is who hears it, interprets it and decides how meaning is derived from it.

The literary context

There are a number of analyses of Zimbabwe’s literature (George Kahari, 1990; Flora Veit-Wild, 1992; Ranka Primorac, 2006). This paragraph is the briefest of summaries of their work. The country’s written literature does not have a long history. Indeed its first black-authored literature was written in what was Rhodesia, encouraged by the state Literature Bureau in the Native Affairs Department, established in 1953 with the express purpose to encourage and support writing in vernacular languages. ‘Natives’ were graduating from their colonially imposed Christian education – the missionary and state schools – and there was an absence of indigenous written literature. Stories with high moral and Christian underpinnings were encouraged through the Bureau’s competitions and radio programmes. Through this institution, the colonial state directed and controlled what kind of literature would be created for the black masses and it serves as a precise example of Bill Ashcroft’s descriptor:

The institution of ‘Literature’ in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone license the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work. So, texts of this kind come into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage system which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. (2002, p.16)

The meaning to be derived from these stories was quite straightforward: to inculcate readers in a nexus of ‘Christian’ values that upheld the racist state, to reinforce the ‘one story’ that had been decided was good for Africans. Nevertheless they were the pioneers of Zimbabwean literature, what Veit-Wild (1992) termed the first generation of Zimbabwean writers. They had a prodigious output: the first Shona novel, *Feso*, was published in 1956, by Solomon Mutswairo. Between 1956 – 1984 seventy-one Shona and forty-four Ndebele novels were published. (Primorac, 2006, p.17). They were a mixture of genres but linked by moral Christian themes, writers clearly following the literary tradition they had experienced in school and as a result of the Bureau’s writing workshops run by European trainers, who had a mandate to steer writers away from ‘morally and politically pernicious literature.’ (Bureau Annual Report 1956, cited in Veit-Wild 1992, p.74). A split occurred between these authors who chose to work in the local languages and another group who wrote in English towards the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s. Novels in English were usually political and/or historical and published overseas as their authors had to move into exile in order to write narratives critical of the white regime; these writers became the second generation. Examples of these are: Stanlake’s *Year of the Uprising* (1976); Solomon Mutswairo’s first novel in English *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (1978); Dambudzo Marechera also published The *House of Hunger* in 1978 – a searing testimony of township life in Rhodesia.

Since those early publications, the literary landscape has blossomed with a multitude of multi-racial voices, including those of women. In her analysis of Zimbabwean fiction pre- and post Independence, Primorac (2006, p.30), describes the nature of this landscape: ‘The fiction of the country whose name means “house of stone” thus came to resemble a house of intertextual mirrors and echoes, where different traditions merged and began to cross-fertilise.’ Notwithstanding the mixing of metaphors this is the house I hope to enter.

Why short stories?

Why short stories and not a novel? I decided the malleability of the form would allow a wider range of voices and stories from multiple circumstances to emerge than I could achieve in a novel. In the ‘Introduction’ to a collection of essays on post-colonial short stories, Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russel (2013, p.3) describe ‘the postcolonial short story’s emergence’ as an ‘expressive medium for themes of fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity.’ I felt I could use the form to describe fragments of lives, of loss and displacement; that I could be nimble, alert to changes in circumstances, and focus on individuals in life changing moments. In my PhD I could experiment with voice and styles across stories to tell different tales. I felt I was joining a post-colonial literary movement where writers use the short story, and perhaps its relationship to oral storytelling and folk culture, to allow a wider spectrum of discourse – and thereby agency – from diverse and multiple narrators than had been possible through novels. They can be published quickly and in a postcolonial context make a significant contribution to the articulation of cultural and communal identity. They appear in print magazines and on the internet, requiring less economic investment than a novel from either the reader or the writer; for example my story ‘The Piano Lesson’ was published by *Toasted Cheese* literary e-journal within a few weeks of my finishing it in 2016 (Mansfield, 2016).

As a non-African, I cannot claim a relationship to Africa’s folk culture. Nevertheless, I do feel connected to the folkloric as a means of cultural expression, and was brought up on Grimm’s *Fairy Tales* and Hans Christian Anderson’s fables as a child. Short stories seem to be a fundamental element of oral literature and remain within the deep culture of many societies. Awadalla and Russell (2013, p.4) propose that:

[T]he short story’s association with the oral roots of folk culture raises further issues upon the political process of nationhood. In passing though, it might explain why the short story has been keenly used by postcolonial writers and critically endorsed by awards such as the Caine Prize.

As my collection emerged, through the deliberately disparate perspectives of my characters, it embraced some of those themes they identified: ‘of fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity.’ (p.3)

Historically, short stories have not featured strongly in Zimbabwean fiction. In their compilation of a bibliography of Zimbabwean fiction published between 1966 and 1986, Rino Zhuwarara and Musaemura Zimunya (1987) included only two short story collections: Charles Mungoshi’s *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972) and Dambudzo Marechera’s *House of Hunger* (1978) and both were listed in the novel section of the bibliography. Since then, however, there has been a minor explosion of short story publications. Amabooks in Bulawayo, for example, has published over ten collections among its twenty-four publications to date. Weaver Press in Harare has published eight collections to date. Amongst Weaver’s output *is Can We Talk and Other Stories*, a volume by Shimmer Chinodya (1998), one of Zimbabwe’s foremost writers and the winner of the Commonwealth Prize for Fiction in 1990. This collection focuses on the transition from youth to adulthood. Although it is set in the decline of post-Independence hopes, chronologically speaking it is too early to feature land reform.

In my research, I looked for stories featuring the upheavals of the land reform and did not find many. *Writing Mystery and Mayhem* (Staunton, 2015), for instance, included no stories which specifically include this as a plot theme, despite being published well after the initial mayhem of the land reform. Neither do either of Petina Gappa’s collections, *Elegy for Easterly* (2009) or her recent *Rotten Row* (2016). There is, however, one collection focussed entirely on the land reform: Lawrence Hoba’s *The Trek and Other Stories* (2009), a slim collection with an evocative structural arc. It begins with a brief story ‘The First Trek – The Pioneers’ (pp.1-3), the title making clear semantic allusions, using the words trek and pioneers to refer to the first white settlers. The child narrator is black, in an ox-cart with his parents on a journey from their home village to take part in the possession of the farm of an ousted white, sometime after 2000. Various other black narrators, all poor and all struggling to make sense of the new circumstances on the resettled farms, are used to tell nine linked stories about themselves and their community. The collection ends with the original narrator, two years older, telling the story of ‘The Third Trek’ (pp.48-52) where his family is driven away by the state police, back to their original village. The collection offers voices of disillusion, fortitude and defeat through its poor, black protagonists, very different to those of the original white trekkers, who succeeded in their own project to acquire land. Besides this volume, I have discovered only one other short story directly addressing land reform: John Eppel’s ‘Tomato Stakes’ (2011, pp.188-197). In a first-person narrative, Eppel describes the coming of age of two European-African boys, and their losing not only innocence and then land, but Africa itself as they become exiles. Nowhere could I find a substantive body of stories about the undoubted trauma experienced by the thousands of people who experienced the land-reform events.

I concluded there was room for a voice like mine with a particular perspective and background which would allow me to create a collection of voices from within the land reform ‘plot’. I am a white expatriate, not a Rhodesian, and thus I have no strong emotional attachment to Zimbabwe’s farmland. My liberal politics and long experience of witnessing injustice in southern Africa mean that I am not sympathetic to ‘the white cause’. As a woman I feel I can join the growing community of female writers in the country; and I am old enough to have known something of Rhodesia and yet have been with Zimbabwe from its beginning. I have worked with Zimbabweans as colleagues and friends inside the new state structures, from its joyful Independence to its current state of disrepair and despair (but also some hope since the deposition of President Mugabe in November 2017). I could conjure the shape and style of a collection: all set in contemporary Zimbabwe, during the upheavals of the land reform programme, post-2000, told by people whose experiences were not being voiced. None of my narrators or protagonists would be real people, but the situations they encounter and the experiences they go through would be. My plan was to use information derived from empirical research findings of land-tenure specialists, social scientists and historians tracking Zimbabwe’s emergence into nationhood (e.g. Hanlon, Manjengwa and Smart 2013; Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo, 2009; Ian Scoones et al. 2010, 2018), as well as considering – and deconstructing – the insufficient and overly simplistic media stories of white tragedy that dominated the news cycle.

Problems with my approach

Ali Smith (2008, p.16), ventriloquises William Carlos William, saying short stories act like ‘the flare of a match struck in the dark, … the only real form for describing the briefness, the brokenness and the simultaneous wholeness of people’s lives’. I really wanted to create that ‘flare’. But how? I felt that I needed to make sure readers understood the provenance and state of the box from which that match was taken. I began to grapple with what Charles May (2004, p.2) describes as ‘how to convert mere events, one thing after another, into significance.’ I butted up repeatedly against this idea, driven by my conviction that readers must understand the whole of Zimbabwean history before they could enjoy a short story based on mere events. Paola Trimarco (2011, p.14) uses a concept of ‘relevance theory’ in the context of short stories to describe how understanding and enjoyment from them can sometimes demand some deeper background knowledge: ‘[t]o fully comprehend and appreciate … readers often need to infer from social narratives, traditions of literary symbolism or other relevant background information, such as historical or political knowledge.’ I knew the historical context and had the political knowledge, and the emerging research findings that disputed the generally held view of chaos and collapse of the Zimbabwe agriculture sector. Not many lay people read land-tenure textbooks and so my stories, based on ‘the facts’ would bring these to a wider audience.

This was my initial approach – and it was a creative mistake. Instead of leaving readers to fill in ‘missing narrative’ (Trimarco, 2011, p.15), I left nothing out. My previous stories had always been generated from a moment such as a particular gesture that reminded me of something I couldn’t quite remember or a snatch of conversation that lodged in my mind. But this time I had a message I wanted to get out there, I had facts I wanted to explain. My leitmotif was meant to be the injustice of the original land-grab by Rhodes’ white settlers overlain with a narrative which would demonstrate how the contemporary restitution of land to black Zimbabweans was a just re-balancing of that earlier wrong, no matter how badly it was being implemented. And the results were stories so didactic they were embarrassing, so boring I wanted to burn them. My research into the details of land-tenure issues and the history of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe had generated such a mountain of information I was burying my stories in it. The structural form of the first two stories I wrote, ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’ and ‘The Herd’ were based on flashbacks and full of convoluted history, packed with solid facts and empirical data and not really stories at all. My supervisor suggested that I was not challenging myself in the short story form and that I should write a story in the present, with no flashbacks. I needed to re-examine style and form, as well as content. I was forced to ask myself: when is a story not a story? Perhaps when it consciously seeks to proselytise and educate. What I really wanted to do I found described in Ian Reid’s dissertation on the short story where he quotes William James talking about his brother Henry’s short stories which give:

an impression like that we often get of people in life: their orbits come out of space and lay themselves for a short time along ours, and then off they whirl again into the unknown, leaving us with little more than an impression of their reality and a feeling of baffled curiosity as to the mystery of the beginning and end of their being. (Reid, 1977, p.65)

I had to get back to story writing. I understood that the essence of a short story is to offer moments, which may be extended or contracted – of emotion, of clarity, of epiphany perhaps– and here I was writing political history. So, I put away my evidence.

Developments in my approach

One example of the ‘new’ process I adopted is illustrated in a morning in which I allowed my thoughts to go back to a recent visit to Zimbabwe. I recalled a wall plaque that I had read in a church garden of remembrance in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe; it was a memorial to a young white man who had died in a motorcycle accident on the mountain road in the area. It had resonated with me because I have a motorbike-riding son. I had been to a local fete, where ousted members of the white-farming community came back for reunions and mingled in the sunny garden with church members and the new black entrepreneurs in the district, perhaps the same people now farming what had once been their land. I met a white couple who had been run off their large, successful orchard a few years before and then latterly evicted from the small cottage they had found instead; they seemed remarkably resigned to all of this and had gone to live in a town some miles away. Their surname was the same as the boy commemorated on the plaque. The results of this memory of an afternoon of socialising with the heteroglot community that is now rural Zimbabwe, and my brief conversation with who I assumed was the mother of that motorcyclist, were ‘The Piano Lesson’ and ‘Dear Mother’

In ‘The Piano Lesson’ I anchored the story around a few moments of contact, over a piano, between a white woman and a young black man who has been sent, with others, to evict her and her husband from their cottage. I wanted to show the nature of their different states of disempowerment in the story, and the similarities between them. Although I did not deliberately intend to make the intertextual allusion, in a later reading of Yvonne Vera’s short story ‘Crossing Boundaries’ in her collection *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* (1992, pp.1-25) there is also a piano, which her protagonist, Nora, uses as a shield: she physically ‘hides’ behind it to avoid answering a question from a servant, James. He wants to ask her husband to allocate him a small piece of land so he can grow more food for his family, and, in the husband’s absence, is making the request to Nora:

[She] moved from behind the desk to the piano where she sat with her straightened back challenging him, willing him to depart from the room. … She was thankful for the piano and used it to protect herself from him.’ (p.3)

Nora does not want to deal with James. The piano in this story functions as a metaphor for colonial power and status: it is a prestigious artefact, removed from any indigenous cultural reference, brought to this homestead from the metropole and used solely by the white settlers. Nora feels safer behind this physical manifestation of the power of the white invasion, which seized the land from her servant in the first place. The reader is presented with what Homi Bhabha (1990, p.308) terms ‘alterity’ in stark terms: a black man, who carries total authority in his own home and culture, crouching on the floor in front of a white woman. The Other, created by the colonial endeavour, supposed to be silent, is here trying to speak, to make a request even. It is a brutal, though not violent, scene, with its complexities compounded by gender. Vera creates a scenario in this story in which the reader is meant to view the ‘native’ as belonging to, as Bhabha (1984) puts it in an earlier essay, ‘an-other history and an-other culture’(p.98).The piano reinforces the state of Otherness described throughout the story. But on the other hand, Vera, as a black Zimbabwean writer, also encourages us to view the situation through the other side of the lens, seeing the coloniser as the stranger – here imposing an anachronistic cultural artefact into the landscape of the story. Although most of the focalisation is through Nora’s eyes, the story allows access into the minds of the servant family, and thus enables the reader to derive some understanding of their perspective, their view of the white couple as intruders. At one point, James’ thoughts about his employers express this: ‘The couple represented for him a microcosm of the white man’s struggle to feel at home on foreign soil. He saw Madam labour to absorb the landscape as she sat on her rocking chair, seeking equilibrium.’ (Vera, 1992, p.13) In this way, the narrative allows the reader some insight into the inner world and sophisticated musings of the powerless Other. In the story, James is very clear that the whites are strangers in his land. The text is therefore challenging the view of Otherness as a concept only constructed by the powerful about the powerless. If the relationships are reframed and shifted from the ground of colonial power dynamics to the literal ground of relationship to the land and thus heritage, perhaps a colonised African can ‘other’ a white landowner?

In my story, the piano serves a different function, that of connection. When Clara invites the young man to sit next to her on the piano stool, their bodies touch as she physically shows him where to place his hands on the keys to teach him the well-known Happy Birthday tune, a song originally imported from Europe that has become ubiquitous in Zimbabwe for black and white celebrations alike. I portray her, the white Madam, a common stereotype in Zimbabwe, as a grieving mother reminded of her dead son by the physical likeness and age of the young man, Tonderai. His circumstances of unemployment and desperation, and desire to support his own mother speak across culture, race and age. His Otherness as a black person and enemy is thus subsumed by deeper human feelings of parenthood. The piano in this scene, together with the imported ditty, symbolises the possibility of reconciliation between the races in contrast to its meaning in Vera’s story. In my story, it illustrates a version of cultural hybridity, in the sense of fusing disparate entities and energies into some degree of synthesis, made possible in this case by the power of human emotions overcoming those of difference and post-colonial antagonism. There are no facts about land tenure in this story: the gang of young men arrive at the cottage in the first few lines and the characters and action emerge from that moment. Readers are left to make their own assumptions and pose their own questions as the ending offers no conclusion. The story is an example, as noted in chapter one, to exemplify what James (cited in Reid 1977, p.65), described as the orbits of people ‘come from out of space’, laying next to each other for a while. This is a reflection of the situation in Zimbabwe post-Independence where unlikely people bump up against each other, things happen and they move on, perhaps without resolution.

Robert Young (1995, p.26) describes the complexities of such a situation: ‘Hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different.’ Playing a few bars of a banal tune cannot be described as a successful example of cultural hybridity in itself, but it does hint at the appropriation of the cultural artefacts of the coloniser by the colonised. The mbira, or thumb piano is an indigenous instrument and western keyboards have been easily assimilated, accompanying street music, protest songs, and performances across the continent and perhaps the inclusion of the piano into cultural life across Africa might be seen as an example of hybridization.

But ownership of the land was the defining feature of white settlement from the start of the colonial venture, not attempts at integration with the indigenous population. In a recent study of white farmers’ attitudes towards the black inhabitants of Zimbabwe, David McDermott Hughes (2010, p.xv) claims that the white settlers’ integration was with landscape, not with people:

[White farmers] concentrated on … bonding themselves to African nature. Many neither feared nor loved blacks but simply tried not to think about them. They discounted the Other – a move that many blacks found more insulting than visible prejudice.

In my story ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’, I draw a character, Chris, so attached to his land and what it means to his sense of self that he sacrifices his long marriage for it. He and his wife, Steph, had to flee in the land-repossession upheavals and have settled in Cape Town, South Africa. Some years later, he is trying to come to an arrangement with a black politician that will allow him to return to at least part of his farm. Chris is oblivious to the distance between his and his wife’s views on the issue. Home to Steph is now Cape Town, not Zimbabwe or the farm that she never loved anyway. I portray this man as an exemplar to illustrate the depth of attachment to the land espoused by white farmers, demonstrated by their tenacity throughout the violence of the repossessions, upheavals and physical danger they and their families faced. The story encodes what McDermott Hughes (2010, p.2) described as ‘a forged sense of belonging more enduring and resilient than empire’.

Rose’s father in my story ‘The Herd’ is another example of this endurance, personifying the strength of the connection, or fixation, of the white identity with land. As Hughes writes: ‘”whites” obsession with landscape [in Africa] slides towards pathology. It has contributed to the delusion … that whites should own the landscape.’ (p.4) He refers to the many examples of white ‘owned’ international conservation groups and well-known white animal activists in Africa, concluding that ‘[N]owhere was this set of fantasies and desires more deep rooted and prolonged than in Zimbabwe.’

Themes

During my revision process four major themes seem to emerge quite strongly from the collection: those of ambivalence, loss, violence, and resilience.

***Ambivalence***

There are no absolute villains or heroes portrayed in *Zimbabwe Ruins*. The complexities of history and the colonial past, the state-building project to create Zimbabwe and new legislation have blurred the edges of right and wrong. ‘What Goes Round’ in particular depicts the morally ambiguous physical and metaphorical terrain in which the collection is located. Although the focalisation is through the black character, Nat, and it is therefore through his eyes that the reader sees the white farmer, Tom Williamson, I wanted the reader to understand why Tom would break his word and destroy the farm despite all Nat’s concessions to him. In this story, I use Nat’s wife, Ruth, to explain this betrayal to her devastated husband: ‘It was too hard for him my husband. It was too much to expect a man to hand over his world, to keep his word on something as big as this.’ (p.27) On the other hand, earlier in the story I show Nat, the beneficiary of the transaction, being forced by his wife’s questions and his religious beliefs, to consider his own decision to accept the farm. In this situation Nat cannot make a morally ‘correct’ choice; each alternative is ‘wrong’ in some way and the story explores the dilemmas he faces as he makes his decision. He rationalises his acceptance of the repossessed farm with the argument that: ‘There are new laws now Ruth. It’s what they did when they came here, took the land and made laws to make it legal.’ (p.22) Nat’s view here is an example of what Ashcroft has described as ‘ambivalence’

It may be seen to be the ambivalent or ‘two-powered’ sign of the capacity of the colonized to ‘imitate’ transformatively, to take the image of the colonial model and use it in the process of resistance, the process of self-empowerment. (Ashcroft 2001, p.126)

In this instance, the colonised Other has adopted the institutions of the coloniser (the legislative procedures of Parliament) to establish new powers and repossess what was taken and there cannot help but be some ambivalence in ‘imitating’ the colonial model in order to be free of it.

There is even ambivalence in the language used to describe the land reform events. Are they in fact ‘seizures’ and ‘invasions’, ‘occupations’ and ‘trespass’, or ‘repossessions’ and ‘resettlement’? Were they ‘land grabs’ or ‘compulsory land acquisitions’? Is the process one of ‘restitution’ or of ‘theft’? I have characters in my stories use a range of language to express their different perspectives.

***Loss***

The second theme is that of loss, sometimes linked to trauma. The land-reform events occurred throughout Zimbabwe and thus affected the whole nation. In a sense, even those in urban areas and those with no direct links to the farmers or the re-possessors experienced trauma at some level, vicariously or directly. A feature of the traumatic impact of the farm repossessions is that of physical loss of the farms themselves, on some, but this is only one facet of the social rupture experienced across the nation. Ann Kaplan (2005, p.147), in her analysis of trauma and terror linked to the 9/11 attack in the US, identifies loss as an overarching theme in situations of violence, asking ‘who is to say how loss should be handled?’ She goes on to suggest that the story writer, in bearing witness to traumatic events, has a legitimate place in reflecting on how loss is handled. My stories work in this mode, as reflections on how various kinds of loss are, and are not, handled in the Zimbabwean context.

An example is ‘What Goes Round’ which describes both the loss of a farm and the loss of trust when the white farmer breaks his promise. There are the losses of psychological and physical security in ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’ where the farmer’s wife, Steph explodes in a tirade driven by fear and insecurity. In ‘Dear Mother’ and ‘Bountiful’s Story’, relationships are dissolved and family members lost after the death of the women’s sons. In ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’ and ‘The Sunset Cruise’, the loss featured is one of moral principles: the endings describe women finally free of male subjection, an achievement only made possible through murder.

***Violence***

Whether in personal relationships or national situations and politics, violent events occur in the stories; circumstances emerge that propel characters into violent responses. The land-reform events were violent, physically in some cases, verbally, and always psychologically, as the stories illustrate. Characters are constantly forced to make choices in a social landscape being stripped of values, overtaken instead by the need to survive. In ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’, the female war veteran easily recounts the murders she has perpetrated of her father and husband. In ‘The Sunset Cruise’, as described above, a daughter plans the murder of her father. In ‘The Gang Leader’ a group of criminals use a powerless, bereaved woman as a tool in a plot to blackmail and terrorize a white farmer. Violence is therefore explicit, or reported on as in ‘The Soldier’s Wife’, or implicit or threatened in some way as in ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’.

I discuss gender-based violence in detail in chapter three, and argue that the high levels experienced by women in the country have generated a theme that permeates its literature, especially that created by female writers.

***Resilience***

Nobody gives up in my stories, everybody fights back: Steadyfaith makes a new life for herself after being abused by her father and her husband, not to mention her harrowing experiences as a child soldier in the liberation war; Laura takes an extreme step to rid herself of an oppressive father; Chris makes a deal with a politician to get back to his farm; in ‘The Friends’ Sybil leaves a long marriage to move to the potential loneliness of old age in the UK. Through his analysis of the motif of tears that recurs across the stories in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Greaney (2011) describes Joyce making ‘a point about Dubliners’ capacity for sentimentality and lachrymose self-pity.’ (p.31) A theme in my collection is that Zimbabweans, black and white, old and young, do not give up in the face of what might seem outrageous circumstances. This is something I witnessed first-hand when living in Zimbabwe, alongside trauma and injustice. Last year, 2017, when I expressed admiration to my Zimbabwean neighbour, at the stoicism of people in the face of yet more upheaval in the country, she observed to me: ‘We are not a flimsy people.’ I hope my stories represent this strength.

Chapter Two - Voices in the Collection

The writer has a duty to give voice to the ‘voiceless, the powerless, the victims of both power and circumstance’ (Hove, 1989 cited in Veit-Weld, 1992, p.314)

I began my collection of stories feeling that I had a duty to tell stories more complex than those that currently existed of the ‘winners’ and the ‘losers’ of the land-reform events. ‘Duty’ however, does not fully characterise my writing process, which bore none of the negative connotations the term might suggest. Rather, I found it an endlessly fascinating and creative challenge, most particularly to construct well-rounded characters and to find believable voices in which to tell their stories.

In this chapter, I describe some of the challenges that I encountered in deciding what stories I would write, particularly within the context of the current debate on cultural appropriation in literature. I had begun the project with a determination to put women at the centre of the collection. Over time, however, my approach shifted and the collection features a variety of voices, of women and men in a range of socio-economic circumstances and I discuss the issues and decisions that underpin this change. I explore the Bakhtinian concept of ‘heteroglossia’ showing how it functions – and why it features – in my stories. Next, I consider the ambivalence of my characters and the sometimes equivocal decisions they make. I examine technical considerations involved in creating some of my characters’ voices, ending the chapter with a brief consideration of dilemmas involved in writing about Africa.

Whose voices?

On reflection, I realised I had not fully understood the implications of ‘voice’ as a concept at the project’s inception. Initially, I had thought, somewhat naively, that a writer finding a ‘voice’ referred simply to the authorial voice; that of my own style and tone. It is perhaps the most obvious dilemma for a writer – how to find a distinctive voice – but in this collection I did not want to intrude with an obvious authorial authority. I read about Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of ‘polyphony’, a critical framework which chimed well with what I was trying to do myself: using a deliberate textual strategy to try to achieve a range of perspectives in my stories. Wayne Booth (1983, p.417) perhaps best captures my ultimate aim, that of presenting in my collection: ‘a genuine “polyphony”, the kind achieved when the author succeeds in suppressing a dominant voice… by giving full voice to “alien” characters.’ It is important for me to stress that in some instances, the voices in my polyphonic chorus speak ‘against’ me as the author, in that the language and ideologies embodied by some of my characters are alien to my own ethical perspective on the world.

As well as considering technical aspects of narration, making conscious choices of lexis, style and syntax to craft the polyphonic effect, I also reflected on the idea of metaphorical ‘voice’ where a character asserts a position, perhaps through dialogue and/or through action, in the story. Lanser (1992, p.5) describes the relationship of these two meanings within the framework of feminist analysis:

As a narratological term, ‘voice’ attends to the specific forms of textual practice and avoids the essentializing tendencies of its more casual feminist usages. As a political term, ‘voice’ rescues textual study from a formalist isolation that often treats literary events as if they were inconsequential to human history.

She goes on to cite Bakhtin’s notion of ‘sociological poetics’, a concept in which voice embodies ‘the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced.’ (p.5) This meaning of voice in the context of ‘silenced communities’ is what Lanser describes as a term that ‘has become a trope of identity and power.’ (p.3) It was probably the most important aspect of voice to me initially, and one I had been conscious of from the faltering beginning of my project, when I gave my characters didactic, proselytising voices to parrot messages that I had decided were politically correct.

The voices in my collection emerged from the particular Zimbabwean nexus where poetics are intrinsically linked with politics. By this I mean that particular elements of the poetics of my stories – the narration, plot, structure, focalisation and the voices – have been generated by the singular historical context of time and place I chose to write from. As Donald Stone (1988, pp.707-08) notes in his analysis of Bakhtinian polyphony: ‘According to Bakhtin ... we live through language, tradition, history; they speak through us; they transmit their legacy even as we are developing as individuals.’ My characters, in the multi-linguistic, multicultural community of people that is Zimbabwe, speak from their own legacies of colonialism, racism and the hopes of a developing nation. In a feminist reflection on the emergence of individual voice in American women’s fiction, Lois Parkinson Zamora (2005, p.267) suggests that: ‘Voice is still a central metaphor, but its significance is now less personal than political [as] American women writers tend to foreground the politics of cultural identity.’ I found that I had to balance poetics and politics, and acknowledging this continuing dilemma permitted the emergence of new, more personal and more nuanced voices to replace those found in my first drafts.

With the emergence of these diverse voices, I had to reflect on the contentious issue of appropriation. As a white Western woman, how could I – practically and ethically – tell stories where my characters and/or focalisers are not white or female? This remains a keen concern of mine. In 2016, Lionel Shriver, a white American woman, gave a now-infamous speech at the Brisbane Literary Festival where she made light of the issue, seeming to mock the concerns it raises: ‘Seriously, we have people questioning whether it’s *appropriate* for white people to eat pad Thai.’ (Shriver 2016, n.p.) In response, the Sudanese-Australian memoirist Yassmin Abdel-Magied (2016, n.p.), laid out the rationale for opposing the easy appropriation of another’s situation:

It’s not always OK if a white guy writes the story of a Nigerian woman because the actual Nigerian woman can’t get published or reviewed to begin with. It’s not always OK if a straight white woman writes the story of a queer Indigenous man, because when was the last time you heard a queer Indigenous man tell his own story? How is it that said straight white woman will profit from an experience that is not hers, and those with the actual experience never be provided the opportunity?

Shriver and Abdel-Magied seem poles apart. But Shriver (2018, p.20) has since developed a more nuanced position: ‘I’ve grown more self-conscious. Accents and dialects make me nervous. I’m more hesitant to fold a range of ethnicities, races, gender variants and classes into my work.’ In a feature in *The Guardian* a month or so after Shriver’s Festival speech, various authors expressed their views, stressing both the need for sensitivity and research in writing about ‘other’ cultures, but emphasising that it is nevertheless ‘allowed’. Kamila Shamsie (2016, n.p.), for example, remarked:

To continually return to the same subset of humanity and declare there is no one else who imaginatively engages you or who you know how to imaginatively engage with, strikes me as one of the most dispiriting things a writer can say.

Hari Kunzru (2016) in the same feature asserted: ‘Clearly if writers were barred from creating characters with attributes that we do not ‘own’ (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on) fiction would be impossible ... The injunction to refrain from ‘cultural appropriation’ sounds like a call for censorship ...’ These issues are not resolved but Lanser (1992) offers ways forward, at least for me. She maintains that:

Narration entails social relationships and thus involves far more than the technical imperatives for getting a story told. The narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive; if there is no tale without a teller, there is no teller without a tale. (p.4)

There are tales to be told of the land reforms, and as a teller of tales who is not of the same race or national identity of those who experienced them directly, I sought to write with empathy as I considered complications of focalisation and constructions of character, experimented with form and voice and attempted to suppress my own authorial ethics in places. So doing, I was late in coming to recognise that, as David Lodge (2011, p.10) explains it, ‘Modern fiction has tended to suppress or eliminate the authorial voice, by presenting the action through the consciousness of the characters, or by handing over to them the narrative task itself.’ This view echoes Bakhtin’s notion of a polyphonic chorus (Booth 1984, p.xxii). Somewhat thankfully, I learned to handover narrative agency to my characters, characters often very different to those I had originally planned would speak.

The voices of women

Originally, I had planned to write stories using the perspectives of women exclusively, and of poor black women at that. These are the Spivakian ‘subaltern’: the voiceless victims of the dual powers of patriarchy and colonialism. In this I understood from the onset that my project was controversial: I am neither a black African woman nor a Zimbabwean, so who am I to even attempt to ‘give voice’ to these women? It is not possible at all, I thought; I can only attempt to represent them. Spivak (1994) characterises ‘subalternity’ generally as defining a group who lack access to the power structures that enable them to be heard. The point is not that subaltern individuals cannot literally speak, but that nobody among the elite, the hegemony, is interested in hearing what they say or reacting to it. This has been the situation of the great majority of poor, rural women in Zimbabwe. Spivak concludes her essay by proposing that ‘[r]epresentation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.’ (p.104) I saw my circumscribed task not as defining poor Zimbabwean women as an oppressed and orientalised Other from the external viewpoint of a Western feminist, but instead as presenting these women in their heterogeneity, as vital and as complex as women anywhere in the world.

Until recently, finding self-representations of southern African women has been difficult. Subaltern subjects have spoken, but we do not know how often or in what tone because their voices have not been recorded. A major problem in finding women’s voices from the history of southern Africa is presented by the absence of relevant written texts. However, in 2003, a group of feminist scholars from the International Modern Language Association compiled an anthology of women’s voices from the southern African region: *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (Daymond et al., 2003). In a note prefacing the volume, the earliest pioneers of the project observe that the anthology’s title ‘metonymically suggests a blend of verbal and written forms of expression embodying the experiences of African women in envisioning their lives’ (Allan, Busia, and Howe 2003, p.xviii). This explains the appearance in the volume of court records, song lyrics and other non-fiction texts. The overall aim of the publication is stated explicitly as: ‘a project of cultural reconstruction that aims to restore African women’s voices to the public sphere.’ (p.xviii)

*Women Writing Africa* uses a temporal and spatial organising principle to represent women’s work for the entire southern African region (Botswana; Lesotho; Malawi, Namibia; South Africa; Swaziland; Zambia; Zimbabwe), dividing the collection chronologically and then sub-dividing each section by country. Of the seventeen pieces of nineteenth-century material included, none are from the area that would eventually become Zimbabwe. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, the anthology includes just one woman’s voice from the country: a voice that bridges over a century of history, speaking to us from 1908 in a translated court record held in the Harare Archives. Although not a verbatim transcript, we can nevertheless hear the voice of a brave thirteen-year old who had the temerity to defy her father and husband by making a complaint to the Native Commissioner at the time. Her father had forced her to marry a much older man in order to gain the bride-price (*lobola*), and in her testimony she details the beatings and the rapes she endured after running away more than once from the household of the man (pp.152-54). We cannot know how many others her voice may represent but it was a rare young woman to defy both her father and the man who had paid for her. In the section spanning the 1920s to the 1950s, there are just two Zimbabwean voices included. One of these is a 1943 extract from a satirical short story, ‘The Case of The Foolish Minister’ (pp.225-229) by the renowned author Doris Lessing, published here under her maiden name, Doris M. Wisdom.

As discussed above in the general Introduction, Zimbabwean literary culture experienced something of an efflorescence in the decades of the 1960s and 70s, *Women Writing Africa* lists three contributions, all written in indigenous languages (two in Shona and one in Ndebele). This represents the first wave of women novelists coming through the Rhodesian education system. Joyce Simango (1974) was the first African women to have a novel published in Rhodesia: *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* (*For a Better Tomorrow*). This work, written in the Shona language, was produced with the encouragement of the State Literature Bureau. Simango’s plot echoes the testimony of the young girl heard from the Harare Archives discussed above, offering traces of a connotative intertextuality between factual records and fictional representation. In *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, a wife runs away from a marriage to an old man. The union has been forced on her by her father who wants the *lobola* he will receive in payment for his daughter to pay for a sixth wife for himself. In the introduction to the extract in the anthology, Simango maintained that her inspiration originated in her own family background. (p.339). We can only speculate about how the voice of her narrator was generated.

*Women Writing Africa* bears witness to the increase in female literary production from the 1990s onwards. In the section covering the 1990s to the 2000s, there are texts by seven Zimbabwean women – written in Shona, Ndebele and English – out of thirty from the region overall. This means that, as represented in the anthology at least, Zimbabwean women’s voices have increased from veritable silence in the nineteenth century (0% of entries in this section) to significant volume, comprising 23% of all texts from 1990 to 2009.

As a feminist, I was seeking to join the sisterhood of contemporary Zimbabwean female writers – those such as Yvonne Vera, Tstsi Dangarembga, Petina Gappah, Valerie Tagwira, to name a few – who, in their different styles are finally illuminating the reality of women’s lives in Zimbabwe. In any case, despite the work of these authors and others, the Zimbabwean world of female oppression is little changed. This is not to suggest that there are no changes at all in female consciousness. As early as 1995 the feminist Zimbabwean Women’s Resource Centre and Network published *Zimbabwe Women’s Voices*, (eds. Ciru Getecha and Jesimen Chipika) ‘to allow the silenced voices of many Zimbabwean women to be heard.’ (p.8) Approximately two thousand rural women were interviewed, the results compiled into categories of their lived experiences: Women and: Education; Health; Politics; Business and Economic Development; Land and the Environment and so on. Currently the Facebook page of the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe holds up to the world a contemporary view of young women working politically with each other to transform the unequal world they find themselves in. What’s more, Zimbabwe abounds with women’s organisations pursuing a more equitable future, as detailed in-depth in chapter three. The voices we hear from female Zimbabwean novelists are not those of women essentialised as victims, even though they may be suffering in brutal marital relationships and under patriarchal controls. These authors, as Bull Christiansen (2012, p.209) suggests, ‘write specifically in order to articulate women’s unheard voices’ in fiction that is intended to ‘share a directly stated feminist goal’. It is in this spirit that I have created the female characters in my collection. ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’, for example, provides an example of a woman who, though still poor, has become conscious of, and struggled to be free from, the overlapping restraints of colonialism and patriarchy. Similarly, although the young girl in ‘Prisca’s Story’ may superficially resemble an archetypal subaltern subject – the poor daughter of a black farm labourer on a white farm – she is shown to be bright, determined and able to grasp opportunities in unusual ways. The female characters in my stories, like women everywhere, have identities which are inherently intersectional in construction. In her analysis of female postcolonial identity in Zimbabwean literature, Katrin Berndt (2005, p.77) describes this: ‘Socio-political categories like ethnic belonging/cultural origin, gender, age, profession and family background are acknowledged as identity layers, as well as aspects of private life, like sexual orientation, former or present abuse and intimate relationships.’ These ‘identity layers’, were described less academically ten years earlier in the publication noted above, *Zimbabwe Women’s Voices*. (Getecha and Chipika, 1995).The signification of these layers, however, is historically and socio-culturally dependent and as they often involve having husbands and sons in their lives I have included their voices in my collection.

So as my own stories unfolded– and despite my original intentions – a singular voice of ‘woman’, perhaps itself an overly simplistic conception, did not materialise. Instead, there emerged a chorus including white and black men, alongside white and black women. These are the voices that speak in my collection, not simply black, female, poor and subaltern at all; stories of everyday people who have nevertheless experienced the extraordinary and whose lives are narratives of complex experiences.

The ‘heteroglossia’ of discourse

In chapter one and in the discussion above, I refer to Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony to describe the multiple voices that feature in *Zimbabwe Ruins*. Heteroglossia is an associated Bakhtinian concept which has helped me to analyse the various complexities that I have encountered in constructing some of the voices in my collection. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is fundamental to the novel, (1981, pp.259-422) and can be defined as the multiple speech practices, or genres that can occur within the same language, encompassing different styles used not only by social or professional groups, but also by an individual at different points of daily interactions. Michael Holquist (1981, p.xx) describes the context for Bakhtinian heteroglossia as: ‘two actual people talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time and in a particular place.’ In effect, a writer can place protagonists in a situation where they can choose from myriad responses to react to the specifics of time and place, the social situation, and their particular interlocutor at that instant. A text is thus able to portray *social* heteroglossia through the language, lexis and style choices made by the speaker. For example, academics discussing a professional topic will use different tones, registers and vocabulary to those they might use at home to interact with their families. Similarly, teenagers might use a style of street language with their peers that would be unintelligible to their parents.

Bakhtin focuses on ‘utterance’ and communication as embedded in common discourse, explained by Holquist (1983, p.311) as follows: ‘[d]iscourse is an action …Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of communication.’ This framework was helpful to me in considering some of my stylistic decisions. The way we choose to speak at any one moment is endlessly flexible. A passage from my story, ‘What Goes Round’ demonstrates Bakhtin’s framework. In this story, a black economist, Nat, is faced with his wife’s opposition to his acceptance of one of the seized farms. In discussion with Ruth, Nat uses persuasive language at the beginning of the conversation to try to relieve her anxieties:

‘It must be that agricultural show and my demonstration of the piggery – the new feeding routine – and the tobacco I’ve been experimenting with. You remember those Party guys going round, looking everybody over. And they will know I have forex from the consultancy assignments, foreign exchange is critical these days. That must come into it.’ He came back and stood in front of her. ‘You see, there are many reasons why I meet the criteria.’(p.20)

He appeals to his wife directly, trying to draw her into a shared memory: ‘You remember.’ He moves close to her, appealing to her: ‘You see, there are many reasons ...’ She is not convinced and at the end of the discussion, I show Nat using authoritative and didactic utterances: ‘There are new laws… The world has turned. The land is ours again.’ (p.22) His style and tone now close down the discussion. This example of heteroglossia in the discourse shows Nat at one point using gentle, persuasive language and moments later changing tone, style and word choices to assert his dominant position and concretise his decision-making role. The utterances shared in this passage are an example of what Bakhtin (1981, p.312) describes as involving ‘particular people in actual social and historical situations.’ The heteroglossic shifts in Nat’s utterances as the conversation with his wife proceeds are a function of their specific social and political circumstances at a specific historical moment. His culture and society buttress him in his views, and his utterances at the end of the conversation are meant to illustrate him putting his foot down and ending the discussion on his own, ultimately patriarchal, terms.

On the other hand, lack of heteroglossic shifting also bears witness to an individual’s socio-cultural subject position. In ‘The Sunset Cruise’, for example, the father displays no heteroglossic shifts at all, as he speaks to his daughter and to the staff serving him in the same imperative language and tones. Here is a man with a simple outlook on life, one where he is ultimately in charge, one that has been created from his life as the ultimate authority as head of his farm, his family, his staff and his labourers.

Ambivalent characters and equivocal voices

As remarked upon in chapter one, I found it difficult to draw unambiguous heroes or villains in the collection, although contemporary Zimbabwe might seem an obvious place to locate such representations: the racist white farmer; the avaricious black politician; the beaten traditional wife. Some of these characters do appear, but with a slight shift of the lens to suggest alternative interpretations to the reader. Definitive conclusions about who is right or wrong are certainly not easy to make. I was anxious not to conjure up stereotypes. Wainaina (2006), in the essay cited earlier, pinpoints what he sees as sterile and pervasive typecasting:

Avoid having the African character laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances … African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life – but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories.

I had not read his essay until my stories were completed so I went back to re-look at my characters and the situations they confront. After this review, I am fairly confident that they and the voices they carry do not fall foul of his judgments. The characters, black and white, have large inner lives, speak with voices that I have tried to make authentically their own, and struggle with conflicts and resolutions. One of my African characters is an economist, another is a civil-servant in the tax department; there is a team of land-reform academics, a female lawyer, a feminist activist. Their equivocality is more apparent than simplistic caricatured behaviours and each of the voices in my stories has its own narrative weight, the protagonists’ moral judgements freighted by circumstance and history, not easily slotting into a Manichean framework of right and wrong. None of them reflect Wainaina’s sarcastic formula for depicting African characters.

But when I reflected further on this aspect of the collection I had some concern that my approach had been escapist: I had not so much chosen to create ambivalent characters, but rather avoided creating villains because, creatively, I was not able to do it. In close reading of the works of various Zimbabwean writers, however, I discovered I was not alone in portraying people making and living with morally ambiguous decisions. A major motif in Yvonne Vera’s (1996) novel *Under The Tongue* is incest, which is obviously morally repugnant. Yet, Vera structures her text in such a way that the reader has opportunities to develop some understanding of the rapist father: chapters alternate between the child’s experience of the rape and those that tell the reader about her parent’s background and family life. Although the father is not given his own voice in the novel, he *is* named: Muroyiwa. We get to know him through an omniscient narrator in the alternate chapters, while the rape and its aftermath are focalised and narrated in other passages through the internal voice of the child. (I discuss aspects of this novel in more detail in chapter three).

The initial distance established between a perhaps shocked reader and the brutalizing father as we learn of the rape is somewhat shortened as we learn more about him and his courtship of his wife, Runyararo. The family is extremely poor and Muroyiwa works in dangerous conditions in a mine in order to provide for them. Readers are allowed some access to his inner life, with hints of some tenderness:

In the evenings Muroyiwa would watch Runyararo creating her mats. …She would sit outside and he would sit with her. … She liked his face with the gold of the dying sun, and he would watch the perfect symmetry of her mats, the confident movement of her arms, of her wet fingers, of her lips. …Muroyiwa wondered at his own curiosity and pleasure, at the symmetry gathered in her face, in the moment they had shared; her wide smile which welcomed him, her eyebrows almost touching and thin like a clean mark on the ground. A perfect shape. (pp.213-14)

The ambivalence that emerges in my stories is particularly evident here in Vera’s novel. She has chosen to give voices to the women only – girl-child, mother and grandmother – but whispers from the man at the centre of the story can be heard permeating the narrative. Muroyiwa was VaGomba’s son; a brother to a man who did not come back from the liberation war; and a diligent and warm husband at one point at least. Why did Vera do this? Force the reader to know more of Muroyiwa as a son, a brother and a husband as well as a rapist? Readers are not able to entirely condemn this man, they are compelled rather to wonder what influences propelled him to rape his daughter: how could he have become that kind of man when we have been allowed to know him as another, a man capable of love and affection.

Another example of an equivocal character from my collection is the narrator telling ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’. She is a female war vet, one of the so-called ‘Comrades’. We find her now in middle-age, fairly comfortable on her small plot of land, sub-divided from a repossessed commercial farm. Her voice came clearly to me, telling her story of child rape, training in one of the guerrilla camps in Mozambique: a story that includes marriage and murder. The story is fiction, but Steadyfaith’s voice was created from listening to interviews on the English-language radio stations in Zimbabwe, reading local newspaper articles of interviews with female freedom fighters and the book, *Mothers of the Revolution* (Staunton, 1991). These sources featured testimony noting the authenticity, and scope, of the experiences described: ‘[t]his is what I did’, said one former Comrade, ‘many of us did the same; it is not a special kind of life’ (Juliet Chitsungo, 2017, p.8). Fay Chung, Minister of Education in Zimbabwe 1988-1993 wrote a memoir of her years in the liberation war: *Re-Living the Second Chimurenga* (2006). This was another rich source for me, as Chung describes her experiences in Zambia, her journey to become a Comrade, her training and life in the camps in the bush.

I can lay some further claim to the authenticity of Steadyfaith’s situation, as a new farmer with her own title to land, from the research literature. Studies prove that some women have benefited from the land seizures. ‘Women are far from reaching equality,’ as noted by Hanlon, Manjengwa and Smart (2013, p.158), ‘but the fast track land reform has been a major change, created by women themselves who have been pushing for quotas, credit and their names on land documents.’ Steadyfaith’s Story’ could be told as one of appalling hardship, of a peculiarly African adventure of war and death, in the manner Wainaina (2006) critiques, but in my story, she tells it in an affectless style. There are no histrionics in this voice, and she is mistress of her own piece of land:

Ahh Madam, in those days I did not think a white person would ever want to hear my story. All the fighting we did. It is a story not so different from many others, my story. Yes I hear you. You do not need to tell me to use my own words. I have only words that are my own. (p.159)

She tells her story as a monologue to a white land tenure researcher whose role it is to listen and so finally she has an audience, using the moment to construct her own history from within a social structure that, as a norm, ignores female history and demands their silence.

Technical considerations involved in creating my characters’ voices

How should I represent my characters’ direct speech? The question has particular resonance when applied to the gender and race of some of them, given that I am a white woman and some of my characters are male, and some are African. Decisions about voice and their articulation in my stories were and remain for me a critical and contested element of my creative process. That the mother tongue of these characters is not English and that I do not speak more than the basic greetings in Shona only adds to the challenges of creating credibility in the text. Stephen M. Ross explores the plausibility of mimetic voice in his analysis of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and asserts:

It is assumed not only that a voice belongs to some person but also that it is in crucial ways ‘appropriate’ to that person – to his or her socioeconomic class, level of education and so on. Any loosening of the bond between voice and person violates verisimilitude and ‘sounds unnatural’ to the reader’s ear, because the reader has accepted the representation of that person as an actuality. (Ross, 1979, p.303)

I agree with Ross. It seems to be only commonsense that authors strive to create believable voices for individual characters. Steadyfaith’s voice, as described above, includes examples of speech mannerisms consciously chosen as appropriate to her level of education and her experiences. In other stories, the struggle to create a voice was sometimes easier. The collection features African men as protagonists in more than half of the stories, and in two the action is focalised entirely through African men: Nat, the economist in ‘What Goes Round’ and Tonderai the young township boy in ‘The Piano Lesson’. Both stories are told with a close third-person point of view.

From the first sentence in ‘What Goes Round’, Nat’s perspective dominates:

They had agreed the appointment on their cell phones two weeks ago so Nat remained in the cab of his battered Land Cruiser and waited for an appearance on the dark veranda in front of him, sure they would be aware of his arrival. (p.16)

I felt fairly confident that I could manage an authentic tone and style for this character, a professional cosmopolitan, the kind of person I work with on a daily basis in Zimbabwe. His voice, and Ruth, his wife’s, were not difficult to represent and I simply used a slightly more formal syntax, the voice of the educated class in Zimbabwe. This is demonstrated in the following extract where Ruth is speaking to Nat:

[Ruth:] ‘I did not want you to make that application.’

[Nat:] ‘I know…but I decided to go ahead in the end.’

[Ruth:] ‘We agreed we did not like what was happening, Nathaniel.’(p.19)

This is a concise example of a technique I employ throughout the story, in longer passages of dialogue: the avoidance of colloquial or less formal contractions to attempt a mimetic portrayal of actual speech patterns – ‘did not want’, ‘did not like’.

Emulating speech as a means to create authentic ‘sounding’ dialogue is a critical aspect of my stories. Whilst such emulation is, I feel, necessary in presenting authentic characterisation, it remains a challenging endeavour, laden with practical and ethical dilemmas. Sam Leith (2017, p.14) describes some of the general technical difficulties entailed: ‘The spoken language tends to be more loosely packed and less structured than the written version. Sentences run together, break and change direction or circle back. Speakers say “um” and “er” and insert empty phrases.’ He reminds us that ‘[w]riting and speech are profoundly different animals.’ (p.15) There is therefore a necessary degree of concision in ‘reproducing’ dialogue. Strangely, on the page concise dialogue is ‘inauthentic’ in that it is not reproducing exactly what the characters would say in reality. We rely on the reading brain to do its work, to fill in and to interpret the truncated utterances of characters. As such, it is not necessary to include what Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short (2007, p.130) term the ‘features of NORMAL NON-FLUENCY’ [emphasis is original], i.e. hesitations, assumptions, false starts, syntactic anomalies, fillers such as *erm*. Doing this would, in fact, interrupt the narrative flow and slow down the reading process.

I use dialogue in sections of ‘What Goes Round’ to move the drama forward or to establish the conflict in the plotline. In other stories, I use dialogue passages for different stylistic reasons at particular points in the diegesis. In ‘Bountiful’s Story’, for instance, all the passages of dialogue are used to illustrate the nature of the relationships of the characters to each other as they are not described otherwise. In ‘The Researcher’, the discussion between the team of land-tenure specialists and the exiled white farmer is used to convey technical information about Zimbabwe and land issues. In ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’, the dialogue sections are used at moments of high drama to show a specific, perhaps revelatory incident. For example, the meeting between Chris, the white farmer and Shadreck, the leader of the war veterans come to take over Chris’s farm.

Whilst I had an understanding of the technicalities of creating dialogue, I generated difficulties for myself by attempting to give a flavour of an accent and tone in many of my direct-speech passages. An additional constraint in representing my black Zimbabwean characters’ speech was my inability to switch languages other than for a single word at intervals. While it is not unusual for black Zimbabweans, in certain social positions, to speak in English to each other – as Nat and Ruth do, for example, in ‘What Goes Round’ – I was unable to add to these voices the fluent ability they would have to switch between languages in a single discourse, and even within a sentence: so-called code-mixing or code-shifting (Pieter Muysken, 2000). This phenomenon is demonstrated particularly well in the verbatim transcription of a recent interview with a female war veteran in the Zimbabwean *Sunday Mail* newspaper (Deria Minizhu, 2017). In the interview, former ‘Comrade’ Deria Minizhu describes her feelings about her father’s death at the hands of some of her fellow liberation fighters during the war:

Sometimes I would think of going back to revenge, but *muhondo humunzarwo.* You know *ndichiri kuhondo*, some of babumunini’s children came to join the liberation struggle. About two of them. They looked for me *vakandiwana*. This was way after my training. When they came I understood that these were just children like me. Their father was the problem not these two. Up to now I am still in good books *nevana vababumuniniavi*. I don’t have a problem with them. One of them is in the President’s office. (p.8)

Minizhu seamlessly shifts between English and Shona here; I do not have the ability use language in this way. The inclusion of code-switching, an obvious example of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, in fictional narratives is widely used by Zimbabwean authors writing in English. I can illustrate what is missing from my stories in this respect by examining a particular example.

In her English-language novel *Uncertainty of Hope*, Valerie Tagwira (2006) makes her characters use Shona phrases and exclamations throughout. In ‘real life’, they would be speaking Shona exclusively, but the book is aimed at the mainly triglossic readership of Zimbabwe, (Shona, Ndebele, English) hence she has chosen English as her main medium. Even so, the occasional use of Shona allows Tagwira to signify the place and culture of Zimbabwe and adds to the authenticity of the voices in her text. On the other hand, this narrative, written in English, with her characters speaking mainly in English, could instead be described as ‘inauthentic’ as, in life they would be speaking in Shona throughout. It is representative of the insoluble writerly dilemma in which politics and authenticity may be at odds: where an author has chosen to write in a specific language for economic or political reasons, and then has to manipulate the text to re-inject authenticity by implication of the use of the indigenous language throughout.

Ashcroft (1995, p.50) suggests that inserting the national language into an otherwise English medium text is a substantively political characteristic of post-colonial writing. These insertions interfere with the centrality of English as a medium, as well as allowing ‘a metaphoric entry for indigenous culture into the “English” text’. An example of this, from many in Tagwira’s (2006) text, is where the main protagonist, Onai, is being reassured by a younger friend:

Katy nodded. ‘I’m happy to see you smiling again, sahwira. And you’re right. People often say one or another thing will happen. Who knows…zuva raizobuda kubva kumavirara chaiko! Pakati peusiku chaipo!’ (p.56)

Tagwira assists the non-Shona-speaking readership to follow the text by having Onai repeat this sentiment to herself in English: ‘the sun would never rise from the west, and certainly not at midnight.’ Of course, in reality Onai would never do this. As such, this technique could be cited as an example of an acceptable inauthenticity to allow the book to reach the widest possible readership

In his discussion of the linguistic ethics of the Anglophone African short story, Roger Berger (1998, p.77) underscores the connection between language use and politics: ‘These disruptions of the English text may indeed be sites of textual resistance to a discursive imperialism.’ This argument is echoed in Tenday Mangena and Oliver Nyambu’s discussion on the ‘use and abuse’ of English in two Zimbabwean novels, Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009) and Petina Gappah’s *Elegy for Easterly* (2009). They offer a succinct explanation as to the rationale of mixing languages, and including made-up vocabulary from the streets in narratives:

In postcolonial discourses … while the new African English may be regarded as a ‘desecration of the English language’ in the colonial or former colonial Metropolis, in the colonised world, it became a way of recognising the reality of a changed society and also a part of the ambivalent gesture of what postcolonialists may easily term ‘speaking back’. (Mangena and Nyambu, 2013, p.76)

The post-colonial project of ‘speaking power’ to imperialist discourse(s) resonates with my own goals in writing the collection. But the question remained: how could I, as a white English-speaking non-Zimbabwean, use language to facilitate this for my Shona-speaking characters?

I had particular problems trying to create the voice of a barely educated female character, the eponymous domestic worker of ‘Bountiful’s Story’. Finding an authentic voice for this very poor, working-class woman was so difficult that I incorporated a mixture of techniques to enable her to ‘speak’. I did not feel I could express the interiority of Bountiful’s character in her own voice for the entire story, and yet I was trying to get to the depths of her experiences. After trying, and failing, to create an authentic voice in which to carry the entire story, I changed the initial voice from Bountiful to that of the white Madam, Sharon, a ‘Rhodesian’ voice with which I am very familiar. It would have been simple to tell the entire story in this voice but I was deeply uncomfortable about the ethical implications of having an unsympathetic white character tell the story of a black woman. Why should Bountiful not have her own voice in which to tell her own story? The reason was that I was not technically able to portray it, and yet I had intended to the collection to include precisely this voice. I thought I managed it in ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’, but the two women are very different: although both women are from the same class, Steadyfaith is strong, independent and a fairly fluent English speaker; Bountiful is none of these. I could record her simple, almost mono-syllabic responses to Sharon’s questions– and this is an authentic representation of a common one-sided situation where power is symbolised in this type of interaction, but it would have been inauthentic to write Bountiful able to tell Sharon her story with fluency. As it was not possible to extend the dialogue and enable Bountiful’s voice to emerge in direct speech I used two additional techniques in the narrative: I developed some sections of reported speech and created a sympathetic proxy voice, Grace, an older, experienced domestic worker, eloquent in the formal voice of a second-language speaker. I decided that to use another black woman, from her peer group, would be an acceptable extension to Bountiful’s voice, and would allow the story to move forward from the stilted question-and-answer dialogue sections. Grace speaks firmly to Sharon, establishing her voice as a presence with some power in the story:

‘Madam I am telling her to tell to you her story. It is very hard for her. She is saying you cannot be interested because it is a story far from your life…But I am telling her you are a good Madam in your way. I am knowing your ways and your words. I am telling her you will not be hard with her.’(p.152)

The use of the present indicative tense throughout this speech illustrates a normal speaking pattern in Zimbabwe for those not fully fluent in English; it is one I am used to hearing and decided I could reproduce. In the reported-speech section of the story, I approximate the style of English that a person like Bountiful would use in talking to Sharon: ‘Her husband was Aloysius. A man too good with her.’ (p.152) It is normal usage among second language speakers of English in Zimbabwe to use the adverb ‘too’ in place of ‘very’ and to use prepositions in a different way. The sentence means Aloysius was *very* good *to* Bountiful, i.e. he was a good husband; Sharon would understand this meaning and so will Zimbabwean readers.

After this struggle with the narrative, I decided these techniques did allow Bountiful’s story to emerge, albeit with Grace’s assistance and Sharon’s focalisation throughout. Reading the story again though, it is questionable whether these techniques have been successful or instead they have worked counterproductively, stealing Bountiful’s voice. The point of view in the story is Sharon’s; we see Bountiful, and hear her, through Sharon’s perspective, and in places I have Grace telling her story. Although I think I have succeeded in drawing sharp comparisons of the emotional life of the women, instead of giving Bountiful a narrative voice perhaps I have colluded in silencing this woman.

African writers have long wrestled with issues of language and voice from different perspectives. For example, Chenjerai Hove is a Zimbabwean author who writes in English, and whose characters, even the less educated and rural characters, who would in reality speak in Shona, speak in English in his novels. This permits his work to reach a wider readership than would be accessible otherwise. Hove uses a particular technique to indicate that his characters are really speaking in Shona. Prebeem Karsholm (2005, p.9) describes it as ‘the ultra-poetic English rendering of the voices is an attempt to reproduce Shona idiomatic characteristics.’ By contrast, after writing some of his most famous novels in English, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o made a political decision in the 1980s to write only in two of the mother tongues of his country. He proclaims his intention in the opening of his aptly entitled book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1987): ‘This book ... is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way.’ (p.xi) Decisions about who to write about, how to enable them to speak as well as what they should say, have become ever more freighted with meaning for me as I reflected on my stories.

How to write Africa?

A final aspect of representation I consider here are my deliberations on the way my narrators’ voices would inscribe the state of the nation as the stories unfolded. The phrase ‘poverty porn’ is a generalised term used to describe media of any kind, including literature, which uses the condition of the poor as a means of attracting attention. Take, for example, the familiar shots of under-nourished African babies shown on television to raise charity funds. It is not difficult to draw on poverty as a trope to weave through any novel and collection of stories located in an African country. Many authors deploy this problematic motif, including those from Africa themselves. In his *Guardian* review of the novel *We Need New Names* by the Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo, Helon Habila (2013, n.p.) criticises his fellow African writer and her depiction of ‘Africa’ in the book. He asks if Bulawayo ‘had a checklist made from the morning news on Africa’, and continues by listing the topics covered in the novel’s first one hundred pages:

[A] soul-crushing ghetto called Paradise … a dead body hanging from a tree; there is Aids – the narrator’s father is dying of it; there is political violence … there are street children … Did I mention that one of the children, 10- or 12-year-old Chipo, is pregnant after being raped by her grandfather?

Habila’s criticisms reflect those of Wainaina (2006) quoted above and reinforce the difficulty involved in answering the central questions at stake here. How should an author write about Africa? Whose voices will say what? And when the voices represented appear in a realist tradition, as do mine, how is it possible to achieve some degree of authenticity without falling into the trap of what Habila (2013) terms ‘performing Africa’? These questions were the source of endless anxiety for me.

Many of my narrators are poor and live in extremely difficult conditions, but I was clear I would not add to the mass of stereotypes portraying Africa as exotically impoverished. In an essay exploring content and form in postcolonial African literature, Simon Gikandi (2012) argues that realism as a literary form is valid in its intention. Indeed, it is ‘a strategy of giving the imagined nation a reality effect that would rescue it from the phantasm of the colonial library evident in novels such as Kipling’s *Kim* or H. Rider Haggards’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*’ (p.319). Nevertheless, Gikandi maintains that realism is not sufficient to represent fully any given nation. He bolsters his argument by including a lengthy quote from the Indian academic Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000; cited in Gikandi 2012, p.149) which offers a reflection upon the drawbacks of strict literary realism:

If the nation, the people, or the country were not just to be observed, described, and critiqued but loved as well, what would guarantee that they were indeed worth loving unless one also saw in them something that was already lovable? What if the real, the natural, and the historically accurate did not generate the feeling of devotion or adoration? An objectivist, realist view might lead only to disidentification.

Gikandi’s essay eased my doubts somewhat that I was not fully representing Zimbabwe by my omission, or de-emphasis, of the grinding hardship so many of its people experience. Chakrabarty’s notion of writing characters who could be ‘lovable’ was appealing to me. It would have been easy to represent the worst of Zimbabwe in my stories and, whilst perhaps I was not aiming at evoking ‘love or adoration’, I nevertheless attempted to respect the spirit of this thesis by ensuring that my stories include voices of equanimity and reason even within the chaotic times of the land reforms. The leader of the war veterans in ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’, Shadreck, is a secondary character whom the reader might expect to be a thug, but he is the voice of reason. The white madam in ‘The Piano Lesson’ might realistically be a racist, but I draw her as a mother, recognising another mother’s son across the divide of race and the chaos in which she is engulfed. ‘The Gang Leader’ pivots on a revenge motif wherein a white man, humiliated by a gang led by a black woman, becomes fixated on identifying and punishing her, particularly because she is a woman. The end of the story shows him being given the information that would allow him to have her beaten or killed, but unable to make this decision because he is also told about her destitute circumstances. He holds his head and explodes: ‘Christ, it’s not fair!’(p.115) The reader is left with the ambivalence of this juvenile expression expressed in a very adult context: is it his situation that is unfair or hers? Or the entire national situation? The ending is meant to convey a measure of irony. These are characters not defined by their circumstances only, but by inner values, no matter how conflicting these may be.

Chapter Three - Women’s Voices

‘The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. … But what I didn’t like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness.’

(Dangarembga 1988, p.118)

In this chapter, I argue that a significant proportion of contemporary Zimbabwean women’s fiction is an expression and demonstration of what Lanser (1992) describes as a ‘communal voice’. Firstly, I describe the specific social landscape in which this ‘communal voice’ has emerged, illustrated with examples from Zimbabwean authors and my own story collection. As will become clear, this voice operates not only as a literary narrative form but also a stylistic choice with significant ideological implications. My argument is supported by detailed examination of four literary techniques by which a ‘communal voice’ is textually conveyed. After this in-depth analysis of a communal (Zimbabwean) voice in general terms, I end by interrogating the representation of this voice through a close-reading of Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue* (1996), a text which uses a particular narrative style to permit the creation and transmission of a ‘communal voice’ of women.

**Lived experiences of patriarchal values**

What is the ‘communal voice’ saying in contemporary female-authored Zimbabwean literature? In summary, it is asserting that women live complex and diverse lives within a framework of patriarchal values that constrain their agency and limit their full participation in society. The defining characteristics of texts which feature this ‘communal voice’ comprise an explicit focus on female protagonists living under patriarchal control, enduring gender-based discrimination and violence. It might appear from this description that I am essentialising the experience of being a female Zimbabwean into the limited category of passive ‘suffering’ and enduring victimhood to the exclusion of any and all other life experiences. This does not fully reflect the Zimbabwean sociological landscape.

There are vast numbers of organisations created by Zimbabwean women, obviously demonstrating agency and purpose not just on the level of individual women but also of women as a collective. There are too many such organisations to list here, but a representative sample includes: business and professional groups (such as the Zimbabwe Women’s Lawyers Association and the Indigenous Business Women Organisation); implicitly or explicitly feminist groups (such as Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre and Network, the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe, and the Women’s Action Group Zimbabwe); and political associations (such as the Parliamentary Women’s Group). Such formally constituted organisations are joined by hundreds of others operating at the grassroots level, including, but not limited to: the Association of Women’s Clubs of Zimbabwe; the Women and AIDS Support Network; the Women’s Development Credit Scheme; and the Women’s Desk of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. Across rural areas, burial societies and cooperatives can be found by the thousand; sources of community support organised and run by women, for women. Women in all sectors and levels of society in Zimbabwe come together in groups to self-identify as a particular generalised collective, identifying as *women* first and foremost.

The abundance of women’s groups in Zimbabwe sketched above might seem, at first glance, to indicate women’s powerful status; there are so many groups because women are in charge. In reality, the opposite is true. Zimbabwean women seek strength in identifying and organising as a collective, undertaking supportive and collaborative group action to counter the prevailing male norms with which they must routinely deal. A particularly emblematic example of this situation is presented by the Women and Land Lobby Group. The Group was formed in 1998 (prior to the farm invasions), to lobby the government to include women’s concerns in decisions made about land programmes and resettlement. The issues the Group included in its submissions to government included getting women’s names on leases and permits together with that of their husbands’, as well as addressing the basic problem of enabling women to be granted title in their own names. In essence, the Group lobbied to get women meaningfully included in the land programmes at all. One researcher in the early days of the fast track land-reform programme found that less than 20% of the 30,000 new black farmers receiving entitlement to land were women (Lloyd M.Sachikonye, 2003). It is as a direct result of this discrimination that the Women and Land Lobby Group came into being and I include this organisation in ‘Prisca’s Story’ as an illustration of my character’s journey into political awareness.

On the other hand, women have been represented at the highest echelons of Zimbabwe’s most powerful institutions since Independence. Women have filled the roles of government ministers, senior civil servants, and Public Service Commissioners in all sectors. In the rankings for countries with the highest proportions of women as MPs (or similar), Zimbabwe actually outperforms the UK with the former ranked as 36th globally out of 193 countries, and the latter at 41st place (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018, n.p). One reason these female MPs have not been successful in substantially reducing gender based discrimination lies in the detail behind this percentage. Of the eighty-six women in the National Assembly, only twenty-six were directly elected, the other sixty being nominated in line with the requirements of the Constitution. This has led them to being denigrated: ‘The selection of these MPs by their parties rather than election by the people led them to be perceived as lacking a legitimate mandate. They were assumed to be incompetent and incapable of winning contests based on merit.’ (Rumbidzai Dube, 2018, n.p.) Only fifteen percent of the 2018 candidates standing for election are female. A different anecdotal example of how women may be perceived might be seen embodied in the person of a very senior public figure: the recently deposed (in 2014) ex-Vice President, Joice Mujuru.

At one time, Mujuru was powerful enough to be spoken of as a possible successor to President Robert Mugabe. Although she was a Liberation fighter in her own right – and draws much of her political power based on this history – she was married to an even higher-ranking war veteran (General Solomon Mujuru). No matter her personal history and qualifications, in the media and anecdotally, one of Mujuru’s most admired, and commented upon, virtues was that, Vice President and warrior though she was, she behaved in the home as a ‘proper’ Shona woman. No matter her power outside of the household, Mujuru exhibited traditional behaviour by cooking and kneeling to serve her husband. This obedience to patriarchal norms was not just widely publicised, but generally lauded. Appreciation for ‘proper’ Shona womanhood, particularly in terms of the conduct of married women, is not just evident in Mujuru’s case, but is widespread in Zimbabwean culture. Another, more recent, example is provided by discussions held in the aftermath of President Robert Mugabe’s deposal in 2017. Some details of these have been relayed to me by a friend, an insider in Zimbabwean politics. ([Anonymised] 2017, pers. comm. 17. December.) A meeting was held between the all male traditional leaders and ZANU-PF officials to arrange the transition from Mugabe to the new President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The meeting included Mnangagwa’s wife, Auxillia, to discuss her position as the new First Lady, a role previously filled by Grace Mugabe, renowned for her political ambition. It was emphasised that the new First Lady must, above all, exemplify traditional Shona wifely behaviour: respectful, quiet, unassuming.

The examples above demonstrate some of the cultural complexities involved in being a woman in Zimbabwe. Even if they belong to the highest echelons of the ruling party, can women be full and respected Zimbabweans, equal in status to men? This question refers to deep structures of Zimbabwean society exposing the paradoxes within which women navigate their lives. The examples above underscore the harsh realities faced by everyday women in the country; if these two women, with their level of social and economic status, can be targeted to uphold ‘wifely’ behaviour how much stricter are patriarchal rules enforced for ordinary women? Thoko Ruzvidzo (1995, p.15) describes the situation: ‘For me the most important concern for women is patriarchy because it affects intellectual, middle-class, rich and grassroots women alike.’ This helps to explain the plethora of women’s groups: women self-identify as a group because they face life problems which are gender-based and cross differences in class, economic status, and rural or urban geography. It is not surprising therefore that fiction written by women represents women living within a deeply patriarchal society, facing all the issues of oppression and powerlessness that this generates.

The fate of women in rural areas has been a topic explored in-depth by Pascah Mungwini, a researcher based at the State University of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. Mungwini focuses on the government’s re-empowerment of traditional authority structures and its deleterious impacts on the situation of rural women. The title of the article presenting her findings encapsulates the issue: ‘Forward to the past: Dilemmas of rural women’s empowerment in Zimbabwe’:

Since Zimbabwe is mostly a patriarchal society, the reforms these traditional leaders are instituting are invariably patriarchal driven and as such pro-male and without doubt anti-women. Through this revitalisation of traditional leadership institutions, government has facilitated a reawakening of the patriarchal values and customs some of which were fading with the passage of time. There is a clear resuscitation of male dominance and ultimate control of events in the rural areas that has a negative effect on women and their capacity to participate openly in the affairs of their community and make decisions for themselves. (Mungwini, 2007, p.129)

In this paper, Mungwini observes that ‘reforms’ being made to traditional structures i.e. the chieftainship, specifically militate against women, revealing a national policy attempting to recreate an interrupted pre-colonial history, re-inventing a time when ‘men were men’ and women ‘knew their place’ in the rural community. Central to the character of this ‘place’ is the motif of voiceless women, silent both in the past and in the present day.

Mungwini’s analyses are supported in later research concentrating on rural women in terms of the inequality evident in terms of women’s roles in land management when compared to those of men. Manase K. Chiweshe (2015, p.47), for example, summarises the continuing reality for rural women: ‘Post fast-track farms in Zimbabwe are highly gendered, as roles between men and women are based on patriarchal values. Such values determine where women are located within social systems and what assets they have at their disposal.’ As one woman, interviewed during Chiweshe’s primary research in 2010 puts it: ‘It is not proper for a woman to lead where there are men. We feel women should give men their proper place and let them lead.’ (p.47) Other interviewees underscore the negative consequences of acting with agency as a woman farmer: ‘If we talk our husbands will be angry with us.’ (p.47) Even if notionally accorded power by occupying a bureaucratic leadership position, women struggle to make themselves heard. One woman, in the formal position of chair of the farmers’ meetings, describes the culture of male entitlement: ‘Men speak mostly and issues that men propose carry the day, even if I am the *sabhuku* (headman) there is very little you can do when men dominate meetings.’ (p.47) Once more, these individual voices highlight how, even when women accede to formal positions of ‘power’, men still use their cultural power to dominate public spaces and it is not difficult to understand how much further cultural power dominates behaviour in the domestic environment, as the narratives referred to describe.

This domestic environment can be a dangerous place for women and girls in Zimbabwe, as in much of the world. Gender-based violence is a significant theme in Zimbabwean fiction, and for good reason. Despite the passing of the Domestic Violence Act (2007) it is widely believed to be an under-reported feature of women’s lives. A report from Womankind (2016, p.10) found that:

Despite the adoption of legislation and policies, VAWG (violence against women and girls), remains widespread and perpetrators continue to benefit from impunity. The lack of training of law enforcement, the lack of awareness of women’s human rights and the fear of social stigma reprisal contributes to the ineffectiveness of such laws.’

These figures are corroborated by the Musasa Project, a local organisation to combat gender-based violence based in Harare. The Project maintains that violence against women, including rape, is rising.

Almost worse than the fact of the violence itself is the ‘consent’ of some women themselves to receiving it. This is demonstrated by the results of a study by Michelle Hinden in which she interviewed almost six thousand women in Zimbabwe:

Over half of all women in Zimbabwe (53%) believed that wife beating was justified in at least one of [the] five situations. Respondents were most likely to find wife beating justified if a wife argued with her spouse (36%), neglected her children (33%), or went out without telling her spouse (30%).(Hinden, 2003, p.1)

The reasons the interviewed women give as justification for their own abuse by their husbands demonstrates the pervasive and deeply entrenched cultural attitudes described by many Zimbabwean writers in their fiction.

As if it was not sufficient that traditional values seem to encourage violent behaviour, the cumulative decline in the economic circumstances of Zimbabwe has been assessed as adding *economic* violence to that of domestic abuse. Mary Johnson Osirim provides an analysis of this form of abuse:

The economic crisis and Economic Structural Adjustment Programme led to increased economic violence against women, especially for those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Economic violence can be defined as: property grabbing by male relatives of a deceased man, forced dependency, or neglect of a wife’s material needs. (Osirim, 2003.p.156)

There are no indications that the situation is improving for women who are poor and rural. Overall, a context of gender based violence is the empirical context of much of Zimbabwe’s women’s literature.

**Literary portrayals of lived realities**

In 1994, the then organisation of Zimbabwe Women Writers published *Anthology* (ed. Norma Kitson, 1994), a volume containing over one hundred short works, including stories and poems. The themes of women’s submission, male violence and husbands’ infidelity appear again and again in these works. The volume Foreword, provided by the then Minister of Information, Posts and Telecommunication, David Karimanzira (1994, p.iii), acknowledges this:

Since Independence in 1980, the laws pertaining to women in Zimbabwe have been amended so that women are now equal before the law. The contradictions between traditional and modern practice, however, mean that women are still fighting discrimination in society. A number of contributions in this volume reflect that fight. Much of the writing is tendentious – that is also its value – and my Government welcomes the struggle of women to overcome their oppression.

Whilst the legal landscape may have changed for the better, socio-cultural practices often have not and literary depictions of these continue. In her novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tsitsi Dangarembga depicts a scene where boys still in primary school exhibit norms of acting violently towards women. Tambu, the young heroine, has discovered that her brother has been stealing the mealies (maize) she had been growing and intending to sell to earn enough money to pay her own school fees. Tambu is only eight years old at this point in the novel, and she exerted significant effort growing her crop. Small and younger though she is, she confronts her brother in the middle of a football match. His friends gather round as her brother talks to her: ‘“Why talk?” a footballer shouted. “Just hit. That’s what they hear.”’ (p.23) Through this response Dangarembga is portraying the male right to inflict violence in the mouths of small boys.

The deterioration of women’s conditions in times of deep austerity, noted by Osirim (2003) above, is described in Valerie Tagwira’s novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) discussed in chapter two. Tagwira’s role as an obstetrician and gynaecologist in Harare gave her intimate glimpses into women’s lives. She became so concerned about the situation of the women she met through her practice that she decided to write fiction to give a voice to these women:

[B]eing a woman was my motivation [that] women and the girl-child are worse off than their male counterparts … women are more likely to be unemployed, less educated, and less in control of their lives because of cultural and biological reasons, all of which makes them even more vulnerable.(Interview with World Press 2009, n.p.)

*The Uncertainty of Hope* begins with a close third-person voice as Tagwira’s chief protagonist, Onai, thinks about the circumstances of her violent marriage. From the very outset, then, a primary motif of the novel is made explicit, one of female suffering and resilience, which later expands into one of female solidarity:

Gari was not an easy man to live with. Over the years she had worn herself out just trying to conceal proof of his violence. … her episodic facial bruising and blackened eyes had ceased to be material for speculation because they all knew precisely what was happening. However the cocoon of pretence she had woven around herself had become her armour. It was the one thing which held the frail vestiges of her dignity securely in place. There was nothing else she thought she could do. She was, after all, only a woman. (Tagwira 2006, p.1)

The opening of Tagwira’s novel summarises a life that seems unremittingly bleak and violent for women. However, the novel goes on to describe a more nuanced social landscape, also showing us a non-violent marriage and female friendship and solidarity. For example, Onai’s friend has a non-violent, dependable husband as a counterpoint to the violent Gari. Tagwira’s work, written from inside her deep knowledge of women’s circumstances, is an example of mimetic representation of the lives of the women she worked with. Whilst not all women suffer from domestic violence in Zimbabwe, so many do that *The Uncertainty of Hope* adds to a communal voice of women exposing persisting patriarchal norms.

By contrast to Tagwira’s unflinching portrayal of the a battered wife, Nozipo Maraire’s (1996) epistolary novel *Zenzele* provides an example of a more affirmative framework for ‘giving up’ the female body to a kind of collective ownership. Maraire’s text, structured as a mother’s letter of memories and advice to her U.S.-based daughter, includes a passage where the narrator recalls her mother-in law showing her own, old body, and proudly proclaiming: ‘There is not a mark here that is my own. It belongs to Baba vaTapiwa [her husband], Chipo, Farai, Tawona and Ziyanai [her children].’ (p.43) The marks are not of beatings, but of a life of labouring with her husband, and of bearing children. This could immediately be read as another example of female subservience – to her wifely and child-bearing duties, and in one reading it is. But the author follows this with a more complex allusion to a broader life of emotional nuances, as the old woman goes on to declare ‘It is a body of love.’ (p.43) This is a body which has led a fulfilled life, one of which the character is proud and the text, in its address to a daughter of Africa seeking her selfhood on a different continent, reminds her – and us readers – of traditional womanly roles, and of the satisfaction that some find in embodying them. This framing of the female body shows appreciation of the contemporary need for individual agency while attesting to a cultural background that will not be denied.

It is important to note here that the iconic nature of the ‘womanly roles’ of African wife and mother, is not undisputed in the literature. Katrin Berndt (2010), for example, analyses Yvonne Vera’s use of pregnancy in her novels as a means to question cultural values, particularly in the novels *Without a Name* (1994) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998) in which the female protagonists opt out of procreative roles. She maintains that these characters’

[R]efusal to consider pregnancy and the prospect of motherhood as an option is determined by the fact that they both feel inhibited by the patriarchal power structures of their country and the historic situation in which they happen to live. (Berndt, 2010, p.18)

I am taking some pains to add nuances to any picture of generalised female disadvantage in Zimbabwe. Although a ‘communal voice’ of Zimbabwean women calls from the literature – and although it can be defined in broad terms as speaking from a position of gendered disadvantage – it is not one of simplistic oppression. Moreover, pervasive patriarchal male dominance is not exclusively a feature of Zimbabwean (or African) culture. Society is constantly changing. Time has moved on in Zimbabwe too and the position of some women has improved, without question. However, the traditional past nudges up close against contemporary Zimbabwe. The pull of those ‘traditional’ cultural mores which demean women still carries a strong resonance in Zimbabwean society and are thus a constant feature of the current literature, an undeniable component of its ‘communal voice’.

The concept of ‘communal voice’

Lanser (1992) employs a precise meaning and provenance for the term ‘communal voice’. She pinpoints it as emerging from a twentieth-century sensibility of collective identity and representation in women’s writing: ‘From among various forms of novelistic multiplicity, then, I am distinguishing the convergence of representation and narration that occurs when a collective or group protagonist is represented through formal strategies that allow the plurality itself to speak.’ (p.256) This narrator then, is distinct from either an overt, authorial heterodiegetic voice or from a personal autodiegetic narrator. The ‘formal strategies’ used to convey the ‘communal voice’ comprise particular narrative techniques deployed in the text. In the following sections, I examine four significant strategies: 1) the use of ‘we’ narratives; 2) the use of second-person ‘you’ narratives; 3) the use of sequential narratives; and 4) the use of ‘phonocentrism’ (the privileging of speech over written discourse) in a work by Yvonne Vera I have termed a phonocentric novel.

Although I explore the ‘communal voice’ of Zimbabwean women in particular, it is worth observing that it is not a concept confined to feminist analysis. Keith Clark (1999), for example, dissects Ernest Gaines’s 1983 novel *A Gathering of Old Men* which portrays racial discrimination on a Louisiana cane farm in the 1970s. Clark asserts that ‘Gaines’s aesthetic endeavour involves the re-centering not merely of the black male voice, but of a black male *communal* voice which contrasts sharply with the mono-voicedness of protest discourse.’ (para 1.1) Moreover, Clark insists that ‘voice and story function not only as fictive tropes but as viable vehicles for the transformation of the black male self.’ I will explore the ideological implications implied by this statement for the communal voice of women in Zimbabwean literature.

Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (1999) summarises the Zimbabwean literary landscape:

Before Independence in 1980 Zimbabwean writing in English was criticized for its lack of a common mission and for the individual stance that many writers took ...writers who had lived migrant lives outside Africa and who had become preoccupied with their own encounter with Europe. (p.88)

These were mostly male writers and their preoccupations did not markedly change after 1980. In other words, although black male writers did experience a common colonial oppression, it did not drive the emergence of a communal male voice either literally or metaphorically. This is a markedly different response from that of women writers who demonstrate in their published output a common preoccupation with their experiences as women.

In her discussion of female American writers, their struggles to be published and heard and the contemporary emergence of some commonality of metaphorical voice, Lois Parkinson Zamora (2005, p.267) suggests that: ‘Voice is still a central metaphor, but its significance is now less personal than political ... contemporary American women writers tend to foreground the politics of cultural identity.’ Further, proposing that this writing intends to ‘speak for cultural communities’, referencing Toni Morison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Silko as authors who do this for their respective communities (African-American; Laguna-Pueblo American; American-Chinese), Zamora insists that work demonstrating a communal voice is written ‘from the perspective of marginalised communities whose histories have been silenced.’ (p.272) This encapsulates precisely the output of the Zimbabwean women writers under discussion here.

The Zimbabwean historian, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2005, p.21) points out that ‘[T]here is no attempt by historians to grapple with the absence of women’s voices in mainstream narratives of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe.’ He goes on to argue that ‘[w]hat can be said with certainty is that when the chorus of African voices was finally heard, it was interpreted as a single group speaking in unison. The male voice was presumed to represent collective African thought.’ No longer though; in Zimbabwe, female writers are publishing work from the margins with a combined voice that has broken the silence. In the following sections, I examine the techniques used by these authors to enable the rendering of a ‘communal voice’ in their work.

Literary portrayals of a ‘communal voice’

**‘We’ narratives**

The use of the first-person plural ‘we’ is not a common perspective in literature although a famous example is William Faulkner’s *A Rose for Emily*. The pronoun immediately establishes questions for the reader: who is included in this ‘we’? Can any reader consider themselves part of the community conjured by its use, or only those who can recognise themselves in the narrative? It is not clear what access any individual reader has to this vague collective. Uri Margolin ascribes the rarity of ‘we’ narratives to the instability of the form:

[T]he exact scope of ‘we’ may remain ambiguous since it may cover most but not all … it may or may not include the speaker and … its reference group may consist of somewhat different subsets … on different occasion. (Margolin, 1996, p.132)

An example in Zimbabwean literature is found in Petina Gappah’s (2016) short story ‘A Kind of Justice’. Pepukai, the story’s protagonist, is a Zimbabwean international human rights lawyer attending a United Nations (UN) court in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of that country’s civil war. Pepukai asks a question half way through the story: ‘What is it about us that these are our lives?’ (p.146) She has been reading the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission detailing the atrocities carried out by Sierra Leonean rebels during the civil war, and Gappah presents Pepukai’s thoughts ranging over Africa and its history of the slave trade, colonialism and its contemporary conflicts. She ‘understand[s]’ that there are complex reasons for the outbreak of the ruthlessness enumerated in the report, but is unconvinced by them, musing: ‘But still. But still, but still.’ (p.146) What Gappah seems to be doing here is asking the question on behalf of all Africans: what is it about *us*? Should over one billion Africans be asked this question? Can a non-African reader engage with the question?

In an essay analysing the use of ‘we’ in fictional narratives, Amit Marcus (2008, p.135), discusses the phenomenon of authors using a single narrator to speak on behalf of others. He is concerned, primarily, with ‘the ideological stance enmeshed’ within this ‘technique of narration.’ The ideology, in this case, means some recognition of shared experiences. In ‘A Kind of Justice’, the ideological stance is partly illustrated through Gappah’s narrative technique of using a sudden shift of point of view. She begins the story using direct thought and a close third-person focalisation, thereby allowing readers to observe Pepukai’s personal point of view: amused and mildly cynical about the UN court process. At the point that Pepukai asks the tortured question, however, the narrator shifts to a first-person plural stance. Readers become part of a collective ‘us’, now implicated as participants. It is a disturbing and controversial change of perspective by Gappah, to imply that Africans as a group, somehow, have a collective responsibility for, and engagement in, the actions perpetrated by a vicious minority.

Lanser (1992) explores this concept through consideration of the ‘we’ narrator in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The use of the first person plural during the novel expands from inclusion of the narrator’s sister, to other children, until, Lanser suggests: ‘at the end of the novel the “we” becomes by implication an entire generation of northern African-Americans.’ (1992, p.259) In much the same way, Gappah uses ‘us’ in her story as a narrative technique to reflect a coherent group consciousness articulated by a single narrator.

Margolin (1996, p.115) describes a narrative ‘we’ as ‘a collectivity defined by a bond of some kind, and engaged in a series of activities.’ She describes a community of voice as having a sense of ‘we-ness and self-awareness as a group’, although individual narrators may not necessarily be engaging in a ‘group-speech act’. She notes that:

Since the group story is told, sometimes in the present tense, by a group member who is not a spokesman [sic], most ‘we’ narratives contain at least a passing reference to this ‘I’ as narrator, and sometimes also as participant in the narrated events. We are thus reminded that while the protagonist of the narrative is a collectivity, the image we get of it is filtered through individual centre(s) of awareness. (p.131)

In writing about and ‘for’ women, what narrator has sufficient authority and permission to speak for an entire community, therefore overlooking individual differences and personal experiences? Lanser (1992, pp.262-63) discusses the danger, inherent in the concept, of subsuming individual experiences into a normative whole: ‘[I]t … risks erasing difference beneath presumptions of similarity.’ But writers do take up this authority, without ‘permission’.

Yvonne Vera (1999, p.2) in her preface to a short-story anthology of work by female African writers, *Opening Spaces*, stresses that ‘Africa is as diverse in its womanhood as it is in its disillusionment.’ Here, like Gappah, she is speaking on behalf of the women of Africa (indeed of Africa itself), at the same time as proclaiming their diversity. Vera goes on to explain that the women authors were selected because ‘[T]hey are joined by land, by the evidence of the eyes, by current struggles, by a hunger for escape’ and further, by knowledge that they ‘ought to write bravely, fiercely’ (p.2). She is calling on a collective identity, a unity in diversity to write thus on behalf of other African women who cannot. The deliberate use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ is a particularly valuable tool in achieving these authors’ aims.

**‘You’ narratives**

Another uncommon choice in narrative fiction is that of the second person, although its experimental and slightly risky form lends itself to the short story form. The use of ‘you’ is a device that immediately seeks to compel the reader to become an active participant in the text, a risk being that the reader will reject it. The imperative yet intimate tone of this ‘you’, implying a certain sense of collusion with the reader might not be comfortable and may be one reason for its infrequent usage as a narrative voice. It does, however, have a singular place in describing a communal experience. In an article discussing second-person fiction, Monika Fludernik (1993, p.222) emphasises that:

Verisimilitude requires that the narrator too, has some (if only tenuous) existential links to the story past. After all, unlike the omniscient authorial narrator of heterodiegetic fiction, this narrator has to have acquired the knowledge of *you’s* story by being part of her world. [Emphasis in original]

The implication is that the narrator and the narratee, the ‘you’ of the story, must have some shared encounters, or at the least knowledge of such. The choice of second-person narration is, above all, a means of sharing a collective experience. It is used to convey the troubles of the story’s nameless wife in the short story ‘In the Heart of the Golden Triangle’ by Gappah (2009):

Her name is Sophia. She is twenty-five years younger than your husband. You know this because you had your husband followed. Not that he even tried to hide it. No man can be expected to be faithful, he has said often enough. It is not nature’s intention. He said the same thing to you when you met in secret away from the eyes of his wife. (p.107)

There is a knowingness inscribed in this story as Gappah, through the use of the second-person pronoun, implies a high level of generalised familiarity with male infidelity and understanding of the situation of her protagonist. Lorrie Moore (1985) addresses exactly the same theme, albeit located in the US and from the perspective of the ‘other woman’, in her story ‘How to Be Another Woman’. Moore alludes to the authority of ‘How To’ instruction manuals in her title, a context underscored as the story is published in a collection named *Self Help*. This authority is made more explicit with imperative sentences seemingly instructing the reader: ‘Meet in expensive beige raincoats … First stand in front of …press your face close to the glass, watch the fake velvet Hummels … Draw a sign of peace. You are waiting for a bus.’ (p.3) In this story, the ‘other woman’ is eventually revealed as just one of many others before her; as in Gappah’s story the wife, is revealed to have once been ‘the other woman’ herself.

NoViolet Bulawayo’s (2011) bleak short story, ‘Snapshots’, also uses second-person narration to display deep knowledge of cultural norms in a particular Zimbabwean domestic situation. It cites a wife’s vulnerability when her husband dies:

Your mother is told to pack her bags and leave the house because your Uncle Mandla, your father’s youngest brother, will be moving in as is the custom. You and Rose (who are staying because who doesn’t know the children belong to the man’s family?) stand by the window, looking and listening as your mother’s fate is being discussed. (p.70)

Bulawayo emphasises the woman’s ‘place’, both physically and metaphorically: ‘You can see your mother, seated there on the floor with her head bent and looking like the setting sun, facing all those men who are seated on chairs and looking important.’ (p.70) It is difficult to read this story without flinching; the immediacy and intimacy of the ‘you’ directly engages the reader in the narrative’s unremittingly cruel events, events which are well known to so many women. I portray a scene in ‘Bountiful’s Story’ where a widow is treated similarly (p.153), a too easy example perhaps of women’s powerlessness in some family situations, but an authentic addition to the reportage of a collective experience nevertheless.

**Sequential narratives**

This is perhaps the most extensive category where a communal voice can be demonstrated. In these, communality is not expressed through narrative devices in the text but instead lies in the accretion of creative output giving voice to a collectivity of experience. Lanser (1992, p.263) terms a collection of voices like this ‘sequential communal narratives’. Sequential’ narratives are those told by individual voices, not purporting to speak directly for ‘us’; they do not use a ‘we’ narrator, nor do they seek to immediately engage a reader through the second person. Their communality is based on each single addition to another like it: the individual voices describing singular events which cumulatively create a panorama of linked experiences and outlooks. The short story is a form eminently suited to this kind of storytelling and perhaps one perfected by women writers. In this Commentary I reference a number of examples of anthologies by women writers in Zimbabwe. Crucially, the voices have a self-awareness of belonging to a group that shares these experiences, together culminating in a believable ‘communal voice’. It is a voice that, in Zimbabwean literature, has created an ideological position, one which exposes a patriarchal hegemony and seeks to change it. To paraphrase Clark’s (1999) assertion in his analysis of Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* (quoted above), the power of a ‘communal voice’ lies in its possibilities to transform the status quo.

For example, every short story in Yvonne Vera’s (1992) collection set in 1970s Rhodesia, *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals*, depicts the gendered positioning of the characters. Vera opens ‘An Unyielding Circle’ (pp.75-78) with what could be labelled a battle cry of male power as a circle of drunken men receive food from a market woman. Vera depicts a collective instruction to her female protagonist from the men: ‘“Knees! Knees! A woman must bend her knees to give food to a man. What kind of woman is this?” The woman, not wanting to argue … does as she is told, ...’ (p.75). The story continues with the women, around the edge of the circle of drinking men, reflecting on their marginalisation, and the ways in which they use hard-won personal skills to negotiate their lives in this oppressive cultural frame. The ‘unyielding circle’ of the story’s title is one of men, an embodiment of the cultural attitudes Vera is illustrating. She portrays the self-knowledge and resignation of the women: ‘“Remember to kneel”, MaDube mocked her gently.’ (p.77) as her friend goes back with more maize cobs for the men. Solidarity, and perhaps a sense of humour shared by the women, is hinted at here by the use of the adverb ‘gently’ as one woman supports another in dealing with the men’s demands. Vera uses direct speech again to let us hear the men giving orders about how the woman should receive payment for the food she has been serving them. Collectively they use the imperative: ‘“Two hands! Two hands! A woman must use two hands to receive anything from a man.” She did not hear this, but later, she would hate the men and herself.’ (p.78) The text does not use grammatical techniques to assert communality; there is no third-person plural pronoun in evidence, instead the reader is immersed in an interpretive unity with the characters. There is a bond between these women, a commonality of the treatment women endure within their society’s patriarchal ‘norms’, and their sufferance of that treatment.

Women’s lack of access to education is one of the ways in which inequality is inscribed, and perpetuated as a patriarchal ‘norm’. In the same collection, ‘Crossing Boundaries’ (pp.1-25), for instance, describes two mothers discussing their own lack of education as they pound maize, waiting for their daughters’ return from school. One tells the other that ‘her father did not allow any of his daughters to go to school’ as he could not see why he should waste money on a girl. (p.5) In ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’, I describe this norm when Steadyfaith tells a researcher about her education in contrast to her brothers’: ‘Those boys all went to school and I did not because my father decided that only the boys should go to school and the girl should not.’ (p.159) In her novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Dangarembga introduces the theme of female oppression in the opening two chapters through the choice made by the head of the family, the father, to educate his son in preference to his daughter (Tambu) as the family cannot afford to pay for education for both of them. Despite all advice from her mother to accept the situation, Tambu decides to grow maize to sell to raise money for her own fees: ‘I think my mother admired my tenacity, and felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it.’ (p.20) The implication here is that her mother knows about being disappointed as a woman. Tambu talks to her brother about her exclusion from school, and her brother’s response continues a major theme of the novel: ‘He hesitated and then shrugged. “It’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl.”’ (p.21) At the time of its publication, *Nervous Conditions* was considered ground-breaking in its exposure of normalised patriarchal attitudes. The novel reflected the socio-cultural reality of when it was written, more than thirty years ago, not long after Independence when the new government of Zimbabwe signed all the international protocols of women’s equality. We might reasonably expect, then, for there to have been some fairly radical changes in Zimbabwean society thirty-six years on, ensuring better treatment of women. Whilst this is perhaps the case in some urban, educated circles, there have not been such positive effects for the great mass of women living in rural communities.

**A phonocentric novel: Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue* (1996)**

Yvonne Vera’s novel *Under the Tongue*, as with all her work, can be included in the previous section as a contribution to the series of sequential narratives from which a communal voice of women emerges. For my purpose here, however, the significance of this novel is in Vera’s use of particular stylistic techniques, which create what Kizito Z. Muchemwa (2002, p.3) terms ‘reconstructed orature’. In my analysis of the novel, I extend Muchemwa’s concept further, arguing that Vera’s work is ‘phonocentric’, a term which, in literature, has the paradoxical meaning of privileging speech over writing (Cuddon 2012). Vera emphasises orality by using devices to portray speech that are normally avoided by writers: repetition, loose structure, uncorrected register, and verbatim transcriptions. The text progresses in loops and circles of orally re-constructed memory as its child protagonist forgets and remembers her ordeal of being raped by her father. Instead of representing speech by using typical literary techniques of concision, Vera wants us to *hear* the girl in all of her fear, confusion and despair. It is this style that makes the novel an especially powerful addition to the communal voice of Zimbabwean women.

Vera is an internationally recognised writer, winning the Commonwealth Writers’ prize in 1997 for *Under the Tongue*. She was born in 1964, growing up therefore during the Rhodesian civil war of the 1970s, and became an adult after Independence in 1980.She studied for her PhD in English Literature at Toronto University in the early 1990s, and died all too early, aged forty-one in 2005. She wrote one short story collection, *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* (1992) and five novels, of which *Under the Tongue* was her third.

In her works, Vera presents content which engages with cultural circumstances and social change through representations of disturbance and upheaval, often in the tightly circumscribed spaces of rural homes where male power is traditionally unchallenged, and always represents the final authority in the familial and community context. Vera wrote as a woman, about Zimbabwean women. In their introductory remarks to a collection of essays on her work, Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (2012, p.xxiii) suggest that ‘Vera’s texts increasingly appeared to be articulating women’s search for autonomy and a public voice both written and spoken.’ Her oeuvre is an unremitting dissection of female expectations, opportunities and constraints, in which she addresses the effects of extreme examples of traumatic male violence, including rape, incest and abortion.

She appeared on the literary scene at a time in the 1980s and early 90s when, as Boehmer (2005b, p.217) describes it, the gendered landscape of male postcolonial writing began to alter, and ‘for a woman to tell her own story was to call into being an image of autonomous selfhood.’ South African women in particular began to write their own histories of the anti-apartheid struggle and Vera emerged in a literary environment expanding with women’s voices. Nevertheless, a distinction needs to be made here, between the author and her characters. Vera wrote from a relatively privileged, educated and professional position, able to construct personal notions of ‘selfhood’ through the act of writing fiction. By contrast, her female characters do not embody an iconic coming-of-age vision of female empowerment, but instead the continued repression and entrapment of women in the cultural expectations of the patriarchal system endemic in Zimbabwe. Notwithstanding the disparity between the lived situation of Vera and her characters, Elika Ortega-Guzman (2007, p.106) argues that:

She tells the forgotten stories of women who have been left behind. Vera’s aim seems to be to speak about the abuse that women have suffered over the years, and which has been silenced. It is significant that she gives each one of her female protagonists a voice to tell her own story, and thus gives them the possibility of representing themselves.

And through these voices, Vera directly confronts the patriarchal framework of the society in which she lived; a society in which violence has been normalised as a lever to control and silence women, where trauma, though not much discussed as such in the national debate, haunts abused women. This is the silence that Vera’s work breaks. It is for this reason that Boehmer (2005b, p.217) goes on to say that Vera’s work is liberating, a means of breaking through the silencing of voice: ‘The written word, as the Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera urges, opens a terrain of relatively free expression to women, into which taboos and secrets may be released.’ *Under the Tongue* enters the discourse to explore this aspect of women’s lives, to give voice to the voiceless and to bring the darkest realities of women’s lives out into the open.

***Under the Tongue***

Dodgson-Katiyo (2003, pp.86-87) suggests that Vera: ‘sees women as transgressive and this transgression is represented in a discourse which seems always to be written on the female body.’ *Under the Tongue*, in which Zhizha, the protagonist, is raped by her father, is exemplary in this respect. An underlying paradox drives this novel, in that the ‘voice’ of the child narrator is silent, so that the event is represented as ‘unspeakable’. A greatly intriguing feature of the narrative is the means by which, technically, Vera manages to ‘oralise’ convincingly Zhizha’s thoughts and thus give readers access to her story. The novel’s chapters alternate between Zhizha’s free direct thoughts which describe her response to the abuse, and third-person chapters describing her parents’ personal history. This structure means that, in the first-person sections, the reader is enclosed in the claustrophobia of the child’s tormented mind as she lies in the restricted physical space of her grandmother’s hut. In the shorter third-person chapters, the narrative opens out into the wider spaces of Zimbabwean society as her parents’ early lives are described. The novel pivots therefore between the past, depicting possibilities and anticipation of the future by Zhizha’s parents’ younger selves, and the present, where the oppressive interior of the hut is the backdrop to a devastating event.

Vera uses a poetic, rather opaque, style to enable her traumatised narrator to express herself. Before we understand the full meanings of the metaphors and symbols, readers appreciate that *something* bad has happened. The opening sentence introduces the metaphor of the tongue which ‘no longer lives, no longer weeps’ (Vera 1996, p.121), describing a devastating loss of voice. We meet a character who is so traumatised by an unnamed event that she cannot speak or weep, and has sunk into a death-like state. Her tongue is ‘buried beneath rock’ (p.121), a powerful image of coercively demanded silence. Martina Kopf (2005, p.244) highlights the way in which trauma resists, even destroys, language:

One of the main characteristics of trauma is that it resists narrative representation, revealing itself more in a language of symptoms than in a language of words and sentences. Speaking about trauma, we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of speaking about the unspeakable looking for words to describe what originally surpassed the signifying power of words.

But two kinds of silence are described in the novel. One is the traumatic silence that has descended on Zhizha as a result of the rape, and which we might view as a not uncommon response to trauma. The second is a more normative silence enforced on women generally, located within the specific cultural context of Zimbabwe. In a broader interpretation, therefore, the rock symbolises the Zimbabwean land, that is, the country itself and those cultural institutions which demand silence from women. Vera’s text thus explores male power and the imposition of silence on women more generally through depiction of a single harrowing incident within a close-knit, rural family.

Zhizha’s trauma and her own reaction to it are described by Vera in a narrative style that can leave the reader confused. We do not know if the events are real or imagined; they are not told in a chronological order; no geographic or spatial location is offered. The narrator’s voice at the opening of the novel is incoherent, rendered more disorienting by shifts in temporality. At the beginning we are with the narrator and her grandmother in an unspecified location; later, we are with Zhizha and her father. Initially, it is not clear if the latter scene takes place before or after the opening scene; readers must construct the temporal sequence themselves. At this early point in the novel, we do not know why the girl cannot speak but we know that she is afraid and that her grandmother is central to her recovery: ‘I listen. A murmur grows into my awakening, from Grandmother. She wipes her forehead with her hand and her voice embraces all my fear.’ (Vera 1996, p.121) A few paragraphs on, and we are now with Zhizha and her father; we do not know if her thoughts are a dream, a hallucination or a memory:

Father holds my breathing in his palm. His palm is wide and widening, grooved and wet. Then he lifts a heavy arm and touches the edge of the moon, in my sleep. I shout through fingers so strong, so hard, his fingers saying in their buried touch, Zhizha…Zhizha.

A hidden visit.

…A shadow grows from the moon. The shadow lifts me from the ground. I wait beneath a fervent sky. The shadow of the moon has turned bright with the serenity of death. The moon is wounded by the darkness. (p.124)

What is the reader to understand from passages like these? It is not immediately clear from this monologue that Zhizha’s father has raped her. Is she describing a dream? Is the moon symbolic of the feminine? Is the shadow that lifts Zhizha from the ground her grandmother come to save her? There is no explanation from the author. Only later in the novel, when the rape has been revealed, might we come back to this section, and understand that her father’s voice, repeating her name, entering her consciousness, is a metaphor for the rape. Meg Samuelson (2002, p.95) asserts that the rape scenarios in Vera’s work(s) function as metaphors for women’s triple victimization: within colonial structures; within the patriarchy of the traditional society; and latterly through the nationalist discourse which lionizes the role of men as the country’s liberating saviours. ‘While rape as metaphor continues the critique of colonialism and nationalism,’ she suggests that *‘Under the Tongue* goes further to offer a sustained analysis of women’s “rape” by culture.’

Vera’s techniques, such as the charged interiority of the monologue, deliver a modernist text which is not immediately accessible. The novel is not an easy read, however, somewhat paradoxically given the difficulty of her style, critics have described Vera’s writing as attempting to give a voice to women by using oral expressions and styles, albeit in a written text. Muchemwa (2002, pp.3-5) describes her style as ‘an amalgam of “lyrical method”, post-modern narrative techniques and reconstructed orature’. He argues that Vera, although using the written word, uses an emphasis on speech in her work specifically to allow women a voice:

The phonocentrism of the language of the narrators and characters in her fiction is an attempt to recover the repressed voice of women in Zimbabwe culture. Zimbabwean orature, traditional and modern … is patriarchal. The language is sexist and women are denied the power of agency; they are perceived as passive recipients of men’s actions. (Muchemwa, 2002, p.5)

But how, practically – technically – speaking, can the written word be phonocentric? To my mind, Muchemwa’s ‘phonocentrism’ is produced by the use of oral techniques within a written form, such as the use of rhythm and patterns, repetition and a certain kind of metric familiarity through the use of short sentences. These techniques are all present in *Under the Tongue*, and, in deploying these devices, Vera seems to be drawing on oral traditions of praise poems, folk tales round the fire, burial chants, songs and sermons, and so on. In this way, she has created Muchemwa’s ‘reconstituted orature’.

*Under the Tongue*’s integral phonocentrism is illustrated particularly well in the passage in which Zhizha is thinking about her mother, Runyararo, who has been arrested for killing her rapist father:

The name falls and follows Grandmother to the ground and lies still. Runyararo…I do not understand why the name has followed Grandmother like that, followed us. I look for the name on the ground but I cannot move my arms. I cannot find the name with my arms. I do not move. The name lies still on my lips, watered with tears.

Runyararo…I carry the name in my mouth once more. It falls again. Runyararo…I search the ground through my tears. Runyararo…I see Grandmother. Runyararo…She closes her eyes again and sleeps. Her sleep has taken her and hidden her far where I cannot find her. I am afraid. I stand very far from Grandmother. I stand outside Grandmother, outside myself. I see mother. My mother, not me. My mother. Runyararo. (Vera 1996, pp.134-35)

The passage continues with its remorseless repetitions of the mother’s name, Runyararo, and the repeated verbs: ‘follow’, ‘stand’, ‘cannot move’, ‘cannot find’, ‘do not move’. Reading passages like this is mesmerising; undisturbed by speech or authorial intervention, we are privy to the raw expression of a narrator’s imaginings. One of the most powerful effects of this interiorised voice is that, although it can be read as an intensely private narrative, it is also addressing concerns of a wider community and stands as testimony of these collective preoccupations. Ortega-Guzman (2007, p.107) proposes that Vera’s repetition of motifs of ‘voice, tongue, mouth and river’ across the characters of the narrator, her mother and grandmother, establishes a conceptual chain that unites the three women. This does not suggest a single image of Zimbabwean womanhood but a historically situated collectivity of abused, silenced women.’ Vera is breaking this silence in her work and contributing to the communal narrative described in preceding sections by the conscious and sustained use of phonocentric techniques.

Nevertheless, embedding oral techniques in a literary text is not a simple undertaking, nor a straightforward means of giving voice to the otherwise silenced. Vera’s style does not encourage any simple understanding of the voice. The trope on which the novel is built is that of female silence and further, she employs a double paradox: on the one hand, she is reproducing language to allow a female voice to speak the unspeakable; on the other hand, the voice is, in fact, mute in the diegesis. Zhizha is not speaking aloud, her *thoughts* have been oralised and it is only through access to these thoughts that the reader gains access to her voice. Jessica Murray describes the contradiction of needing language to make sense of a traumatic event.

The obstacles Zhizha is facing in her attempt to articulate her trauma are myriad. [But] language tends to crumble when confronted with the task of articulating trauma … At the moment when language seems to be at its most inadequate, it is also saddled with its greatest responsibility. (Murray, 2009, p.9)

However, Vera’s use of interior monologue, which gives us access to the child’s thoughts, eliminates the need for coherent articulation to describe the traumatic events. Her technique, of what might be described as ‘managed incoherence’*,* is to immerse the reader in the confusion of the intense, traumatic reactions of the child. Discussing women’s literature in the North American context, Zamora (2005, p.289) observes that:

Contemporary women writers, and more particularly women writing in the context of a cultural minority, are acutely aware of what is hidden, deferred and repressed, and they dramatize their awareness metaphorically on the printed page by engaging oral forms of expression, both metaphorically and stylistically.

The same awareness is evident in Vera’s work, and more generally in texts by Zimbabwean women authors.

As the narrative progresses in *Under the Tongue*, we learn more about the cultural situation in which it takes place. Readers become aware that the rock lying heavily under Zhizha’s tongue not only symbolises the physical trauma of the rape, but also represents the cultural institutions of rural Zimbabwe which require silence from women. Obioma Nnaemeka (1994, p.141), in her essay ‘From Orality to Writing’, argues that: ‘To understand why and how African women write what they write, we must examine the specific location in which they are situated.’ Vera’s novel is located deep within the patriarchal norms of rural Zimbabwe, in therefore a geographical and socio-cultural situation which is central to the political implications of the text. This location is demonstrated in a scene where Zhizha’s grandmother pleads with her husband to talk about the violation of their granddaughter:

Grandmother pleads to be heard. I have not spoken she cries … You have said that a woman cannot speak. I have asked, is it well if I speak the heaviness on my shoulders? I have asked if my woman’s voice can be heard, small as it is, is it not your voice too, does my voice not belong to you as I do? …

Grandmother kneels, hands cupped, arms raised, head bowed, eyes closed, shoulders limp … But grandfather says something about my mother in prison, and Grandmother turns away. (Vera 1996, pp.165-66)

Vera allows the grandmother some sophistry in this passage: if I belong to you then so does my voice and as it is therefore really *your* voice, it must be heard. Even so, the ploy does not work; she is turned away, unheard. The woman is portrayed in this scene as entirely submissive, kneeling in front of her husband, pleading to be allowed to speak to him. Vera shows her defeated by the cultural norm that she can speak only if her husband allows it. Even in circumstances that utterly destabilise the family, his will as a male dominates any other. And yet the novel, through the ‘voice’ of the silent child, is an authoritative addition to the communal voice of Zimbabwean women and, taken in its totality, *Under the Tongue* is a stylish example of an author taking on responsibility to speak for voiceless women.

My collection adds to these voices as some of my female characters are located on those margins identified by Zamora (2005, p.272), where subaltern women are confronted with situations of oppression. I portray them demonstrating agency and response: Steadyfaith lives an independent life after murdering her rapist father and violent husband; Prisca leads her parents to a new, independent life on their own piece of re-possessed white farmland; even Bountiful, my most silenced protagonist, speaks for herself at the end of her story. These characters carry a contribution to the communal voice identified in this chapter.

In chapter four I describe my approaches to revision and the techniques I used to refine my stories.

Chapter Four - Revising the Stories

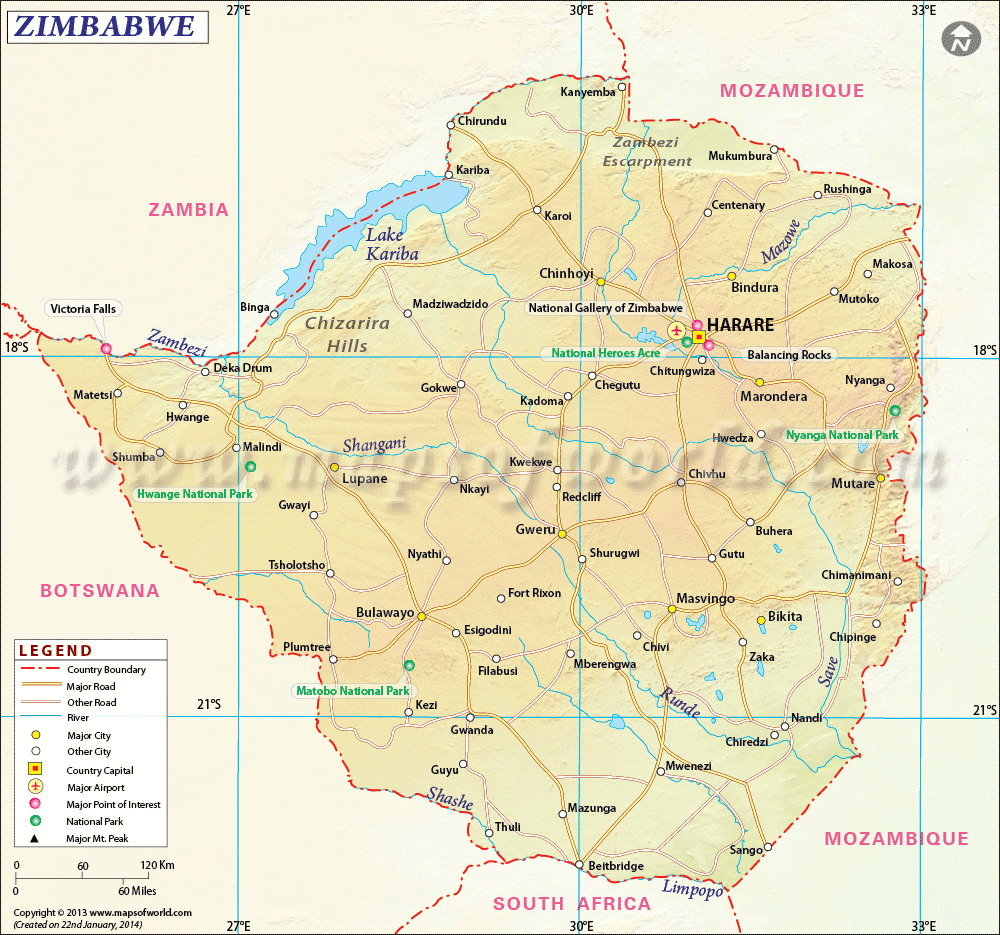
To speak at all carries immeasurable risk. To counter the language of another with a language of one’s own is an act of temerity. To speak in a divided society, to describe events that society might prefer to put to rest, is terrifying. (Madeleine Thien 2014, p.6)

Story by story I constantly revised my narrative voices, refining them to tell their tales with as much believability as I could create. Revising other aspects of the collection as a whole drove me into a deeper consideration of the stylistic techniques I had used. I consulted Susan Bell’s checklists (2008, p.47) for Macro and Micro levels of editing where she suggests paying attention to, for example, Intention, Structure, Foreshadowing (macro-view); Language, Repetition, Redundancy (micro-view). In the end, as well as paying attention to Bell, I found my technical revisions fell into five categories: 1. the paratext; 2. the order of the stories in the collection; 3. narrative voice; 4. narrative progression within each diegesis; and 5. the addition of authenticating details to reinforce the contextual location. In the sections below I describe selected instances of my revision process in each of these categories.

The Paratext

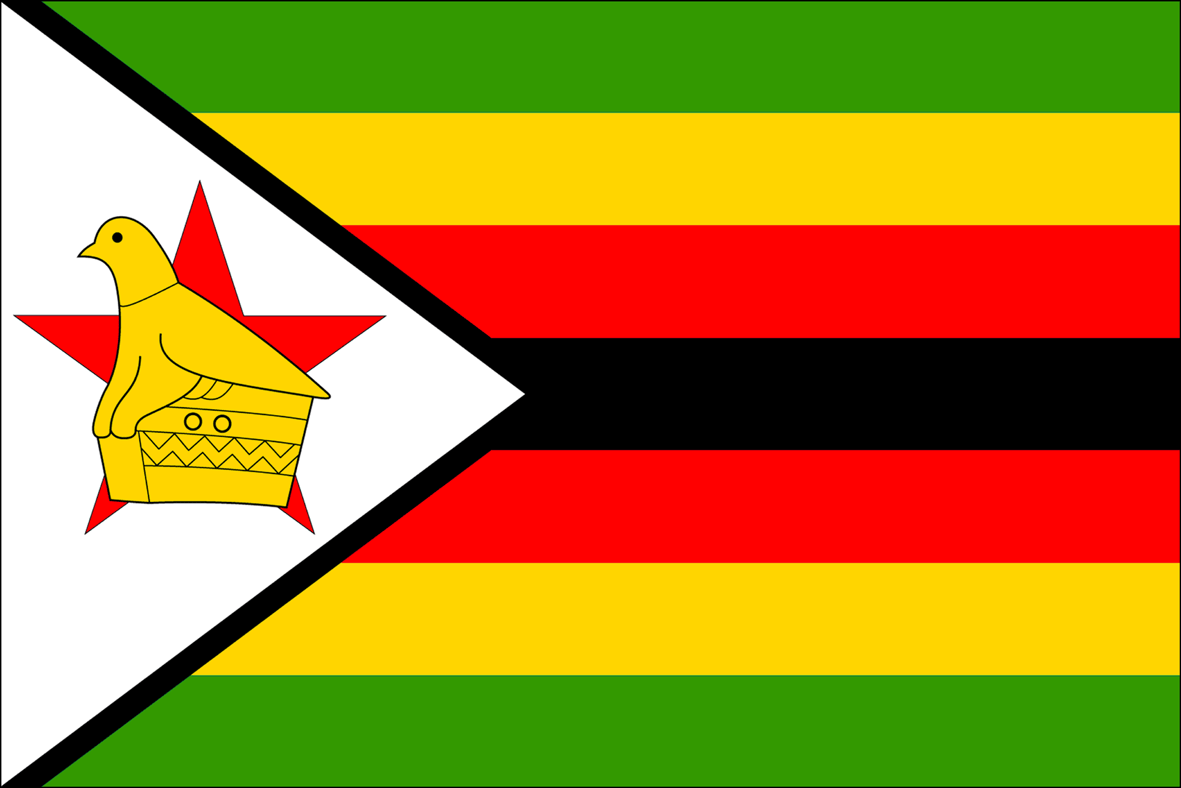
The impressions readers experience when first confronted by a text – the appearance, titles, weight – signal something about it that will influence their expectations of the reading experience. Gerald Genette (1997, p.1) terms these paratext, by which he includes ‘the author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations’, explaining that they surround and extend the text, ‘in order to *present* it, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form … of a book.’ In the light of the ‘risks’ referred to by Thien at the head of this chapter, I paid particular attention to Genette’s assertions in making decisions about the extra-textual aspects of *Zimbabwe Ruins*, especially since he emphasises that even the readers’ prior knowledge of the context of the work may be labelled as part of its paratext. His example is the common knowledge of Proust’s part-Jewish ancestry and homosexuality as ‘paratext to the pages of *Remembrance of Things Past* that deal with these two subjects.’ His position is that people who have this knowledge ‘read Proust’s work differently from people who do not.’ (p.8) I can expect that some readers of my stories will have paratextual ‘common knowledge’, of Zimbabwe and others will not and will therefore read the stories differently. In my PhD project, this Commentary itself is paratext to *Zimbabwe Ruins*.

I decided to insert a map of the country and a picture of the Zimbabwean flag. They are intended to provide immediate reference points providing both cognitive and emotional signals to the nature of the text.



Land is an existential issue in the country, fought over from pre-colonial times, its cultural as well as its material importance intensifying after the white settlers institutionalised a racially-based land policy dispossessing the indigenous population of vast tracts of the best agricultural land at the beginning of the twentieth century. My collection was generated from this philosophical understanding of the pull of the land, felt both by the black population and the white farmers. The map is an obvious paratextual element inserted into the collection to encourage what Genette terms ‘a more pertinent reading of it.’ (1979, p.2) Some readers may not know where Zimbabwe is, what it looks like – its shape and geography, which countries are its neighbours. The stories are set in real places which are referred to throughout the text and I thought readers may derive extra pleasure from being able to locate them. All the stories are geographically specific: Sybil flees from Gweru to Harare in ‘The Friends’; Steadyfaith walked over the Eastern Highlands to join the Comrades in the military training camps in Mozambique; Laura has her father murdered in the Zambezi River near Victoria Falls in ‘The Sunset Cruise’; the couple thrown out of their cottage in ‘The Piano Lesson’ lived in Nyanga and move to an old age home in Mutare.

The flag, as are all national flags, is hugely symbolic.



The gold stripes represent the mineral wealth of the country; the red for the blood of the various wars fought to liberate it; the black centre stripe represents the majority African population, and the green outside stripes the rural areas where most people live and where agricultural endeavour is the chief support of individuals and of the country. My stories take place mostly in these green stripes. The Zimbabwe Bird was found in the historical site of Great Zimbabwe and is the country’s symbol: a huge bronze reproduction sits outside the country’s Reserve Bank in central Harare. The red star behind the Bird represents the country’s early socialist aspirations and in my stories characters use the moniker ‘Comrade’ in some situations. It was in common use in the country throughout the eighties and nineties, sometimes sarcastically. Readers might be familiar with the flag from the country’s recent prominence in world news.

The next paratextual aspect I considered were the titles of both the collection and the individual stories. The choice of a title for the collection was a concern. I started with *African Affairs* but decided it was too generic and I thought I could use this instead for a different collection I have started writing, Although I have some concern that *Zimbabwe Ruins* could signal another addition to both black and white authored misery literature about the travails of contemporary Zimbabwe, it will carry some resonance with readers familiar with the country. ‘Great Zimbabwe’ is a UNESCO World Heritage site located in southern Zimbabwe, extending over almost 2000 acres. Prior to this designation the site was named ‘The Zimbabwe Ruins’ by the early Rhodesian curators. It is the stone remains of a settlement built between 1100 and 1450AD and now widely understood to have been at the centre of a thriving trading society. The word Zimbabwe means ‘house of stone’ in the Shona language but the early (white) archaeologists who explored it could not envisage the complex stone settlement being built by black Africans. When I first visited in the late 1960s, the received wisdom was that the Chinese, the Phoenicians, or perhaps Portuguese had built the complex, and a number of historical theories were created to correlate with the views of the racist state towards Africans as a culturally impoverished and intellectually limited Other. The first story in my collection, echoing its title, is ‘The Zimbabwe Ruins’*,* set in 1969, when this was the monument’s official name. I introduce the theme of land and its disputed ownership through a young character’s puzzled response to the contemporary explanations for the settlement’s creation. This story is meant to set the scene for the collection, not only in terms of the physical landscape, but also of the cultural and racial disputes found in the later stories. Although technically Great Zimbabwe is a historical monument, like Dover Castle for example, culturally it is also a sacred place and there remain various disputes around its current meaning and management, though not around its African provenance. Works such as those of Joost Fontein (2009) *The Silence of Great Zimbabwe: Contested Landscapes and the Power of Heritage*; and Webber Ndoro (2001) *The Preservation of Great Zimbabwe: Your Monument our Shrine,* describe the dilemmas involved. Using the old nomenclature for my title therefore, is meant to allude to the richness of a historical past, the old arguments about its creation and new ones about its management and future, and perhaps hint at the long arc of history. These meanings become clearer as the story unfolds, so the title is meant to work for different levels of familiarity among readers. At the same time, by omitting the definite article in the title of the collection itself, *Zimbabwe Ruins*, I mean to convey something about the disillusion and hardships being experienced in contemporary Zimbabwe, so playing on the two meanings of ‘ruins’.

The titles I created for the sixteen individual stories surprised me when I considered them as a group; of the sixteen, nine begin with the definite article. It looked repetitive, perhaps not inspiring, and I considered changing them. Should I revise them to make them more enticing? On reflection I decided I must have chosen this particular determiner, perhaps subliminally, to suggest the specificity of the events in the story. For each title, it prefaces a particular noun or noun phrase – The: Piano Lesson; Sunset Cruise; Good Farmer; Soldier’s Wife; Herd; Friends, Researcher. I explained in chapter one that my intention in writing the stories was to explore individual encounters behind sensationalist headlines, to scrutinise the uniqueness of a single event and explore how different characters react in different circumstances. In the end I decided to keep the titles with their definite article to express the distinctiveness of each experience and the characters involved. In his collection *Difficult Loves* (1984), Italo Calvino has a section comprising eight ‘Stories of Love and Loneliness’, all of which are given the repetitive title ‘The Adventure of …’ perhaps with the same intention.

Of the other seven stories, three are labelled as miniature memoirs: Steadyfaith’s, Bountiful’s and Prisca’s stories; ‘Dear Mother’ suggests its epistolary nature. The story title I did consider changing was ‘Shades of Deficit’. It was suggested to me that its connotations are too edgy, alluding too much to the infamous ‘shades of grey’. But in the end I kept it because it was a phrase a Zimbabwean colleague used, an Africa specialist in the World Bank, to describe the relativity of differential economic circumstances. I decided it not only kept this meaning in the context of a conversation in the story but also signalled the emotional colouring of the affair and its effects on my protagonist.

Arranging the stories in a chosen order

Initially I expected arranging the stories would be a straightforward exercise but on entering the task, I discovered it was not without challenges. I thought about the deliberate impression I wanted to make on the reader with the collection and if the sequence of the stories would make any difference to this. I definitely wanted to locate the stories within the arc of Zimbabwe’s history and to explore it with the reader. Which should be the first? The last? Did it matter?

I discovered there is a debate about the language used to describe a short story collection: is it a sequence or a cycle? Suzanne Ferguson (2003) considers the argument in some detail. She explores what common characteristics collections as diverse as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Dubliners* may have, what makes them a cycle or a sequence and if the distinctions between them generate different genres of short story collections. Gerald Kennedy (1995, p.viii) describes a short-story sequence as a collection of stories that are ‘linked by common ideas, problems, or themes.’ This is certainly true for *Zimbabwe Ruins*.

Forrest Ingram (1967, p.19) describes a cycle in terms of ‘a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of the component parts’ and Michael Greaney (2011, p.28) also declared that the reader’s experience is ‘intensified when the stories appear as part of an interrelated sequence’. Whether cycle or sequence this notion of a successive experience resonated with me as I began to arrange the stories, helping me to answer my original question: it did it matter which came first, next or last. For example, in ‘The Friends’, land reform events are only tangential to the story and, if it was not placed within the collection, might not draw a reader’s attention as being of any significance. Placed inside this collection however, it is possible to see the character, Sybil, taking action to leave her husband partly because of her fear of the general unrest across the country, which the reader will have experienced in other stories and can draw from to understand her. Similarly in ‘Shades of Deficit’, Izzy’s ex-lover, Nat, tells her he has been allocated a re-possessed farm within a story whose focus is their abandoned love affair and his new family, so the reference to the land is, again, tangential. Previously we read about Nat, his family and the farm in ‘What Goes Round’ and so this information in ‘Shades of Deficit’ carries greater resonance. The two stories can stand on their own but the reader learns more about the two characters and the country having read both. Ingram (1967, p.19) emphasises that his definition be applied to collections where ‘the story-groups have been given an order, a pattern, by their author’, as distinct, for example, from when a publisher might produce a posthumous collection from single stories published elsewhere in journals and so on. At this point in my reading on the issue I recognised a degree of overlap in the definitions and thought I could classify *Zimbabwe Ruins* as either a sequence or a cycle based on Greaney’s and Ingram’s criteria. The formal terminology however, in the end, did not seem to be a critical issue in relation to my creative endeavour.

With this discussion in mind I arranged my collection within a structure such that it moves through an obvious time frame, with a jump of thirty years from the opening story, ‘The Zimbabwe Ruins’, set in 1969, to the rest which are located chronologically in the decade starting around 2000. A further factor in ordering the stories was that I have some recurring characters, Izzy most frequently, but also others, which made it natural that their temporal story line should be coherent. A few of the stories do not rely on any sequentiality to define their place and so I placed them between these others. This applied to: ‘The Herd’, ‘The Friends’, ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’ and ‘The Sunset Cruise’; all the others required an ordering in regard to at least one other story to enable some degree of Ingram’s (1967, p.19) ‘successive experience’ to occur.

As selecting the first story was an important structural decision, so was my choice of a final story. I first decided on ‘The Researcher’ to give an uneasy sense of closure to the collection. It is the fourth story in which the character Izzy is featured: she opens the collection in 1969 and I had her ending it in the 2000s, a different person to the young, fairly naïve character who scrambled around the hillside on Great Zimbabwe, taking on the white guide, confident in herself as a young Brit living in the questioning and ideologically driven times of the late 1960s. By the end of the book, she, like Zimbabwe, has been through hope and disappointments and her final story ends in ambiguity and some disappointment. Perhaps the reader, who may have aligned with this character, is also left feeling disappointed at the decisions I show Izzy making, and its unresolved ending. An allegory perhaps, of Zimbabwe’s story to that point. However, further thought, and new data in Scoones’ latest book (2018, pp.72-91), prompted me to change my mind, and write to end the collection with a new story. The new story has a more hopeful and positive outlook carried by a young Zimbabwean woman; Prisca breaks the rules in her story and illustrates the possibilities of a more optimistic future for the country and its women folk.

Narrative Voice

Genette (1980, p.213) describes ‘voice’ in a narrative discourse as ‘the person (the same or another) who reports [the action], and, if need be, all those people who participate, even though passively, in this narrating activity.’ As narrative voice defined this way carries such critical elements of the plotting, such as tone, distance and focalisation I therefore scrutinised my narrators in some detail to examine if the effects I was trying to create were successful. This is a more precise, technical definition of voice than the ideologically freighted metaphorical aspects of voice I discuss in chapter three above.

From the beginning, I eschewed the use of an overt, authorial voice and deliberately tried to set my characters loose to tell their tales. However, clearly, I remain the implied author that Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002, p.185) describes as ‘the governing consciousness of the work as a whole’. In only three stories have I used an autodiegetic narrator: ‘Dear Mother’, ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’ and ‘The Researcher’. In the rest, events and emotions are described by a covert, heterodiegetic narrator with character focalisation. The line between this non-participating narrator and my characters is indistinct, making it difficult to define exactly where the narration is coming from. Paul Simpson (2014a, p.28) asserts that in using a third-person structure there are two options open to an author: ‘either align the modality with the external narrator or locate it in the viewpoint of the character-reflector’. I have chosen the latter for the most part, intending to deliberately position the reader inside the mind of a single character. It is a technique that can have the effect of aligning the readers’ loyalty with the character’s point of view, manipulating the reader almost, to develop a psychological affinity with the focaliser as famously outlined by Wayne C. Booth (1983) in *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Inherent in the use of this perspective is a degree of subjectivity and although I have deliberately used the technique to create this effect, I have also, in some places, constructed the story so that a careful reader might pull back from this affinity and wonder, Can that be right? Is that the right decision after all? Bloom (p.240) describes the readers’ dilemma in responding to external third person narrative voices which align to a dubious protagonist as: ‘[T]ension between the compassionate effect of intimacy with a narrator or reflector and the distancing effect of characteristics we deplore.’ This reflection encouraged me to revisit three stories which feature Izzy to examine further how I have presented her voice in each one.

As it is a voice that came most easily to me, it might have seemed an obvious choice to use a first person narrator for the opening story, ‘The Zimbabwe Ruins’, where she is the main character experiencing Rhodesia for the first time. Instead I wanted the freedom to expand from the limitations of first person narration. I used the close third person and passages of free indirect thought, which I felt allowed me to create a greater intimacy with her in some passages and allow me to slip easily between external descriptions of scenes and into her internal reflections.

In ‘Shades of Deficit’, the reader meets an older Izzy and again I use a close third-person focalisation to explore her emotions as she meets her ex-lover unexpectedly. The story describes some moments in a longer love story between Izzy and Nat, opening in medias res with Izzy’s perspective from the first sentence of free indirect thought:

‘Isobel?’

God, that voice. Only he ever used her full name. Her stomach contracted, forcefully, instantly unbalancing her. ... The eyes. (p.41)

The passage ends with those two words of direct thought: ‘The eyes’ and then the history of the affair is then seen through Izzy’s perspective only through analeptic passages as she and her ex-lover move through the airport and through these passages Nat’s revelation about his new marriage at the end of the story is given a context. The immediate effect of this focalisation is for readers to sympathise with Izzy, perhaps observing Nat’s new marriage as a betrayal of their earlier love.

By the time she appears again in the ‘The Researcher’, Izzy has grown up somewhat and now I used her first person voice in the immediacy of the historic present tense. The land reform by now is at least nine years old and Izzy is part of a programme of empirical research into its effect. I wanted to achieve a different sense of her from her appearances in the other stories. In this story she is older, not exactly cynical, but has a ‘knowingness’ about her; knowledgeable, but perhaps not very wise. The first scene is set not only to establish a physical place but to give an immediate sense of this Izzy:

I always take a deep breath before taking myself up those few steps up from the lobby into the bar. In the lobby you are simply a guest and in a hotel as up-market as this one, you expect, and receive, every courtesy, but once over that threshold, your gender becomes the most significant aspect of your being. Why is it Zimbabwe can make you feel like a woman of loose morals in 2016 for Christ’s sake, for going into a bar on your own? (p.129)

This passage is highly anticipatory: the ending of the story is intended to leave the reader wondering about Izzy’s decisions and her summing up of its events. ‘Loose morals’ is an outdated phrase, used here to highlight a general sense of Zimbabwean attitudes towards unmarried women out and about on their own, but also to signal that there may be room to discuss the ambiguity of Izzy’s behaviour as the story continues. She is not exactly an unreliable narrator, or only in the sense that all first person narrators are subjective and particular, but one whose conclusions the reader is encouraged to question. After a passage where Izzy has been indicating some interest in Chris, a white farmer she meets in a bar, the reader learns that she has a boyfriend. Initially, the text does not directly reveal that he is black. In the context of Zimbabwe, however, adding a racial element to a story that includes sexual jealousy is a potentially explosive mixture and a knowing reader will pick that up. To create the drama of the scene where John arrives at the farm and attacks the farmer, Chris, I use free direct discourse - untagged as it is obvious who is speaking:

We face each other. Both gasping for breath. Chris is on the floor between us. We don’t even know if he’s breathing.

‘What are you doing?

‘What?’

‘Have you gone mad?’

‘You come out here.’

‘So?’

‘Behind my back!’ (p.141)

Reflecting on writing this scene I realised I had constructed what Simpson (2014b, pp.6-7) terms narrative urgency. He observes that the ‘removal of reporting clauses, […] blocks the possibility for any narrative commentary on the delivery of the speech or thought act,’ suggesting that narrative urgency is also communicated by: ‘a compositional shift to one-clause structures that are normally presented by stand-alone orthographic sentences or as clusters.’ I did not want Izzy mediating the whole of this scene and using this method created a more objective overview of the events with greater room for interpretation than might be reproduced through her focalisation only. I therefore revised the original dialogue, making the utterances even shorter, using simple, one clause sentences. I was better pleased with the way the row exploded between them using this stylistic change.

In the next scene, when the two characters are continuing the row, rather than reproduce what would necessarily have to be a very long passage of dialogue with argument and counter argument, I move the story forward towards its conclusion, now using free indirect speech to give a flavour of the argument and not the full content:

I try to feel I still have a good case against John: I’m outraged, and speak like a Jane Austen character – How dare you? How could you? What were you thinking of?

He’s more outraged, and angrier – Going to the home of another man, alone, what else could that mean? (p.142)

I use dashes to give a sense of the fragmented nature of the row, and to suggest there is more not being reported. But by using this technique here, I keep Izzy’s view central to the story and leave unresolved all the outcomes: whether Chris will continue the uneasy re-possession of his farm; Izzy’s acceptance of John’s violent behaviour; John’s eventual decision about being in a relationship with her if he feels he cannot trust her. In a final sentence of direct thought Izzy sums up the events: ‘It serves me right – you can’t be on two sides in this country: you’re on one side or the other and the skin you’re in makes sure of that.’ (p.143) This may seem a satisfactory and pithy summary of the story at a first reading, and an easy allegory for race relations in the country generally, but the reader might be prompted here into questioning this conclusion. In the context does it make any sense? Was the fight in fact motivated by racial antagonism? By John’s patriarchal mindset? Or was it a result of her carelessness within the complexity of societal conditions? Is she conveniently, and somewhat stereotypically, blaming race as the instigator for a situation where it is a lesser factor than her summing up allows it to be? The story ends therefore with what Martin Scofield (2011, p.49) describes as an ‘anti-epiphany’. The reader is not supposed to get from Izzy a sense of any fuller understanding of herself, or of the situation which drove the drama in this story. The land reform process itself remains contested and not fully understood and the story ending perhaps mirrors the ambiguities that remain.

Narrative progression in the diegesis

Michael Toolan (2009, p.1) uses specialised software to study the minutiae of the lexis and sentence structure of stories in shaping readers’ expectations as to narrative progression. He examines how ‘material that is either explicit or implicit in the text gives rise to such distinct impressionistic reader judgments as ones of suspense, surprise, secrecy or gaps, mystery, tension, obscurity or even incoherence.’ The software draws out of the texts, pattern of word use and phrases that, he argues, guide the expectations of the reader:

As soon as the reading of a story is under way, the reader begins to make a ‘mental model’ about many things in the unfolding text …. All those judgments must be made on the basis of textually-declared information, given on the surface of the text as it were, or on the basis of information inferable in the light of what has been textually declared. (Toolan, 2009, p.8)

I found it a sufficiently interesting technique to draw from and examined my text to search for the ways in which I had encouraged or guided reader expectations and where I could do better. For example: I decided to strengthen the proleptic references at the beginning of the ‘The Sunset Cruise’, while maintaining the build up to the surprise at the end of this story. The story opens with Laura, in free indirect thought musing on her father. The text does not explicitly say that she wants him to die, but I tried to imply her feelings towards him: ‘...she feels he is going to live forever, perfectly fit at seventy-five, apart from the leg; he’s well enough to last as long as the ninety-three year old President himself! Zimbabwe seems to breed long-lived men. (p.92) In my revision, I changed the verb from ‘she feels’ to ‘she dreads’ and added a clause: ‘the wrong kind of long-lived men’. I re-edited another passage, repeating the word ‘old’ and adding an extra phrase [in italics]: ‘*old* people, *old* fathers especially, are to be deferred to and taken care of; *after all they will soon be among the ancestors*.’ (p.93) The reader is meant to infer from these pronounced thoughts, reflections of conversations she must have had with Sean Lovemore in planning the murder, although these are not textually declared. It is normal cultural practice in Zimbabwe to give respect to the old, and to revere ‘the ancestors’; Laura is unlikely to use the word ‘ancestors’ in her thought process without their having been referred to at some point by somebody else, probably African. The passage is making reference therefore to a back story not included in the text, on which the events depend. Repeated use of the word *old* and the reference to old people *soon* joining the ancestors are signals to guide engaged readers’ expectations. In a passage where Laura reflects that returning to see his old farm has given her father a new lease of life, I added the phrase: ‘Just what she needs’ (p.96), again to signal her feelings. It may take a second reading to find these foreshadowing clues but while the ending is a surprise, it is ‘fair’ in the sense that there are sources in the text pointing to this outcome, and in my revision I strengthened these.

Another example where I strengthened textual signals is ‘The Gang Leader’. This story is written in the historic present-tense, third person focalisation through a white farmer, Martin Pistorius. I chose the tense to create the pressure of the events, a moment by moment tumbling forward, holding the reader in what Roland Barthes (1968, p.30) terms a moment of ‘exploded reality’ hoping to parachute the reader into the story in the first sentence: ‘There’s a woman at the head of them: five men, and Good God they’re all hefting AKs.’(p.106) An unnamed woman is purportedly leading a gang come to terrorise a white farmer into giving up his farm. The end of the story reveals that she is not a powerful gang leader at all, but a poor township woman, herself terrorised into pretending to be part of the gang for the purpose of a scam. I initially described her opening a letter: ‘She opens it with two hands.’ In re-editing I added the clause: ‘hands that shook.’ (p.108) Within the story arc at this moment a reader is meant to assume, like Martin, that she is shaking with the tension of the moment, the adrenaline that is meant to underpin the scene. Moments later he watches her taking out a document from her handbag. In the re-editing process, I added a further clause to the description of this action: ‘still trembling with the excitement of it all.’ After reading the dénouement a reader will be able to see that these phrases, and the use of the verbs, ‘trembling’ and ‘shaking’, signalled not excitement, but terror.

Authenticating Detail

Given their location in Zimbabwe I wanted specific details to locate the series in a geographical and cultural context that would directly reference the country. To do this, one element of my editing process concentrated on what John Gardner (1991, p.23) describes as the ‘moment by moment authenticating detail’ of the fiction as it is presented on the page. I expect that readers’ engagement in the stories will depend, to some extent, in the probability of the events and the reactions described being believable. For Zimbabwean readers particularly, any relevance or enjoyment the stories may have will greatly depend on the authenticity of their detail. I therefore returned to the text and made a number of ‘authenticating’ changes and additions. In ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’, for example, among others, I added the trade name of the cool drink offered to the interviewer in the first couple of lines, from orange juice to Mazoe. (p.159) Everybody in Zimbabwe knows the Mazoe valley, where orange orchards are cultivated, and uses the name in the same way as Hoover has become synonymous with vacuum cleaner. Later on, I describe her husband working in a factory and I went back to name it as the David Whitehouse textile factory, a household name in Zimbabwe until its closure in the 1990s. (p.165)

In ‘The Researcher’ I describe the real Explorers Bar in the famous Meikles Hotel in central Harare where Izzy is sitting in the opening scene, and after a personal visit in February 2017, I added a passage where her eyes move over the fading pictures of Zimbabwe’s colonial past hanging on its walls. (p.130) These prints do hang on those walls in Meikles Hotel and in describing these details I am seeking to sit the reader in that particular real bar, with Izzy. The description of the farmer’s kitchen later in the story mentions the smell of floor polish and I edited this sentence to include the brand name ‘Cobra’, describing its lavender smell. (p.138) Southern African readers will recognise the ubiquitous polish used by housemaids throughout the region. I am aware that while these details are authenticating for readers familiar with the country they may have a different effect on outside readers and for them the details could instead be alienating. However, for both, the detail is intended to establish authenticity and intended to draw them closer into the diegesis.

In other stories, specific location and its associated features are a microcosm for the national story. In ‘The Piano Lesson’ all the action takes place in a small cottage in the Eastern Highlands and I wanted the conventionality of the small home, now invaded, to be experienced by the reader through an emphasis on detail: ‘They marauded through to the bedroom part of the house, peering in at a small bathroom, too luxurious with its hot and cold taps and white rolls of toilet paper stacked high on a shelf. One of the boys...strode in...taking up the round pink soap that matched the towels’ (p.66). It was important that readers peer into that small bathroom with the young man and see the matching pink soap and towels and stored toilet paper. These impoverished township boys would see these everyday necessities as luxuries and I create a ‘communal’ point of view to carry this response, using the third person plural in this part of the narrative, although the main focalisation in the story is through one character. I wanted to indicate by this that the group, all poor, uneducated, from similar backgrounds, would see the white lifestyle through the same eyes and this lifestyle is exemplified by the bathroom scene. In fact, in its own terms, this small white family has been impoverished and lost everything, but relative to the economic conditions of these boys they live in some comfort. I continue the theme a few lines further when they enter a bedroom: ‘staring round at the heavy wardrobes and a double bed, neat under candlewick with a matching cushion on the pillows.’ (p.66)

In this simple setting, where a woman tidies up a candlewick bedspread each morning, where she ensures the soap matches the towels and there are spare rolls of toilet paper, a nation’s legal and social framework is being dismantled. It is the objective of the collection, to tell the story of a national upheaval through the detail of individual encounters like this.

**Conclusion**

**Some Final Reflections on a Writing Journey**

I think for me writing is like revisiting old pains, old memories, old troubles, old problems and doing something with them and coming up with something which is palatable, more digestible … swallowable, if you like. That is for me what writing is about. It’s about suffering and the artistic endeavour to create something possibly out of pain.

(Shimmer Chinodya, 2010 n.p.)

I started my doctoral project with a deliberate intention to ‘educate’ a potential readership about the complexities of the fast-track land reform process in Zimbabwe; in the process my own academic and creative education expanded in unexpected ways. I realise now it was an unusual undertaking, to embark on a creative writing PhD without a Masters’, or indeed an undergraduate degree in literature, and without any substantive published work, but it was a project in which I was, and am, deeply personally invested and so I launched myself into the journey. Like Wainaina (2006) I am impatient with the superficiality of much reporting on and writing about ‘Africa’, and specifically in this case, about the level of ignorance about Zimbabwe’s history and politics. Previously I had ‘dabbled’ in the short story form, using its potential for experimentation to create ad hoc stories that pleased friends or fellow attendees at various writing courses and retreats. I decided this project was sufficiently important to expend time and energy in the context of academic study to pursue it fully.

However, a postgraduate Diploma in Adult Education and a Master’s degree in Education combined with a professional background in international development policy and governance issues did not prepare me for an immersion in literary criticism, and what became an apprenticeship in the craft of creative writing over my four years of research and study. I had to learn to write and re-write, taking heart from Ray Bradbury’s instruction: ‘Write a short story every week... At the end of a year you have fifty-two short stories. I defy you to write fifty-two bad ones.’ (2001) I read exemplary work of great short story writers: (Mansfield, 2006; Munro, 2009; Hemingway, 1995, Paley, 1999; Kay, 2003; Carver, 2009). Close reading of these and Zimbabwean texts, such as Vera and Dangarembga, led me to deeper considerations of narrative techniques to engage and sustain meaning and interest.

The academic work I undertook to decide on a conceptual framework for this Commentary and then to research it, led me to a variety of literary theory and theorists I would otherwise not have encountered. These challenging theoretical encounters enabled me to analyse my stylistic choices and locate them within the world of literary theory. It has been something of a tortured delight to discover Bakhtin and Genette, and to learn that I could apply the thinking of these scholars to my own work.

My background did however, prepare me for researching the latest findings into the effects of the land reform and it became my greatest creative challenge to incorporate this research into my stories and not deform my creative writing in the process. Zimbabwe remained tumultuous during the four years in which I wrote the collection, with the advent of further land legislation, new farm re-settlements and seizures, and in the fortunes of those directly engaged in one way or another with the land issues. I wanted to capture what was happening in the physical and social landscape as it happened and the immediacy of the short story form lent itself to this aspiration. Alongside paying close attention to developments in public discourse in Zimbabwe, through the PhD I deliberately extended my academic understanding of the events on the ground by keeping abreast of the scholarly land-tenure literature as it emerged. Though my characters are fictional, the situations in which I locate them are real. For example, because I follow Ian Scoones at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, through his blog, ‘Zimbabweland’, I was alerted to his latest publication (2018), and a section in this which presented research on the fate of farm labourers of Mozambican origin (pp.72-106). This provided background for ‘Prisca’s Story’, an exemplar of the ability of the short story to be completely up to date, responding urgently to situations in ways that that a novel cannot. This urgency, in regard to Zimbabwe, is not undiminished; Scoones (2018) writes:

The controversy surrounding Zimbabwe’s land reform of 2000 has not gone away. Indeed it has intensified with the resignation of President Mugabe and the inauguration of President Mnangagwa. The myths we challenged in our 2010 book...continue to be repeated. During Zimbabwe’s recent crisis [Mugabe’s resignation] the international media repeated most of them. Land reform has been a disaster; the land has been taken by cronies; production has collapsed; Zimbabwe has gone from bread basket to basket case. Yet the story is much more complex, and requires on the ground research to show what has happened to whom and where. (Scoones, 2018, p.1)

Although I had begun to experience some anxiety that I had left it too long, and not been sufficiently swift in producing my collection, it appears that the one story of Zimbabwe’s supposed agricultural collapse remains as an international media theme.

Why was I so driven to write this collection, to create different perspectives and characters to illustrate this particular feature of Zimbabwe’s national life? Malachi McIntosh (2013, n.p.) suggests that:

[N]arrative art organises life in such a way that we can reflect on it from a distance, experience it anew ... I think fiction lets us press pause, rewind, zoom in, zoom out; it creates a space for us to think ourselves and our world in novel ways – to be titillated, frightened, disgusted, amused and surprised.

This seems an apt explanation of what I wanted to do with my collection, intending it to be an authentic addition to the literature of Zimbabwe, representing new voices with different perceptions on what has become a familiar story. More importantly, it was also an act of discovery for myself as a writer, to make sense of events, to explore and experience the lives of others through the act of writing.

It is worth repeating Lanser’s (1992, p.4) assertion here: ‘The narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive; if there is no tale without a teller, there is no teller without a tale.’ This is a notion that resonates with me and my writing life, especially as I created *Zimbabwe Ruins*. The tales told here are not entirely fictive creations, being generated from and by a specific place and time in the history of a troubled country struggling to overcome the effects of colonialism and war to develop a sense of itself as a nation, and so the notion of the ‘narrated world’ in relation to ‘the narrative voice’ has been central to my creative process. As I consider my journey, reading again the notes I have made over the last four years, making revisions to individual stories, it was clear that the world I was seeking to represent drove the narrative voice in each story. I was working intensively for the Zimbabwe Revenue Service during the immediate four years before embarking on doctoral studies and so deeply connected to people and events through this work, and then, during the writing period, I visited Zimbabwe five times. In each visit, I was drawn further into considering the consequences of the land-reform programme. Although the country’s farm land is now nationalised, access to it and connection with it remain deeply contested features of public discourse and contemporary attitudes towards land directly influenced plotlines in my collection. My story ‘The Gang Leader’ was inspired by an item on daily radio news during a visit in 2016; ‘Bountiful’s Story’ was generated by the media reporting, during a visit in 2017, of a major road-traffic accident on a notoriously dangerous road. I linked the two stories through reference to these media reports. ‘Steadyfaith’s Story’ was inspired by interviews I read in a Sunday newspaper. My stories highlight the socio-economic context within which individuals struggle to construct meaningful lives in a nation state beset by contradictions. I know of these struggles and by including them in this way I feel that I have written myself into the collection.

Although the question of who is allowed tell whose story was not at the forefront of my mind at the beginning, it became a significant issue for fiction writers and led me to consider my ethical position. Considerations about cultural appropriation helped to deepen my thinking about constructing characters, the events I immerse them in and their reactions to all kinds of moral choices. It encouraged me to go back and appraise my stories with a more observant eye. I questioned my creative choices. Should I have limited myself to stories of white characters only: Izzy, Laura, Max, Sybil; Chris and Steph; Martin and Eleanor; Ellen and Sharon? Written about only female characters? Clearly I answered this question in the negative. Although I did not write in the first person voice of any male character, I did allow myself close third person focalisers in Nat and Philemon, who are black and Max and Martin, who are white. Again and again, the voices in my stories surprised me.

I understand the ambivalence of my own position as a writer, neither a national, nor even a full-time resident. All of this is true, but I am not a stranger to Zimbabwe either. Of my weaknesses I am acutely aware, but what drives me forward is a strong grasp of my various privileges, the unendingly complex relationship between voice and power, voice and authenticity, and the difference between having a voice and being heard. In this context, I situate myself as an outsider with some degree of inside knowledge of a range of Zimbabwean voices; *Zimbabwe Ruins* reflects this experience.

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# APPENDIX 1 Background

‘Bloody missionaries!’

‘Bloody whites!’

‘They had the Bible!’

‘We had the land!’

‘Now they have the land!’

‘And we have the Bible!’

(Dambudzo Marechera, 1978, p.50)

Zimbabwe is approximately one and a half times the size of Britain, located in southern Africa between the Limpopo River and South Africa to the south, and the Zambezi River and Zambia to the north. It has a current population of 16 million, of whom about 30,000 are white. Independence did not come easily to the country and it was the last in Africa to gain self rule after a brutal liberation war. At Independence in 1980 the white population was approximately 250,000 out of a population then of 8 million; even at the height of white power in the1960s and early 1970s, the percentage of whites in what was colonial Rhodesia was never more than 5% and yet their dominance of the political and economic landscape was absolute.

After the first incursions during the1880s, the white settlers generated a valorous literature of white exploration and triumph, much of which was re-printed throughout the liberation war years of the 1970s by the Books of Rhodesia Publishing Company, with a clear aim to keep alive memories of the settler past as white Rhodesians fought their black fellow countrymen and women. This reprint series carries a generic dedication to this past in each volume:

Re-publication of this book has been made possible by the assistance of two Rhodesians of a Pioneer family whose wish is it that it be

dedicated to

THE RHODESIA PIONEERS AND EARLY SETTLERS SOCIETY

to honour the men and women who pioneered Rhodesia.

At least thirty-four volumes of what is termed Rhodesiana literature exist in this re-print library, each with the same dedication, for example: *Through Matabeleland: Ten Months in a Wagon* (Col. J.G. Wood, 1893); *Sunshine and Storm in Rhodesia (*F.C.Selous, 1896); *Memories of Mashonaland* (Knight-Bruce, 1895) *Sally in Rhodesia* (Macdonald 1927). From this beginning there was only the white, usually male, published voice; there is no comparable black literature recorded, which means a very limited selection of voices told the early story of Rhodesia.

**The Emergence of Zimbabwe**

Given the critical role the country’s history continues to exert on contemporary circumstances it might be helpful to outline the creation of Zimbabwe in a very brief summary of the circumstances which have led to the context in which I have located my characters.

* The original incoming of the white settlers in 1890 which generated the First Chimurenga[[1]](#footnote-1) and established the minority white presence in Southern Rhodesia.
* The Liberation war of the 1970s against the government of Ian Smith and the white settler community – the Second Chimurenga – which ended in the Lancaster House Agreement and Independence in 1980. Robert Mugabe became Prime Minister and then President, leading the government of his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF).
* In the first decade of Independence, encouraged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Government adopted a neo-liberal economic policy, resulting in an Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (EASP). This was basically an austerity policy based on massive public spending cuts and became known at grass-roots level as the Stomach Adjustment programme because of the hardships it caused. Civil rights movements and the Trade Union movement grew during the 1990s in response. There were strikes met with violent responses from the government. This period has become known as the ‘lost decade’ as the country’s citizens emigrated in their thousands and hyper-inflation meant that in 2009 the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe was issuing one hundred trillion dollar notes.
* An opposition party – the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was formed in 1999, led by union leader Morgan Tsvangirai. In 2000 the government met an unprecedented defeat when it lost a constitutional referendum which would have greatly strengthened President Mugabe and his ruling ZANU PF government. It contained a clause empowering government to seize land held by white farmers.
* In the deteriorating political and economic situation a series of land occupations, led by the War Veteran Association, followed and the country was torn by civil strife, particularly in the rural areas. White owners and their black labourers were expelled from commercial white owned farms, sometimes violently. This was the period known as *jambanja*: meaning violence, anger, argumentation, confusion.
* The government responded in July 2000 with the Accelerated Land Reform and resettlement Implementation Plan (Fast Track Approach). The President and ZANU PF politicians attempted to locate the contemporary violence associated with land acquisition within the arc of the country’s history by terming it the Third Chimurenga. A raft of new legislation was enacted in the early years after the first farm repossessions, radically changing the existing colonially constructed, racialised land tenure system. Essentially farmland is now nationalised and farmers operate with leases rather than their original Title Deeds. Approximately three hundred white farmers remain from the six thousand in 2000, and they remain active and engaged in Zimbabwe’s national life.

A meeting of white farmers February 5 2010.



Philimon Bulawayo/Reuters

This is a crude classification that ignores all previous pre-white history of the place now called Zimbabwe, and ignores other events surrounding the complex evolution of the modern post-colonial state. It also appears to reduce the country’s past to what has been termed ‘a patriotic history’, (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009, pp.39-74) in which the current government has constructed a ‘heroic’ narrative of the past, based solely on struggle, deliberately intended to forge a nationalism that serves its own political ambitions. It is not my intention to bolster this ZANU PF re-imagining of the country’s history but these temporal categories, aligned to major social upheavals, are referred to in my stories and their summation here provides a convenient framework for readers unfamiliar with the country’s history.

**The White Settlers**

Southern Rhodesia, like all contemporary African states, was a nineteenth-century construct, created by a colonial power with no knowledge of, or interest in, the original power structures or territorial boundaries of the peoples they incorporated together inside artificial borders. The boundaries of Rhodesia therefore embraced various ethnic groups, eighty per cent of whom are Shona speaking, but even within this majority language group there remain sub-ethnic groupings with internal, distinctive dialects, loyalties and cultural experiences. The early British white explorers and scouts were supported and encouraged by Cecil Rhodes, then Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in South Africa. It was his company, The British South Africa Company that funded the establishment of what later became Southern Rhodesia. In their first explorations over the Limpopo River in the 1880s and 1890s, seeking more gold and diamond fields to add to those the Company owned in South Africa, the incomers met, not the Shona, but the Ndebele people, with their capital in the area around Bulawayo, reigned over by King Lobenguela. They themselves were recent arrivals, in the 1830s, who had fled from the turmoil of the internal wars of Natal further south. Uneasy relations had been established with the Shona people, and they remain uneasy to this day, as patterns of hostility, but also trade and marriage, established themselves across the region. Today, of the eight Provinces of Zimbabwe, the people of Matabeleland South and Matabeleland North, speak a totally different language from that of their fellow citizens in the other six Provinces, and have different historical and cultural identities. The ethnic differences between the two groups play out constantly in Zimbabwe’s evolution as a nation-state and are a pivotal factor in the nation’s sense of identity. The white incursion added another layer of complication to existing tensions. Cecil Rhodes’ agents manipulated Lobenguela into granting a written, signed concession for mining rights, The Rudd Concession of 1888. Although the king tried to disavow it when he realised what the whites were trying to accomplish, permanent settlement in his territory, it was used as a so-called permission and enabled the British government to grant a royal charter to Rhodes’ company to enable it to send white settlers, as distinct from miners, into the region.

Both sections of the indigenous population waged ferocious battles against the newcomers when they realised the whites had come to stay and were not merely prospectors or traders as had been agreed initially with Lobenguela. These rebellions were the First Chimurenga (war) and the outcome was inevitable given the military resources available to the British Empire builders; and thus Rhodesia was created to serve the commercial, imperialist ambitions of Britain and a small group of Victorian men, led by Cecil Rhodes after whom the new territory was named. Yvonne Vera’s novel *Nehanda* (1994) depicts this period of history, highlighting the significance of land to identity and belonging as the colonial war to wrest control of what became Rhodesia from its indigenous inhabitants played out. *Nehanda* was a female, a spirit medium, a figurehead of resistance, hung in 1898 by the colonialists. The novel is unusual in liberation literature in figuring a woman as heroine and fighter.

White memory of initial resistance to colonial rule seemed to fade quite quickly, even at the height of the Liberation war in the 1970s. In the following account of Rhodesian history, there is no mention of how Rhodesia had been acquired, only why. The then President of Rhodesia, Clifford Walter Dupont, opened an Exhibition at the National Gallery in Salisbury, his emphasis throughout on commerce and profit:

In March 1888 Cecil Rhodes, recognising money was needed to forward his political schemes for Southern Africa, obtained the registration of De Beers Consolidated mines entitling the Company to mine not only diamonds but also authorising the acquisition by concession, grant, purchase, barter, lease, licence or otherwise, of any tracts of country in Africa or elsewhere and the expenditure of moneys on railway, telegraphs, wharfs and harbours...

In April 1889 a scheme was submitted by an amalgamation of several financial groups to the Imperial Government for the formation of a company to develop the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the territories lying north of that country. The objects of the proposed company were to extend the railways and telegraph systems northwards in the direction of the Zambezi to encourage emigration and colonisation, to promote trade and commerce and to develop and work minerals and other concessions.

The proposals were well received. The Imperial Government under the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury was undoubtedly swayed by the consideration that such a Company would relieve the Government from diplomatic difficulties and heavy expenditure. (Dupont, 1975)

The territories lying north of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), included what would become Southern and Northern Rhodesia, later the independent states of Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. The British South Africa Company (BSAC) was established to administer the new colonies from 1890 on behalf of the British government. The new capital of Southern Rhodesia was named for the imperial Prime Minister: Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury.

During the first uneasy years of settlement in Southern Rhodesia the BSAC’s administrator ran the colony but after a Referendum, participated in only by the white male settlers, it became a self-governing colony in 1922. The central aim of Rhodes’s project was commercial success for himself and his administration and subsequent legislature and social controls (on the black inhabitants) were established to enable white settlers, especially farmers, to become financially successful. The laws enacted, particularly the infamous 1930 Land Apportionment Act, but also others, racialised land tenure, seizing the land from its original occupiers and constrained African people to servitude in white-owned industrial endeavours in towns, on farms or confined them to the worst of the agricultural landscape.

**The Liberation War**

By the 1970s, white identity with Rhodesia was so strong that many whites were prepared to fight and die in a brutal war to defend its ‘ownership’ against the claims of original black inhabitants for a vote and Independence. From the 1950s, African countries were gaining their independence and Harold Macmillan’s (1960) ‘Winds of Change’ were reaching gale force everywhere but in southern Africa. Consequently, during the 1970s, aided by various African and other international countries, two indigenous armies fought a guerrilla war against white Rhodesian rule. These were the mainly Shona, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) forces led by Robert Mugabe operating out of Mozambique, and the Ndebele, Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) army operating from Zambia under the leadership of Joshua Nkomo. The right wing Rhodesian Front government under Ian Smith maintained a passionate stance against black majority rule even from within the darkest years of the war – ‘never in a thousand years’ (Ian Smith, 1976 20 March). This turned out to be as hopeless an aspiration as King Canute’s eponymous mission to the beach. James Muzondidya and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2007, p.275) maintain that Smith’s intransigence succeeded only in ensuring that independent Zimbabwe, achieved in 1980 long after many other African countries reached Independence more peacefully, was a racially fractured and deeply divided country from the beginning. An uneasy alliance between Mugabe’s and Nkomo’s political parties resulted in the formation of the ZANU PF party in 1987, the same year that Prime Minister Mugabe made changes to the Constitution which enabled him to become the President, which position he retained until 2017.

**Land Reform – a summary**

The newly independent Government of Zimbabwe did embark on ambitious programmes of land reform (Scoones 2010).

* During the Lancaster House talks in London where the ceasefire and Independence was being agreed, Britain promised to pay for land from white farmers, on a willing seller – willing buyer basis.
* 1980: The Intensive Resettlement Programme aimed to resettle 180,000 families.
* 1982: The Accelerated Resettlement Programme had a target to resettle 162,000 families, although only 75,000 were reached. It was however the largest land reform project in Africa at the time, aimed at smallholder farming.
* White farmers were reluctant to sell their land to government and under the terms of the Lancaster House agreement could not be forced. There were many instances where farms were offered to government at prices too high to be affordable. The farmer then received a ‘Certificate of No Present Interest’ from government, which enabled them to sell to another white farmer at a lower price. In this way some whites collected two or three farms.
* As time went on the UK Government was more reluctant to meet the costs of buying white farms and this culminated in the infamous letter from Clare Short (1979), the then Minister of International Development, to the government of Zimbabwe, declaring that the new Labour government would not honour the agreement reached with the previous Tory government of John Major, to provide funds for this exercise.
* Land reform stalled from the late eighties.
* 1991/92 – the most severe El Nino drought of the century plus the imposition of an austerity programme increased the suffering of the population.
* 1992 – the establishment of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association, in response to poverty.
* Unrest throughout the 1990s. More droughts; strikes and demonstrations. The formation of the first opposition party: The Movement for Democratic Change, led by Trade Union leader, Morgan Tsvangirai.
* 1998 Government signed acquisition orders for 926 white farms under the Land Acquisition Act (Scoones, 2000, p.20) signalling a re-energised land reform approach.
* 1999 and into the 2000s: farm seizures, organised in some places by the War Veterans Association.
* 1992 the announcement of the Fast Track land Reform Programme which was to identify and compulsorily acquire hundreds of white owned farms and re-settle thousands of black families on medium sized (A2 farms) and smallholder plots (A1 farms).

**The Beginning**

The very first declaration of the incoming Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in 1980 included statements about reconciliation and building a new Zimbabwe, black and white together:

Tomorrow we shall be celebrating the historic event, which our people have striven for nearly a century to achieve. Our people, young and old, men and women, black and white, living and dead, are, on this occasion, being brought together in a new form of national unity that makes them all Zimbabweans [...] if we ever look to the past, let us do so for the lesson the past has taught us, namely that oppression and racism are inequities that must never again find scope in our political and social system. It could never be a correct justification that because whites oppressed us yesterday when they had power, the blacks must oppress them today because they have power. […]I therefore wish to appeal to all of you to respect each other and act in promotion of national unity rather than negation of that unity. (Mugabe, 1980)

Most whites left the country despite this appeal, and those who stayed largely remained loyal to Ian Smith and his Patriotic Front Party, voting for them in subsequent elections. These early days laid the foundations of the recent arguments by President Mugabe that whites are not true Zimbabwean but traitors and ‘sell-outs’. In my story ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’, Shadreck, the leader of the settler group to reclaim the white farmer’s land, reminds Chris, the farmer, of his fellow whites’ voting choices, choosing the Rhodesian past over a new Zimbabwean future and he questions Chris about retaining his British passport. Despite a law forbidding citizens of Zimbabwean to have dual nationality, many whites chose to keep their British passports as a fail-safe for a scenario when they might choose to be British instead of Zimbabwean. It is possible to draw a parallel here between the need of the whites for self-preservation being a more powerful driver than any larger vision of national future for the new Zimbabwe and the two black liberation ethnic groups driven solely by nationalism. Alois Mlambo (2013) asserts that this was fuelled by a desire for self-rule and an end to the colonial presence and that both of these drivers overrode any joint notion of one-ness or strategy to consolidate a shared history, culture and languages into one territory. Neither blacks nor whites appeared to have a bigger vision for the country than these immediate short term goals.

Perhaps these commonalities would have evolved after 1980 if the country had not become economically stressed and citizens had not lost faith with their leaders. A mixture of drought, corruption, poor economic and social advice from the World Bank and IMF as the 1990’s unfolded, led to deep disillusionment and despair as poverty increased markedly for the working people. This period is well marked in the creative literature by some of the best known Zimbabwean novelists and poets including Chenjerai Hove and Shimmer Chinodya. Their fiction records the hardships of life during this period. Hove’s novel *Bones* (1988), is set on a white farm, post-Independence and gives a black woman’s view of life on a white commercial farm; his extensive oeuvre includes books of poetry, essays and other novels, chronicling the everyday difficulties of life for ordinary people. His outspoken critiques of the government in his work forced him to live in exile in Norway for much of his writing life. Chinodya is another prolific writer, novelist and poet, awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for his liberation war novel *Harvest of Thorns*, a Caine Prize shortlist place for his collection *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998) and many national awards in Zimbabwe. His work is not overtly political although the poverty and struggle depicted in his stories could be read as a comment on government policies whose results provide the context in which they are located.

**Increasing poverty**

The high hopes of Independence stalled as a singular economic imperative, known as The Washington Consensus was introduced to the country. It was an economic model driven by the international community to build a liberal, market based economy led by agricultural exports (grown by white commercial farmers) with de-regulated institutions and cost-recovery for social services such as education and health. Termed the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), it was commonly known as the Stomach Adjustment Programme in the African countries on which it was imposed during the years of the 1980s and 90s. An exacerbation of the country’s economic woes followed, caused by severe drought years and as a result of the government’s decision, in 1998, to send troops to fight in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This was a hugely expensive undertaking for a poor country with a citizenry struggling to find jobs and feed itself, and rumoured to be motivated by the ruling party’s desire to benefit from the Congo’s mineral wealth.

By the end of the 1990’s an increasingly desperate population began invading white commercial farms, demanding the land they had fought for twenty years earlier. There is still contention on whether this movement was originally created by the government, by the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association or began as a genuine grass-roots movement. There were a number of violent attacks on white farms and it is reported that twenty-eight white farmers were murdered between 2000-2014 and seventy-eight black farm managers. (Eddie Cross, 2017). The government responded with what became known as the Fast Track Land Reform Programme and enacted a range of legislation to make the repossessions legal, finally nationalising farm land in Zimbabwe. Thousands of black farmers have been resettled on repossessed white farmland: on small A1 plots of about 6 hectares each and other on medium -sized A2 commercial farms. (Scoones, 2017). White farmers are still fighting for compensation and some have made arrangements with black owners to become managers for them. A story in my collection, ‘The Good Zimbabwean Farmer’ portrays one of these.

1. Chimurenga (Shona) – uprising/revolution [↑](#footnote-ref-1)