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African Laughter

Doris Lessing

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Four Visits to Zimbabwe

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With our short memory, we accept the present climate as normal. It is as though a man with a huge volume of a thousand pages before him—in reality, the pages of earth time—should read the final sentence on the last page and pronounce it history. The ice has receded, it is true, but world climate has not completely rebounded. We are still on the steep edge of winter or early spring. Temperature has reached mid-point. Like refugees, we have been dozing memoryless for a few scant millennia before the windbreak of a sun-warmed rock. In the European Lapland winter that once obtained as far south as Britain, the temperature lay eighteen degrees Fahrenheit lower than today.

On a world scale this cold did not arrive unheralded. Somewhere in the highlands of Africa and Asia the long Tertiary descent of temperature began. It was, in retrospect, the prelude to the ice. One can trace its presence in the spread of grasslands and the disappearance over many areas of the old forest browsers. The continents were rising. We know that by Pliocene time, in which the trail of man ebbs away into the grass, man's history is more complicated than the simple late descent, as our Victorian forerunners sometimes assumed, of a chimpanzee from a tree. The story is one whose complications we have yet to unravel.

Loren Eiseley, *The Unexpected Universe*

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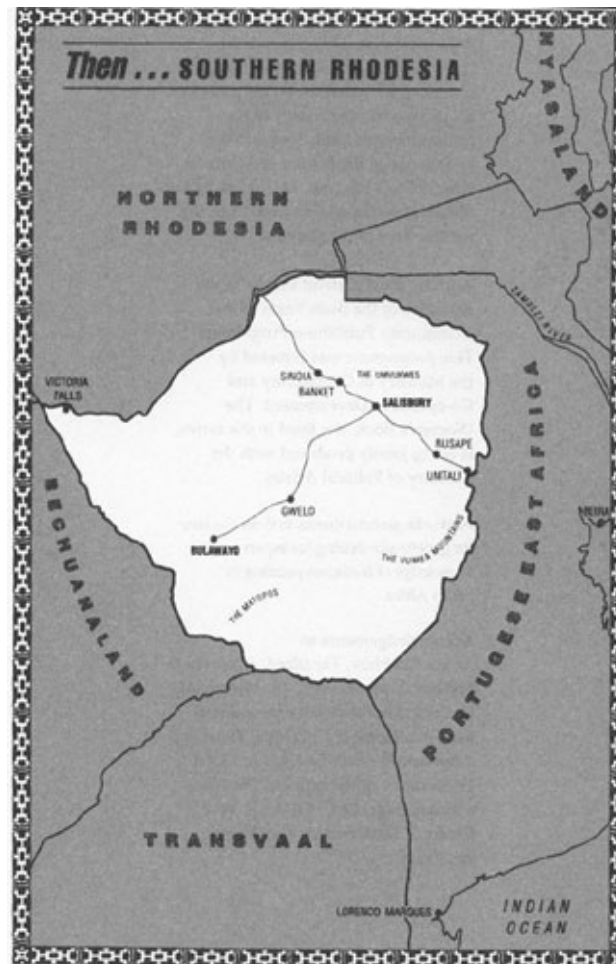
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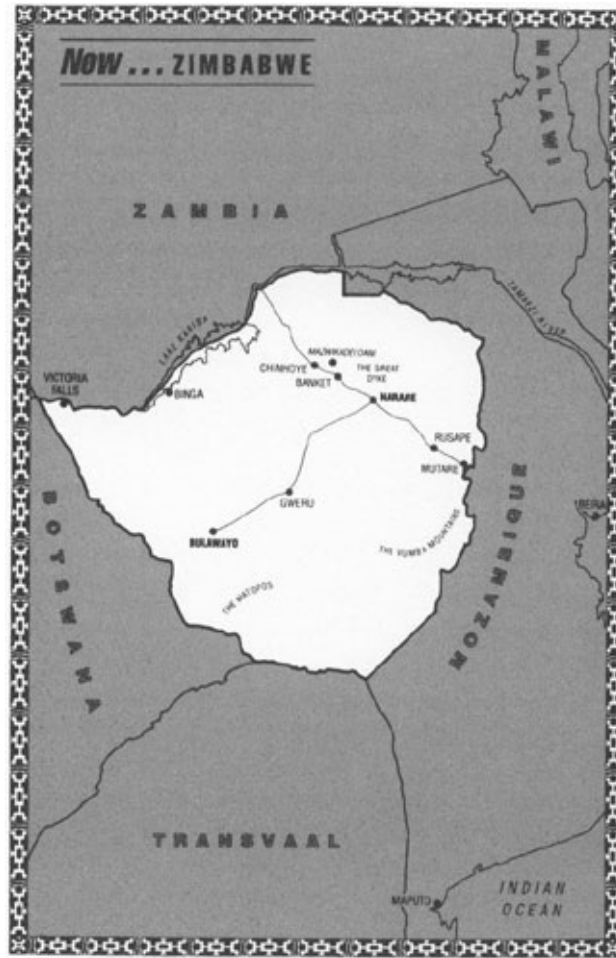
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Map





Then

1982

Early next morning we left the river and journeyed through a region the scenery of which was exceedingly pretty—more picturesque I have hardly ever seen. Hills and valleys, spruits and rivers, grass and trees—all combined to present a most charming variety of landscape views.

Major Johnson and I were driving in a cart some distance ahead of the waggon, and, when we arrived at the summit of a small hill, we stopped and waited for Mr Rhodes and Dr Jameson. I was so struck with the beauty of the country there that I decided to choose the site of the farms, which Mr Venter and I were to have in Mashonaland, at the foot of that hill. Mr Rhodes soon guessed my thoughts, for when he came up to our cart he said to me, before I had spoken a word, -

‘Don’t tell me anything De Waal, and I shall tell you why you’ve stopped the cart and waited for me!’

‘Well, why?’ I asked.

‘Because you wish to tell me that you have here chosen for Venter and yourself the site of your farms.’

‘Precisely,’ I replied, ‘you have guessed well.’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ve just been speaking to my friends in the waggon about the grandeur of the place, and I told them that I was sure you would not pass it by without desiring a slice of it.’

Mr Rhodes then requests Mr Duncan, the Surveyor-General of Mashonaland, who was with us just then, to measure out two farms there, one for Mr Venter and one for myself. I am sure the landed property in that part of the country will soon become very valuable, especially when the railway runs—as it soon will—between Beira and Salisbury.

D. C De Waal, *With Rhodes in Mashonaland*

This excerpt describes the country near Rusape, on the road between Salisbury and Umtali. The journeys were made in 1890 and 1891, during the Occupation but before the military conquest.

Southern Rhodesia was a shield-shaped country in the middle of the map of Southern Africa, and it was bright pink because Cecil Rhodes had said the map of Africa should be painted red from Cape to Cairo, as an outward sign of its happy allegiance to the British Empire. The hearts of innumerable men and women responded with idealistic fervour to his clarion, because it went without saying that it would be good for Africa, or for anywhere else, to be made British. At this point it might be useful to wonder which of the idealisms that make our hearts beat faster will seem wrong-headed to people a hundred years from now.

In 1890, just over a hundred years from when this book is being written, the Pioneer Column arrived in grassy plains five thousand feet up from the distant sea: a dry country with few people in it. The one hundred and eighty men, and some policemen, had a bad time of it, travelling hundreds of miles up from the Cape through a landscape full of wild beasts and natives thought of as savages. They were journeying into the unknown, for while explorers, hunters and missionaries had come this way, homesteaders—people expecting to settle—had not. They were on this adventure for the sake of the Empire, for Cecil Rhodes whom they knew to be a great man, for the Queen, and because they were of the pioneering breed, people who had to see horizons as a challenge. Within a short time there was a town with banks, churches, a hospital, schools and, of course, hotels of the kind whose bars, then as now, were as important as the accommodation. This was Salisbury, a white town, British in feel, flavour and habit.

The progress of the Pioneer Column was watched by the Africans, and it is on record they laughed at the sight of the white men sweating in their thick clothes. A year later came Mother Patrick and her band of Dominican nuns, wearing thick and voluminous black and white habits. They at once began their work of teaching children and nursing the sick. Then, and very soon, came the women, all wrapped about and weighed down in their clothes. Respectable Victorian women did not discard so much as a collar, a petticoat or a corset when travelling. Mary Kingsley, that paragon among explorers, when in hot and humid West Africa was always dressed as if off to a tea party. The Africans did not know they were about to lose their country. They easily signed away their land when asked, for it was not part of their thinking that land, the earth our mother, can belong to one person rather than another. To begin with they did not take much notice of the ridiculous invaders, though their shamans, women and men, were warning of evil times. Soon they found they had indeed lost everything. It was no use retreating into the bush, for they were pursued and forced to work as servants and labourers, and when they refused, something called a Poll Tax was imposed, and when they did not pay up—and they could not, since money was not something they used—then soldiers and policemen came with guns and told them they must earn the money to pay the tax. They also had to listen to lectures on the dignity of labour. This tax, a small sum of money from the white point of view, was the most powerful cause of change in the old tribal societies.

Soon the Africans rebelled and were defeated. The conquerors were brutal and merciless. There is nothing in this bit of British history to be proud of, but the story of the Mashona Rebellion and how it was quelled was taught to white children as a glorious accomplishment.

At all times and everywhere invaders with superior technology have subjugated

countries while in pursuit of land and wealth and the Europeans, the whites, are only the most recent of them. Having taken the best land for themselves, and set up an efficient machinery of domination, the British in Southern Rhodesia were able to persuade themselves—as is common among conquerors—that the conquered were inferior, that white tutelage was to their advantage, that they were bound to be the grateful recipients of a superior civilization. The British were so smug about themselves partly because they never went in for general murder, did not attempt to kill out an entire native population, as did the New Zealanders, and is happening now in Brazil where Indian tribes are being murdered while the world looks on and does nothing. They did not deliberately inject anyone with diseases, nor use drugs and alcohol as aids to domination. On the contrary, there were always hospitals for black people, and white man's liquor was made illegal, for it had been observed what harm firewater had done to the native peoples of North America.

If it is asked, How did these people, no more or less intelligent than ourselves, manage to accommodate so many incompatibles in their minds at the same time, then this belongs to a wider query: How and why do we all do it, often not noticing what we do? I remember as a child hearing farmers remark, with the cynical good nature that is the mark of a certain kind of bad conscience: 'One of these days they are all going to rise and drive us into the sea.' This admission clearly belonged in a different part of the brain from that where dwelled the complacencies of Empire.

By 1900 there was Southern Rhodesia, bright pink all over, inside its neat boundaries, with Mozambique, or Portuguese East Africa on one side, Angola (Portuguese West Africa) and the Bechuanaland Protectorate (pink) on the other, and Northern Rhodesia (pink) just above it.

The Transvaal, arena for the Boer War, was to the south.

The same neat shape is now stamped Zimbabwe. The trouble is that these boundaries ignore a good deal of history, mainly to do with the Portuguese influence, for Portuguese traders, adventurers, explorers, travelled and sometimes lived in areas that later were painted pink. There were no frontiers then, and if any European country were to claim the territory by right of precedence, it should have been Portugal. These histories are in Portuguese archives, not so much in the British, and school children were not taught about the Portuguese in Monomotapa or the kingdom of Lo Magondi. Yet that the Portuguese had been before them could hardly have been overlooked by the British adventurers. There is a certain wonderfully fertile valley, still full of citrus groves planted by the Portuguese, who also brought in maize and other crops.

The boundaries also ignore the pre-European politics of the Shona—for instance the Mutapa state which in the sixteenth century included much of central Mozambique.

The picture of Mashonaland presented as history to the heirs of the Pioneer Column went something like this: When we whites came we found the Matabele, an offshoot from the Zulus. They had travelled north to escape from murderous Zulu kings, and taken land from the Mashona, whom they harried and raided. The Mashona were groups of loosely related clans always on the move, for they stayed in one place only long enough to exhaust the soil and scare away the animals. We, the British, brought the Mashona people peace as well as White Civilization.

In fact the Mashona were skilled farmers and miners, whose techniques are only

now being investigated by researchers. It was necessary for the British to see them as ignorant savages who owed everything to their conquerors.

The British administered sullen populations, but not for long, for quite soon, in the early 1950s, resistance movements began to form. In the late '40s people like myself, interested in the possibilities of black resistance, found very little, though there was 'a dangerous black agitator' Joshua Nkomo, who inflamed crowds with his oratory in Bulawayo and another called Benjamin Burombo. Ten years later the national movements were powerful. They had been given impetus by a frothy notion called the Central African Federation, which aimed at uniting Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia. The idea of this Federation appealed irresistibly to large numbers of idealistic souls, nearly all white. Yet it was attempting to unite incompatibles. The two northern countries were British Protectorates, and their black populations actually believed in promises made to them by Queen Victoria, that their interests would always be paramount, that their countries were to be administered for their good. It never does to ignore the explosive possibilities of 'naive' emotions like this one. Meanwhile Southern Rhodesia had always modelled itself on South Africa, adapting every repressive law passed there, fitting it into an edifice of oppression as comprehensive as South Africa's. People who wanted to believe in uniting these three countries ignored the wishes of the blacks, and in fact the nationalist movements of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (which became Zambia and Malawi on Independence) at once put an end to the foolish scheme.

Meanwhile the nationalist movements of Southern Rhodesia, encouraged by the success of their northern allies, fomented 'trouble' most successfully, everywhere. Already in 1956 I met a couple of young men, whose names I was not told, who described an underground life smuggling political literature, of police harassment and arbitrary arrest, beatings, imprisonment. This underground war, still minor, did not find its way into the newspapers, though people spoke of it. Throughout the 1960s the writing on the wall became ever more visible, but the whites, who had learned nothing from Kenya, chose to ignore it. The War of Independence in Southern Rhodesia, like many other wars, need not have happened. The whites numbered 250,000 at their maximum. Of these, many, if differently led, I believe would have compromised and shared power with the blacks. But a minority of the whites, led by Ian Smith, were determined to fight for White Supremacy. There was no date for the start of that war, which slowly simmered into one of the nastiest conflicts of our time. The opposing armies were not neatly separated into black and white. On the white side fought black soldiers and black police. The whites, far from united at the start, became united by the passions of war, and the few who thought the War was a mistake, and should be ended, and could not be won (for look what was happening in Mozambique where the whites were thrown out after a terrible war) were treated with hysterical hatred, were persecuted, victimized, vilified. The blacks, too, were infinitely divided. Not only were there different armies with different leaders and ideas, there was division in the armies themselves. Robert Mugabe's army was only one, but was the most extreme, communist, or marxist, and while the War went on most people thought that the majority of the blacks would choose Joshua Nkomo or Bishop Muzorewa, moderates and democrats.

The War was fought with cruelty on both sides. People living in the villages had a

hard time, for both the government forces and the black armies punished them for aiding the other side, but they had to help whichever soldiers arrived and demanded it. Large numbers of villagers were taken by force from their homes and put into what amounted to concentration camps—of course ‘for their own protection’. Young men and girls, as soon as they were old enough, ran away to join guerilla armies, in Zambia, or Mozambique, or even the forests of Southern Rhodesia itself, for there at least they would not be subjected to harassment, torture or death by the government troops. Part of a whole generation of black youth was educated in guerilla armies, sometimes to the accompaniment of marxist slogans, but always unified by their hatred of the whites.

The War over, the atrocities on both sides were gently allowed to be forgotten, for when the black population voted—for the first time in their lives—it was Robert Mugabe they chose, and he at once announced a multi-racial society and the end of race hatred. It is known that Samora Machel of Mozambique (and others) said to Robert Mugabe: ‘Don’t make our mistake, don’t throw out the whites, because you will be left with a devastated economy.’ The devastation was not all the result of war, but because the departing Portuguese made a point of burning and destroying everything they could before they left—behaviour we saw recently when Saddam Hussein was forced out of Kuwait.

The young nation Zimbabwe came into being in 1980. That is to say, from the arrival of the Pioneer Column at the foot of the small hill that would mark the beginnings of Salisbury, called the Kopje, to Independence, took ninety years. Ninety years—nothing. Yet in that time the culture of that large area—roughly the size of Spain—had been destroyed; the people had been kept subdued by all the power of modern weapons, policing, propaganda; finally they had rebelled against armies equipped with the most advanced weaponry, and they had won. Now they had to take power as equals in a modern world. Their chief difficulty was the same as in all new black nations. They did not have enough people trained in administration, though Southern Rhodesia had done better than most, particularly in agriculture, for Zimbabwe began with a good number of already trained black agricultural workers. That is one reason why Zimbabwe, unlike the black nations that surround it, feeds itself, and has healthy surpluses which it is proud to sell to South Africa and to donate to famine areas in the Horn of Africa. Zimbabwe is a success for all its faults, for all its mistakes, and although it has had to sustain Mozambique, which is a disaster. To help police Mozambique, feed its refugees, keep the oil flowing in the pipeline from Beira, costs Zimbabwe, a poor country, a million pounds a day. Mozambique has been kept alive by Zimbabwe, while South Africa has done everything to destroy it. If South Africa has stopped trying to ‘destabilize’ its black neighbours, then the damage that has been done will not heal itself overnight, and the rebel bands it armed and financed have not all become good citizens, they still sabotage and destroy. South Africa dominates Southern Africa, for better for worse, and will continue to do so: already in 1991 the ex-communist government of Mozambique invited in South African capital to heal and develop the shattered country.

Zimbabwe, like other new black countries, has a corrupt ruling élite. This is a far from apologetic class of robbers. On the contrary they are proud of themselves, boast and display their wealth. Joshua Nkomo who, like Robert Mugabe, had tried to check

the corruption, finally had to capitulate to fact, and to what he was observing all around him. In a speech in 1989 he said, 'I suppose we have to learn how to be rich as well as having to learn everything else.'

The first decade of Zimbabwe's history was a tale of violence and discord; was contradictory, ebullient, and always surprising. The worst chapter was the murders and arson by the 'dissidents' of Matabeleland, seen as representing all the Ndebele, the whole province. Mugabe's armies terrorized the area, decimated villages, were merciless, treated Matabeleland as an enemy province. It turned out that the dissidents, believed to be a guerilla army, were a few desperadoes who, far from representing their people, were refused entrance by their villages when they returned home. It is not—perhaps—without significance for the future, that it is said the Mashona troops, despoiling or killing or raiding through Matabeleland, said, 'This is in return for...' some incident of well over a hundred years before, when the Matabele drove off cattle, burned crops and huts, took women.

The best of the Zimbabwe story is the vigour, the optimism, the determination of the people. You may return from a several-weeks' visit to Zimbabwe and realize, finding yourself again in the enervating airs of Europe, that you have been day and night with people, white and black, who talk of nothing else but how to make Zimbabwe work, of new ideas that may be adopted there, and who have an identification with the processes of government and of administration that means nothing can happen which does not at once attract the most passionate reactions, for or against. People coming to Zimbabwe after Mozambique, or Zambia, where nothing is a success, where cynicism poisons everything, say their faith in Africa is restored, and that Zimbabwe, for whatever reason, is unique in Africa because of the creative energies of its people. They are proud of themselves...thus you may hear a black person remark of Zambia, or of Mozambique: 'They don't know how to do anything, we shall have to show them.' This self-respecting, or perhaps one might say, bumptious, attitude is a continuation of the Southern Rhodesian white love of themselves and 'their' country, which goes on though the country is no longer theirs. Talking of a success in South Africa, some new enterprise, or farm, you may hear a white remark: 'Of course the Rhodesias down South are bound to come out on top: we know how to do things.'

Before Independence the whites were all convinced that Southern Rhodesia was the best place on earth, and their administration better than that of any other white-dominated country. During my trip in 1989 I kept hearing that so and so had said (notably President Chissano to President Mugabe): 'You were lucky to have had the British, at least they leave behind a decent infrastructure.'

1982

When I returned to the country where I had lived for twenty-five years, arriving as a child of five and leaving as a young woman of thirty, it was after an interval of over twenty-five years. This was because I was a Prohibited Immigrant. An unambiguous status, one would think: either a good citizen or a bad one, Prohibited or Unprohibited.

But it was not so simple. I was already a Prohibited Immigrant in 1956 but did not know it. It never crossed my mind I could be: the impossibility was a psychological fact, nothing to do with daylight realities. You cannot be forbidden the land you grew up in, so says the web of sensations, memories, experience, that binds you to that landscape. In 1956 I was invited to go to the Prime Minister's office. This was Garfield Todd. Striding about an office he clearly felt confined him, a rugged and handsome man in style rather like Abraham Lincoln, he said, 'I have stretched my hand over you, my child.' He was then ten years older than I was. I attributed his proprietorial style to the fact he had been a missionary, and did not really hear what he was saying: he was welcoming me to Southern Rhodesia because he knew I could give Federation a good write-up. 'I have let you in...' I said I could not approve of Federation. We argued energetically and with good feeling for a couple of hours. Later I asked to interview Lord Malvern who, as Doctor Huggins, had been the family doctor, and told him I wanted to visit Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, then full of riots, dissidents, social disorder, and other manifestations of imminent Independence. He said, 'Oh you do, do you!' During the course of arguments much less good-natured than those with Garfield Todd, he said, 'I wasn't going to have you upsetting our natives.' I still did not hear what was being said. Finally he said I could go to Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland for two weeks. 'I don't suppose you can do much harm in that time.' It goes without saying this flattered me: people who see themselves as recorders and observers are always surprised to be seen as doers and movers. (These long-ago events are of interest now only when I try to come to terms with the irrationality of my reactions.) I came back to London and then began to think there was something here I could be seeing. That I had been Prohibited in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, countries where I had never been, did not affect me, but I could not 'take in' the fact that I could be Prohibited in the country I had been brought up in. At last I asked a lawyer to come with me to Southern Rhodesia House where an official, peevish with what he clearly felt was a false position, said, 'Oh drat it, you have forced my hand.' In this way was I finally informed that I was a Prohibited Immigrant. Prime Minister Huggins had ruled long ago, when I left home to come home, that I must not be allowed to upset his natives.*

As the convention was, I was proud to be Prohibited. Since then it has become clear that countries with the levels of purity of motive high enough to match our idea of ourselves as world citizens are not many.

I did not want to live in Southern Rhodesia, for if its climate was perfection, probably the finest in the world, and its landscape magnificent, it was provincial and tedious. I wanted to live in London. What this Prohibition amounted to was that I would be prevented from visiting relatives and friends. They, however, might visit London. These rational considerations did not reach some mysterious region of myself that was apparently an inexhaustible well of tears, for night after night I wept in my sleep and woke knowing I was unjustly excluded from my own best self. I dreamed the same dream, night after night. I was in the bush, or in Salisbury, but I was there illegally, without papers. 'My' people, that is, the whites, with whom after all I had grown up, were coming to escort me out of the country, while to 'my' people, the blacks, amiable multitudes, I was invisible. This went on for months. To most people at some point it comes home that inside our skins we are not made of a uniform and

evenly distributed substance, like a cake-mix or mashed potato, or even sadza, but rather accommodate several mutually unfriendly entities. It took me much longer to ask myself the real question: what effect on our behaviour, our decisions, may these subterranean enemies have? That lake of tears, did it slop about, or seep, or leak, secretly making moist what I thought I kept dry?

Now I see that refusal, that inability to 'take in' my exclusion, as a symptom of innate babyishness: mine, and, too, the inhabitants of privileged countries, safe countries, for there are more and more people in the world who have had to leave, been driven from, a country, the valley, the city they call home, because of war, plague, earthquake, famine. At last they return, but these places may not be there, they have been destroyed or eroded; for if at first glance, like a child's recognition of its mother's face when she has been absent too long, everything is as it was, then slowly it has to be seen that things are not the same, there are gaps and holes or a thinning of the substance, as if a light that suffused the loved street or valley has drained away. Quite soon the people who have known one valley or town all their lives will be the rare ones, and there are even those who speculate how humanity will have to leave the planet with plans to return after an interval to allow it to regenerate itself, like a sick or poisoned organism, but when they return after long generations they find...

AIR ZIMBABWE

In 1982 I booked the seat on Air Zimbabwe, made arrangements, with more than usually mixed feelings.

As I seated myself inappropriate emotions began, all much too strong. For a start, the stewardesses were black, once impossible. Since nearly all the passengers were white, and these black girls had no reason to expect courtesy from them, they were defensive and would not look at anyone. The atmosphere was unpleasant. I had hoped to sit next to a black person, so as to hear what was being thought, but was beside a white race-horse owner, a man of forty or so, who grumbled obsessively for the ten hours of the flight about the new black government. I had heard this note of peevish spite before: at the Independence celebrations in Zambia the white officials of an administration which had done nothing to train blacks for responsibility, recited examples of inefficiency while their faces shone with triumphant malice. Here it was again. This man insisted in one sentence that this was still God's Own Country, and he could raise and train race-horses more cheaply and better here than anywhere in the world; he and his family enjoyed a wonderful life and he wouldn't leave for anything—but the black government...I listened with half an ear, thinking that soon, when I had paid my dues to the white world, I could leave it and find out about the new Zimbabwe. Meanwhile I disliked this man with an impatience identical to that I had felt all those years ago, growing up here. Childish, spoiled, self-indulgent, spiteful... yes, he was all this, they were all like this, or most of them, but what of it, and why should I remain so involved?

While he grumbled about the deprivations they suffered in the way of food, breakfast was served, slabs of bacon, scrambled eggs, sausages, fried bread, a meal to

fuel farm labourers or gravediggers.

The little airport was unchanged: I hardly saw it. The smells, the colours of the earth had undone me, and my emotional balance was gone. Immigration was a shy young man, hesitant, inexperienced, who asked if I planned to come and live here now: too many of 'our friends' had left because of the old government. He enquired about my passport: for I had been born in Persia, and I explained that one could—loosely—equate Persia and Iran with Southern Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. When I changed my money at the airport bank the official asked if I was the author and welcomed me in the name of Zimbabwe. I went out into the dry scented air and wept. And there was the young man who had brought the hired car to the airport. So occupied was I in admonishing my tear-ducts that I hardly saw the streets. I left the young man at the car-hire firm and parked. I was on my own in the streets of the town that was once my big city.

THE BIG CITY

Of course the old one-horse one-storey town had gone...though everywhere bits of that town survived among the new tall buildings. What was wrong? Something was—the atmosphere? Yes, it was cold, being winter, and dry, and the skies sparkled with a thin sunshine. There were few people about, and they moved slowly, without animation. A pavement café had customers, not many, and they were all white, and seemed defensive. As I walked about, feeling more dismal every minute, I was accosted by beggars, the wounded from the War. They were aggressive and abusive, thrusting out stumps of arms and legs, and when given a little money, they shook it about in their palms, as if rejecting it, full of hatred. I went into Meikles bar. The hotel, being unique and full of character, had been pulled down and in its place was one exactly the same as many thousands of others, all over the world. That 'they' could have destroyed Meikles made me feel as helplessly angry as we all do when 'they' pull down buildings anywhere. 'Well, it was a mistake,' we know they will soon say airily. The old hotel appears in photographs around the walls of the bar. I felt as if I belonged in those photographs, and could easily have begun surreptitiously to examine them for faces I knew, or even myself, a young woman. I left Meikles, mourning, and went into a bookshop. The young man who came forward was so aggressive I knew at once how white people entered that shop. I asked for novels and stories written by black writers, and he found them for me, never once looking at me, or smiling. I said I was a writer whose books he might even be selling, but he did not ask the name so I told him. He was suspicious, doubtful, then was transformed into a friend. He said he had read one of my short stories. 'Are you coming back to live? All the good white people left in the War.' I said I was visiting.

And who was I visiting? Hard-line whites, who, if they came into this shop at all, being a black enterprise, would behave as they always had. We said goodbye with cautious goodwill, as if bombs lingered somewhere close, and might do us both in at one wrong word.

I decided to leave Harare. I had been in it for less than a morning, and everything

about it chilled and dispirited me, and not only because I felt like a sad ghost.

I will say now what the matter was, though it was not that day or the next that I came to the obvious diagnosis. This was a town still recovering from the War. The country had been at war for over ten years, the War had ended two years before. It is not possible to fight this kind of war, a civil war, without the poisons going deep. When I went to Pakistan to visit Afghan refugees and the mujahideen, there was the same atmosphere. Something has been blasted or torn deep inside people, an anger has gone bad, and bitter, there is disbelief that this horror can be happening at all. A numbness, a sullenness, shows itself in a slowness of movement, of reactions.

I went to old Cecil Square, named after the Cecil family and Lord Salisbury, to buy flowers. Really, I wanted to talk to the flower sellers. They were all men, as they had been long ago, but different now, for they crowded around, thrusting the flowers just as the beggars had thrust their wounds, into my face. There were too many flower sellers, and these were hard times, with so few tourists, and they had to sell their flowers. When I said no, two bunches were enough, the sellers who had not been favoured were angry, with the same unconcealed, as it were licensed, anger, as the beggars.

I put the flowers in the back seat of the car and drove east on the old road to Umtali.

THE BUSH

The family went often to Marandellas, whose name is now again Marondera, just as the real right name for Umtali would have been Mutare, if the whites had not overrun these parts. We did not go to Umtali, for it was then a distant place. I did not get to it until I was fifteen or so, and then Marandellas had become only one of the way-stations along a road where I visited farms, sometimes for weeks at a time. But as a child, Marandellas was the other pole to our farm, which was in the District of Banket, Lomagundi (or Lo Magondi) seventy miles to the north-east of Salisbury, and on the road north to the Zambesi valley. Nothing ever happened on our road but the routine excitements of flooded rivers, where we might have to sit waiting for the waters to subside for four or five hours before daring the drift that could have potholes in it from the flood; or getting stuck in thick red mud and having to be pushed out over freshly cut branches laid across the mud; or glimpses of wild animals... 'Look, there's a duiker!' Or a koodoo, or a little herd of eland. These being the stuff of ordinary life, and what we took for granted, it was only on the other side of Salisbury that the shock and tug of new impressions began, a shimmer in the air, like mental heat waves, which I knew were proper to the road to Umtali. Marandellas was about fifty miles south-east of Salisbury, but if you ask, What is a hundred and twenty miles?—then that is from the practical, unpoetical perspective. Our car was an Overland, contemporary with the first Fords, now taken out of car museums to star in films of the Great Depression. It was second-hand when we bought it, and thirty miles an hour was a great speed. Add this to the characters of my parents, and the journey became an epic endeavour, to be planned and prepared for weeks in advance. The most often spoken words in our

house were, 'But we can't afford it!'—usually, triumphantly, from my father to my mother, to prove something was impossible, in this case to spend a week near Ruzawi at the Marandellas Hotel. My brother was at Ruzawi School, a prep-school conducted on English lines, and the trip would be so we could take part in a Sports Day, an Open Day, a cricket match, judged as successful according to how they mirrored similar events at prep-schools at Home. Impossible!—thank the Lord!—and he would not have to leave the farm and put on respectable clothes instead of his farm khaki and make small talk with other parents. For his 'We can't afford it,' was not a symptom of meanness, but rather of his need, by now the strongest thing in him, to be left in peace to dream.

But my mother triumphed. Rolls of bedding, boxes of food, suitcases, filled the back of the car where the 'boy' and I fitted ourselves, and we set off. At the speed my father insisted on travelling, the seventy miles to Salisbury took three or four hours. ('A man who has to use a brake doesn't know how to drive a car.') The Packards and the Studebakers shot past us in tumults of dust (these were the old strip roads and you overtook on dirt) for the Fords and the Overlands were already an anachronism. ('Why give up your car when it is still working perfectly well just because *they* want to sell you a new one?') To go from Banket to Marandellas in one day, or an afternoon, even on those roads, was easily done—by everyone else. We stayed at the old Meikles Hotel, but in the annex at the back, because it was cheaper. We ate a picnic supper in our room, because we could not afford the hotel dining-room. Afterwards we drank coffee in Meikles lounge, where a band played among palm trees and gilded columns.

Next morning, the car forced to accommodate even more food, we left early on the road to Marandellas, so there would be plenty of time to set up camp. The drive went on for ever, the miles made longer by the need to concentrate on everything. This is sandveld country, not the heavy red, brown and bright pink soils of Banket, and the landscape has a light dry airiness. Mountains and more mountains accompany the road, but at distances that paint them blue, mauve, purple, while close to the road are clusters of granite boulders unique in the world; at least, I have not seen anything like them elsewhere, or in photographs. The boulders erupt from pale soil to balance on each other so lightly it seems impossible a strong wind will not topple them. The great stones, a light bright grey, with a sparkle to them if you look close, but patched and patterned with lichens, radiate heat waves against the intense blue of the sky. Everyone who passes speculates about how long they have impossibly balanced there and enjoy notions of giants who have played with pebbles. 'That one, there,' I would think, fixing its exact shape and position in my mind, 'it might have fallen off by the time we come back next week.' But that boulder, the size of a hut or a baobab tree, contacting the one beneath it only for a square inch or two, had won the battle against gravity, and was still there in 1982 on that day I sped past on the road, not to Marandellas and Umtali, but to Marondera and Mutare, after so many rain storms, powerful winds, bolts of lightning; after half a century of history and the years of the civil war: the War of Liberation, the Bush War.

The road went up. The road went down. Roads do this everywhere, but never as emphatically as on those journeys at thirty miles an hour, the car labouring to the top of a crest and reaching it in a climax of achievement, then the reward of a descent freewheeling into the valley, then the grind up the next rise, in second gear, because

second gear is a solid, responsible state to be in, top gear has something about it of frivolity, even recklessness. Each crest brought another magnificent view, and my mother exclaimed and directed our attention in her way that mingled admiration and regret, as if such beauty must have a penalty to pay in sorrow. Meanwhile I was cramming into my mind, like photographs in an album, these views and vistas that would never stay put, but were changed by memory, as I would find out on the next trip. A 'view' I had believed was fixed for ever, had disappeared. A coil of mountains was lower than I remembered. A peak had come forward and attracted to itself a lesser hill. A river had changed course and acquired a tributary I had simply not noticed. Perhaps there had been a different 'view', and I had been mistaken? No, because *that* hill, there, near the road, had not changed, and I had used it as a marker. Yet how I had laboured over that view, my eyes stretched wide in case a blink shifted a perspective or spoiled my attention, my mind set to receive and record. I was in a contest with Time, and I knew it. I was obsessed with Time, always had been, and my very earliest memories are of how I insisted to myself, Hold this...don't forget it—as if I had been born with a knowledge of its sleights and deceptions. When I was very young, perhaps not more than two or three years old, someone must have said to me, 'I'm telling you, it's like this.' But I knew that 'it' was like that. They said: '*This* happened, *this* is the truth'—but I knew *that* had happened, *that* was the truth. Someone trying to talk me out of what I knew was true, must have been the important thing that happened to me in my childhood, for I was continually holding fast to moments, when I said to myself, 'Remember this. Remember what really happened. Don't let yourself be talked out of what really happened.' Even now I hold a series of sharp little scenes, like photographs, or eidetic memory, which I refer to. So when I fought to retain a 'view', a perspective on a road, the little effort was only one on a long list. Time, like grown-ups, possessed all these slippery qualities, but if you labour enough over an event, a moment, you make a solid thing of it, may revisit it...Is it still there? Is it still the same? Meanwhile Time erodes, Time chips and blurs, Time emits blue and mauve and purple and white hazes like dry ice in a theatre: 'Here, wait a minute, I can't see.'

Time passed slowly, so very s-l-o-w-l-y, it crept and crawled, and I knew I was in child-time, because my parents told me I was. 'When you are our age, the years simply gallop!' But at my age, every day went on for ever and I was determined to grow up as quickly as I could and leave behind the condition of being a child, being helpless. Now I wonder if those who dislike being children, who urge time to go quickly, experience time differently when they get older: does it go faster for us than for other people who have not spent years teaching it to hurry by? The journeys to Marandellas, occurring two or three times a year, were a way of marking accomplished stages: another four months gone, another rainy season over, and that's a whole year done with—and the same point last year seems so far away. The journeys themselves, slow, painstaking, needing so much effort by my mother to get everything ready, so much effort by my father to rouse himself to face life and remain this damned car's master ('We would have done much better to keep horses and the use of our feet!') were each one like a small life, distant, different from the ones before, marked by its own flavour, incidents, adventures.

'That was the trip Mrs C. visited us in our camp. I thought she was a bit sniffy about it. Well, I think we have the best of it—you don't lie out all night under the stars

if you're in the Marandellas Hotel!' Or, 'That was the time when our boy—what was his name? Reuben?'—(These damned missionaries!)—'went off for two days on a beer drink because he met a brother in the next village, and he turned up as calm as you please and said he hadn't seen his brother for five years. Brother my foot! Every second person they meet is a brother, as far as I can see.' 'Now, come on, old thing, be fair! Every second person they meet is a brother—do you remember that letter in the *Rhodesia Herald*? They have a different system of relationships. And anyway, we did quite all right without a servant, didn't we? I don't see what we need a boy for on the trips anyway.' 'It's the principle of the thing,' said my mother, fierce. But what she did not say, could not say, and only her face ever said it for her, like that of an unjustly punished little girl: 'It's all very well for you! Who gets the food ready and packs the car and unpacks everything, and finds the camp site and spreads the bedding and looks after the children? Not you, not you, ever! Surely I am not expected to do everything, always, myself?' And yes, she was; and yes, she did, always.

When we reached Marandellas, we turned off the main road that led to Umtali, drove through the neat little township with its gardens and its jacarandas and its flame trees, and went for a few miles along the road to Ruzawi. Here the bush was full of rocky kopjes and small streams. The sandy earth sparkled. Well before reaching the school, off the road but within sight of it, a space was found among the musasa trees. The 'boy' cut branches to make an enclosure about twenty feet by twenty, but round, in the spirit of the country. This leafy barrier was to keep out leopards, who were still holding on, though threatened, in their caves in the hills. We could have lain out under the trees without the barricade for any leopard worth its salt could have jumped over it in a moment and carried one of us off. No, the walls were an expression of something else, not a keeping out, but a keeping together, strangers in a strange land. My parents needed those encircling branchy arms. But my brother, when he was only a little older, went for days through the bush by himself, or with the son of the black man who worked in our kitchen, and he slept, as they did, as some still do, rolled in a blanket near the fire.

Inside this boma were made five low platforms of fresh grass, long and green and sappy, or long and yellow and dry, according to the season, and on these was spread the bedding. My brother was given permission to leave school and join us at these times for at least a night or two. And my parents always insisted that the black man must sleep inside the lager, safe, with us.

This involved all kinds of illogicalities and inconsistencies, but I was used to them, and took them for granted until I was much older. Reuben (or Isaiah, or Jacob, or Simon, or Abraham, or Sixpence, or Tickie—for they never stayed long) made up his own smaller fire outside the boma, and cooked his maize porridge on it, eating, too, the foods we were eating, bacon, eggs, steak, cake, bread, jam. While we sat at night around the big fire, gazing at it, watching the sparks whirl up into the trees and the stars, he sat with his back to a tree, turned away from us, looking at his own smaller fire. Later, when we were in our pyjamas inside the blankets, he was called in, and he wrapped himself in his blankets, and lay down, his face turned away from us to the leafy wall. In the early morning when we woke he was already gone, and his fire was lit, he was sitting by it, a blanket around his shoulders, and he was wearing everything he owned—tattered shirt, shorts, a cast-off jersey of my father's. These mornings could